



THE GEOGRAPHY OF  
**MURDER**

**P.A. BROWN**

Geography of Murder  
*by P. A. Brown*

**MLR Press, LLC**

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"In crime fiction writer P.A. Brown's universe, the Geography of Murder is a landscape strewn with suspense, police procedure, and—at the end of its final, breathless trajectory—romance. This is a book that will keep you tied up for quite a while."

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Published by

MLR Press, LLC

3052 Gaines Waterport Rd.

Albion, NY 14411

Visit ManLoveRomance Press, LLC on the Internet:

[www.mlrpres.com](http://www.mlrpres.com)

Cover Art by Deana C. Jamroz

Editing by Kris Jacen

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN# 978-1-60820-055-9

First Edition 2009

## **Acknowledgments**

**Ann Hoyt, Susan Cook, Bob Zumwait, Joylene Butler, Phylis Smith and V.L. Smith of Garretgroup for reading the very raw draft of this book and offering invaluable help on its growth.**

To my editor Kris Jacen, J.P. Bowie, Deana for her great cover art and Laura Baumbach for taking me under her wing as one of her authors. And to AM Riley for her incredible graphics and book trailers. AJMorgan, Corky McGraw, and Nix Winter for their invaluable insights into the world of pleasure and pain and bondage.

To GaywritersandReaders and all their support and good times, and CrimeSceneWriters for getting the police and forensic stuff right.

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**To Ann Hoyt, an encourager and an enabler. You rock,  
babe.**

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**"Do I believe in the milk of human kindness? I'm lactose intolerant."**

Detective Alexander Spider, SBPD

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## Jason

**I threw my arms over my face to block out the brilliant light that flooded my eyes. I yelped at the sharp burst of pain it brought on and sat up in bed.**

"What the fuck—?"

Under me the bed rocked and rolled. Outside I could hear the high-pitched wail of a gull scream and the gentle, slap of water against fiberglass hull. I was on a boat. Whose? I rolled over to escape the relentless light and bumped up against warm flesh. Oh shit, what had I done this time? Another black out? My last memory was leaving the Vault near midnight. I could have sworn I was alone. Wait—hadn't some cute, hunky blond guy waylaid me in the parking lot? The guy beside me was definitely not the blond from last night.

I blinked and stared into his slack face, searching for a clue as to who he was and why I was in bed with him.

I blinked again. I tried to place the face. He was old. At least sixty. Wrinkled face. White mat of chest hair over a flabby paunch, tiny shrunken cock. Faded tats up and down his skinny chest and arms. A leather dog collar. Black leather harness strapped to his thin chest and nothing else. Not the type I usually slept with. Not the type I ever slept with. What would ever possess me to let a loser like this fuck me? I don't think anyone had that much money.

Then a flash of ice poured down my spine and lodged in my gut. The old man was dead.

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I scrambled back, but didn't get very far before hands grabbed me under my armpits and hauled me off the bed. I squawked and tried to swing at my attacker who spun me around and threw me to the floor. One hand shoved my face into the teak deck, redolent of varnish and wood, the other one pinned my arms behind my back. Cold metal snicked around my wrists. What—? A knee landed on my kidney knocking the breath out of my lungs, stopping my protest.

Before I could refill my lungs I was jerked to my feet and found myself staring into a pair of cold gray eyes behind wire frame glasses. He had full lips and a lean, lightly freckled face below a harsh Marine cut. He was a redhead. The freckles didn't fit. They gave him a boyish quality that didn't go with his grimness. He was taller than me by several inches. He had a massive chest that would have split bricks.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Detective Alexander Spider. SBPD. Who are you?"

I gaped at him. "What the hell kind of name is Spider?"

"My father's," he snapped.

I tugged at the handcuffs holding my arms behind my back. My shoulders ached from the unnatural position.

"Who is he?" Spider asked.

It took me about two seconds to realize he meant the body on the bed. I glanced over at the dead man but still didn't recognize him. Not enough to put a name to him. So how had I ended up in bed with him? And whose bed was it? Not mine. I lived in a dump on Los Cerrados Street. I worked at the harbor, at Channel Charters taking tourists out to the Channel Islands for bird-watching trips. I had snuck a trick onto one of

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the boats more than once. It always impressed the cute twinks and guaranteed a hard fuck, but I hadn't done anything like that last night. Had I?

Spider pushed me around, forcing me to look down at the corpse.

He looked over my shoulder, toward the galley. I caught movement there and realized a second cop was busy photographing everything in sight, including me.

"Who is he?" The detective's voice broke through my confusion. I jerked around to look at him, thinking frantically.

I searched my memory for something, anything that would tell me who the dead guy was and why I was with him. As distasteful as the thought was I even took minute stock of my own body trying to detect any signs I'd been fucked by the guy. Nothing. I couldn't see any signs of sexual activity. So whoever the blond guy I thought I had been with, we hadn't done anything either. No half empty drinks. No used condoms. Thank God there were no lines of coke anywhere or those little glassine packs I get my beans and Oxy in. I could just imagine how that would go over with this law jockey.

He jerked my arm up. Shards of pain shot up my shoulders. "Who is he?" he shouted.

Finally I found my voice. I tried to shake him off, but his grip was like a steel band. "Let me go. I haven't done anything—"

"You always sleep with corpses?" He leaned in so close I could see the dark rims of his irises behind his glasses. His nostrils flared and he showed the tip of his teeth in a feral grin. "Who is he? Why did you kill him?"

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"Kill—I didn't kill anyone. And I don't know who he is."

"What are you doing here? You meet him here or did he bring you? Where'd he find you? Hades? Wildcat? The Vault?"

If I'd been thinking straight I might have wondered how he knew so much about the local bondage scene, but I was too confused, and face it, scared. I was in the middle of something I didn't understand, being grilled by a man who, it was fast becoming clear, wanted to pin this mess on me.

I glared at him, trying to look tough. "Why would I kill somebody I don't know?"

"We'll get to that. What is your name, sir?"

That threw me a bit. I'm not used to being called sir by too many people. Under normal circumstances I might have looked behind me to see if he meant someone else. Instead I opened my mouth to tell him to fuck off. He pulled at my aching arms again, stopping the words in my throat.

"Don't bother," he said. "What's your name? Or do I need to pat you down and find your ID myself?" His gaze slid down my skintight, pocket-less pants and bare chest and his mouth twisted in a grimace. "Guess that would be a waste of time. One last time. Who are you? I want your name."

"Jason," I said. When that didn't satisfy him I added, "Jason Aaron Zachary."

Another cop entered the cabin. Female this time. She ignored me.

"ME's here," she told Spider. "You ready for him?"

"Sure," he said. "Let's get this mutt out of here."

"This mutt isn't going anywhere without a lawyer," I said, bracing my feet as though I thought I could keep the two of

them from moving me. It didn't help that Spider looked amused and totally unthreatened.

"Oh, don't worry. You'll get your phone call. You can make two or three for all I care."

"Am I under arrest?"

Spider looked genuinely puzzled at my obtuseness. "Yes," he said, then read me my rights off a card he pulled from a leather folder. When he asked if I understood, I numbly nodded yes.

I vacillated between apathy and terror. I darted glances at the body of the old man on the narrow bunk. It lay on top of a dark navy sheet, which I belatedly realized had darker spots smeared on it. I looked down at my latex-clad legs. Striped Parade pants was about all I had on. What the hell? I only wore my fetish gear on hot dates when I was enticed by someone with deep pockets. My shirt, socks and brand new Captoe boots had vanished at some point. My gaze fell to my crotch and saw the same dark spots. It was the red smear on my stomach that tipped me over. I stared at it in horror. I was covered in still wet blood. His? Mine? Dizziness swept through me. I swayed on my feet, hyperventilating. My stomach threatened to empty itself. Spider grabbed my shoulder and shoved my head down.

"Bend over. Head between your knees. Take deep breaths."

I did as he ordered and the dizziness and nausea faded. I took a final deep breath and straightened, refusing to meet his gaze, sure I'd see contempt there. Or worse, pity.

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"Come on," he said gruffly. "We'll talk down at the station."

"Let me get dressed, at least—" I looked around for the rest of my clothes. I couldn't have come here like this, could I have? It had been cool last night. Where was my shit?

They both ignored me.

I protested the whole time they dragged me through the cockpit, out onto the carpeted deck and the stern loading platform. I squeaked with every step I took. The sound was loud in the enclosed boat. It didn't get much better when we stepped out on the deck. The rising sun was a curdled lozenge of yellow light over the mountains. A nearby forest of masts rose through the early morning fog. It must have been around seven. Around us, the sounds of an awakening dock were muffled by the dense air. Boat engines rumbled and turned over, voices shouted orders. Metal squeaked and booted feet slapped the wooden pier. A pair of pale-blue costumed figures carrying cases threaded through the clutter on the docks,. They passed us then disappeared into the belly of the ship. They looked like space aliens.

Tendrils of fog curled around my bare feet. A large, white-headed glaucous-wing gull hovered off the port bow then drifted toward shore. Its familiar kak-kak-kak followed us as Spider pulled me off a boat I now recognized: *Cutting Edge*, the Catalina 50, largest yacht in Phil's fleet. We moved so fast I kicked and tripped over gear and flotsam left out on the dock. They showed no regard for my rapidly bruising bare feet. I was stuffed into a black and white cruiser under the curious eyes of the entire population of Santa Barbara. I saw



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Phil Collins, Channel Charter's owner. My boss. My former boss, by now.

With my hands cuffed behind me, I had to lean forward on the already uncomfortable seat, which smelled vaguely of piss and vomit. The strain on my shoulders increased with each pothole and manhole we hit. Ten minutes of silence and growing fear later, we pulled up in front of a white stucco two-story building. I was dismayed to see a Channel 3 news truck and a cluster of people with cameras and microphones. How'd they get here so fast? The uniformed driver in front of me swore, then Spider was beside my door. He pulled me out into the glare of lights and shouting voices.

"Is it true you were found with the body of George Blunt?" someone shouted.

I stared at the woman who had thrown out the question. George Blunt? Who was George Blunt? Was I supposed to know the name?

I'd never been to the Santa Barbara police station. Lucky me. Spider led me past a front desk manned by a big-bellied desk sergeant, and through a warren of offices and cubicles. Posters and public service announcements covered the walls. A cacophony of ringing phones and voices filled the crowded room. A cool wash of air blew in whenever the main doors swung open. I was shivering by the time Spider led me into a tiny closed-in room. A woman in a white smock came in after us and used swabs to collect blood from my stomach and hands. When she produced a needle, I balked.

Spider shook his head. "I will compel you to give us blood for tox testing. You're under arrest. You can't refuse." Then

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he nodded at the white smocked woman who deftly withdrew a vial of blood and slapped a band-aid over the puncture mark. I glared at Spider. After she was gone Spider pointed at a chair on the other side of a small metal table. I sat, the back of the chair cool on my spine. My latex leggings clung to my thighs but provided no warmth. I felt naked—hell, I damn near was naked. My shriveled dick pressed up against the latex. It was obvious I had no underwear on.

At least the cop came around and took the cuffs off. I leaned over the table, rubbed my wrists and tried to look tough. He took the seat opposite me.

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## Spider

**He sat across from me looking shell-shocked and glassy-eyed. I might have sympathized, if I hadn't seen the mess he left behind him on board the *Cutting Edge*. I hadn't needed to see the media already camped out in front of the station to know this was going to be a publicity nightmare. I'd known that the minute I ID'ed the butchered corpse. The only unknown here was the mutt who had killed Mr. George Blunt, but I intended to remedy that right now.**

Before anything else I read him his rights again, and this time I got him to sign the card. No way I wanted him to weasel out of a confession by claiming he didn't understand, or I missed something. Jail house lawyers, every one of them.

While he shivered and stared wild-eyed around the interrogation room I studied him. He was jumpy and though his eyes looked dazed, they weren't red or dilated. He kept rubbing his nose and sniffing, so I knew he'd done something recently. He chewed the inside of his mouth, licking his lips like they were dry. He looked like he had all his teeth and he smelled good, something subtle and butch, not fruity. If he was a tweaker, he was an unusually clean, healthy one.

The guy was a user; how heavy I couldn't tell yet.

There was a soft tap at the door and when I cracked it open, Nancy passed me a sheaf of papers, and Jason Aaron Zachary's jacket. I sat back down without looking at him and flipped through the paperwork.

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Possession. Couldn't prove intent to sell. Six months in the county lockup, then he got kicked out—read overcrowded jails needed room for more serious offenders. One count of grand theft that had been reduced when he pled out, claiming it had been a mistake, that the guy who owned the car—a notorious local dealer called Trip—had lent it to him and the ADA didn't think they could prove beyond a reasonable doubt. Picked up for soliciting once on the stroll outside the Vault. My ears perked up at that. It would explain the gear. Nothing to suggest violence though. If experience taught me anything he was more of a sub than a Dom. Not the violent type.

Finally I looked across the table at him and studied him openly. I thought how ridiculous he looked. He had on a pair of skin-tight shiny black pants that made the most annoying noise whenever he moved, and nothing else. His bare chest and hands were covered in blood and goose bumps, his golden skin looking gray in the harsh overhead lights. His nipples were brown knots, and I couldn't help it. I stared at the small gold rings attached to the base of each nub. He bore a tattoo on his left pectoral. It was a brilliant russet and yellow *thing* I could only guess was a bird. In fascination I stared at the colors on the wings and whatever that was over its back, watching them move as he breathed and moved restlessly in the metal chair. He had another tattoo on his neck, one of those incomprehensible Chinese symbols. Despite the signs of trauma, his skin looked like golden silk poured over a hard mold.

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I tapped my pen on the notepad I'd opened in front of me, annoyed at the dangerous thoughts in my head. "Name," I said.

"W-what?"

"Your name."

"I already told you—"

I didn't speak. Finally he sighed and rubbed his lips. His eyes were almost golden brown. I'd never seen eyes that color before. "Jason." His voice sounded hoarse, tinged with exhaustion. "Jason Aaron Zachary."

"Date of birth?"

He stared at the papers in front of me. He'd been in the system before. He knew what it was. He rattled off a month and year that made him barely twenty-two.

I compared what he said to what I had in his jacket. Twenty-two. Eight years younger than I was. A kid. A kid who had just slaughtered a seemingly harmless old man. Except I knew there was nothing harmless about George Blunt. He'd been an unrepentant pedophile known to the SBPD but never sentenced to a day. We'd been trying to nail him for years, but he'd always evaded conviction and no one would talk about what they knew. A lot of local lawyers lived well on our efforts. So, had Mr. Zachary done the city of Santa Barbara a favor? Pity his luck at being caught red-handed, so to speak, if he had. When the guy should have been getting a medal he might be getting the needle instead. Tough break.

"So, why'd you do it?" I asked softly. Sometimes you could lull them into giving up more than they meant to if you were gentle with them. They didn't get very much of it outside. "He

mess with you? George was a mean sonofabitch at the best of times."

"He was? I mean no, he didn't mess with me. He didn't even know me."

"So how'd he end up on that boat, in bed with you?" I leaned forward. "Want to explain that? I'll cut you a deal if you're square with me."

He rubbed his wrists where the cuffs had chafed. I watched the play of light on the dark hairs on his bare arms. His chest was hairless, whether by design or biology I couldn't tell. A thin line of dark hair started on his lower belly and snaked down under the waistband of his neoprene pants. If he was mine I'd shave it all off. I like them clean from top to delicious bottom. He was a sexy thing, no doubt about it. But he most definitely was not George's type, who liked them way younger, and female. I was mystified.

"He fuck with someone you knew? Go after your little sister, maybe?"

"I don't have a little sister. And I didn't know the guy."

"You knew who he was though," I said. "I saw you react when you heard his name. You knew George Blunt, didn't you?"

"I knew *of* him. Who didn't?" He sniffed and wiped his nose, trying to glare at me. Tough guy. I bet he was a pussy in restraints. Funny, I don't remember ever seeing him down at the Vault. I'm sure I wouldn't have missed him.

"Tell me about today."

"Nothing to tell. You woke me up, I was there." He closed his golden eyes. "He was dead."

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"Last night then. What time did you two get to the boat?"

"Us two didn't get anywhere. I never met the guy. You not hearing me?"

"I hear you just fine. You meet him at the Vault?"

"How do you know about the Vault?"

"It's my job to know where the lowlifes hang out in this city. So you did meet him there. What time?" I'd been in the place at ten, and he hadn't been there. Neither had George. Rafe had been and we hadn't stayed long enough to do more than decide to go back to his place for some Dom fun. "You go right from there to the boat?"

"No," he snapped, but something passed over his face.

*Liar.* I smiled at him and he flinched when I leaned over table.

"Who were you with?"

"No one—"

"Who was it?" I roared.

He jumped. But this time he whispered, "I don't know who he was. I met him at the Vault."

"Describe him."

I could tell the kid was thinking hard. "Blond. Young. Hot."

"Name?"

"I don't remember."

"How'd you end up on the boat? Where did Blunt come from?"

"I don't remember! I never saw the guy before in my life."

He clenched his hands into fists. I scribbled some notes, watching him. I was getting to him. These punks gave it away when they got pissed. I waited for the explosion. The tell. Then I'd swoop in and nail him. I was getting excited. I told

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myself it was the thrill of closing in on a collar. It wasn't because of this golden boy in front of me.

He took a deep breath and sat back on the chair I knew was uncomfortable. He grimaced when his bare back met the cold metal. But his eyes were clear of rage and guile. The guy played innocent very well. I knew better than to fall for it.

Nancy came in again. More papers. These were bogus. I wanted to sweat the guy, make him think the evidence was mounting up against him. "Autopsy report," she said. I glanced at it. It was indeed, it just wasn't George's. But these days everybody watched CSI and they thought autopsies were done the minute the body went back to the morgue, not days or weeks later like real life. Sometimes junk TV played well for us.

"I don't—"

"Know him. So you keep saying. But you can't explain how you ended up in bed with him or how he got dead. Doesn't make sense. Doesn't look good, does it?"

"I don't care how it looks. I didn't *do* anything." He was growing agitated again. I decided to sweat him some more. He brightened. "If you got my DNA, you must have the other guy's too."

"Sorry," I glanced down at George's 'autopsy.' "We got your blood at the scene, semen and your prints everywhere. No third party. If you can explain that to me I'll get you out of here." I spread my hands. "Otherwise I gotta process you and send you over to county for arraignment. You talk to me now, maybe we can get you home in time for dinner. If this other guy did it, I can spend my time looking for him." Another lie.



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We didn't have any sign anyone but Jason and Blunt were on that boat. Either way this mutt wasn't going anywhere. But he didn't need to know that just yet.

"I didn't fucking do anything."

"Fine." I pretended to give up and leaned back in my chair. I scribbled another note on the legal pad in front of me. Casually I said, "You willing to take a polygraph? Clear you up in no time."

"Poly—You mean a lie detector?" He looked suspicious. "Those things are rigged."

"Not true." They weren't admissible in court, but I found them very useful for ferreting out the truth. I made to stand up. "You ready?"

"For what? You think I'm just going to submit to some bogus 'exam' just because you asked for it? Fuck that." Then he said the magic words, "I want a lawyer."

I sighed and picked up my paperwork, throwing him a disappointed look. "That's your right, of course. I'll see you get one assigned."

I left him there while I went out to confer with the Lieutenant and Nancy, see where they wanted to go next. Meanwhile I told a uniform hanging around in the hallway to get *Mr. Zachary* a phone.

Nancy was sitting at her desk, facing mine, her phone cradled between her shoulder and her ear, clearly listening to someone carrying on a solo conversation on the other end. She caught sight of me and rolled her expressive brown eyes. She was chewing on a pen.

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I poured myself a coffee and slumped into my chair, staring at the computer monitor in front of me. She hung up and threw her pencil down on her desk. "Asshole."

I cocked my eyebrow at her.

"ADA asshole, I guess. Won't pursue the Ramirez case. Says we don't have enough to hold him over to trial. Guy kills his goddamn *vato* brother and cousin but we can't pursue. No one will talk."

It was always the same. The public demanded action in cleaning up the area gangs, but no one ever saw anything when the crimes went down. Everyone was too afraid to testify or stand up to the *cholos*. So we were left with slime balls we knew were guilty but couldn't make a case against in the damn liberal courts.

"Being a cop sucks," I said. "Then you go out the next day and do it over again. And it still sucks."

"So how'd you fare with pretty boy?" she asked, inclining her head toward the interrogation room where I'd left Zachary. My lip curled. I lolled in my chair, watching a fly crawl across the wall over a box of day-old donuts. Around me phones rang and voices rose and fell as the business of the day went on.

Suddenly a shadow fell over my desk and I saw Nancy sit up. I snapped to attention, but it was too late. Lieutenant Garcia scowled at me from behind his black-framed glasses. The guy was ex-Marine and he never let any of us forget it. It was easy to say I was his least favorite D in the squad room, though my partner, Nancy Richards, was pretty far up his list,

too. I think most women were. Faggots just happen to stand lower.

Our Lieutenant gave the word Neanderthal a whole new resonance.

"You already cut the asswipe loose?"

"No sir," I said. "But he invoked, so he's waiting for an attorney."

"How long till a PD gets here?"

I shrugged. "Depends on what kind of load they're facing down there."

"Let him stew for a bit. Then take him a Coke or something. He's a tweaker, he'll be jonesing for a sugar fix before too long."

I didn't bother telling the man our suspect didn't look like a tweaker to me. He wasn't going to crack over some need for sugar or anything else. But the guy was my boss. I nodded. I did tell him about Jason's claim that he was with some blond at a 'known gay hangout.'

"And he's got a record for hustling. Maybe he and this blond pulled a train on our vic." Garcia said.

"No sign of anyone else at the scene."

"You believe his story?" Clearly Garcia didn't.

I shrugged. "I'll check it out."

"Meanwhile, let him stew."

"Good strategy," I said. "I'll give him ten, then hit him for some more."

Garcia nodded sagely and marched back to his office. I caught Nancy rolling her eyes again. "Good strategy ... How brown is your nose, Spider-man."

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"Stop calling me that. You know I hate that name."

"Sure, Alex. You going to go in and rubber hose the guy? Lieutenant wants this so bad he can taste it. Get rid of two scum in one swoop. The killer and the victim in one nice package."

I thought of golden Jason and his sincere sounding protestations of innocence. "Wouldn't it be a trip if he was telling the truth?"

Nancy had listened in on enough of my interrogation to know who I meant. "Right. Then how'd he explain getting naked with the guy in that get up? That's not exactly street wear either of them had on."

"But we both know Blunt likes kids, mostly little girls from the beefs we heard about. Those guys don't switch their targets. Not that much."

"Yeah, well maybe he wanted to expand his victim pool."

"You know they don't do that."

"Then maybe the kid wanted something from him, and he wouldn't deliver. Wouldn't be the first trick who killed a john."

I wasn't buying it, but I could hardly tell her that. She didn't know the life like I did. Hell, she didn't have a clue what her partner liked to do in his off hours with toys and eager subs, and I had no intention of ever enlightening her.

After ten minutes I grabbed a Coke and took it and my notebook back in to take another stab at Zachary.

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## Jason

I looked up when the door opened. It was Detective Spider again. I felt like I was a trapped fly about to become a snack to this overbearing man. He slid a can of Coke across the table. I grabbed it and sucked back cool soda.

He watched me with a hawk-like intensity that unnerved me. He thought I was guilty, but there was something else going on here.

"Do I get a lawyer or not?"

"One's on its way."

"Who?"

"No idea. PDs come out of a pool. They rotate between assignments. You'll get whoever's next on the roster. You sure you can't afford a lawyer?"

I snorted. "I work part time at the marina."

"What about your, ah, extracurricular activities," he asked, guileless, like he really thought I was a total idiot. "You must make better money doing that."

"What do you think I am? A hustler? A dope dealer?"

He shrugged, never taking his eyes off my face. "You were picked up for soliciting eight months ago. Outside the Vault. You tried to proposition an undercover officer."

"Guy picked me up. He solicited me. Had the hard-on to prove it. Funny how he didn't show his badge until after I gave him a blowjob. He only busted me when I wanted to get paid for services rendered. Very nice dick as I remember. You

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want me to describe it? Maybe you'd like to know how you stack up ... No? Suit yourself."

"Soliciting sexual favors for money is a misdemeanor. Maybe you think it's a joke." He was clearly disgusted. I offered him a small smile until he added, "I assure you it's not."

"That cop didn't think it was such a bad thing. He was really getting into it."

"So you say. How much do you pay for your coke? What else do you use? Oxy? Maybe smoke a little meth? Drop some E at the clubs—"

I schooled myself to stay calm. He was only trying to rattle me. Maybe if I blew up on him he'd have an excuse to use those cuffs again. Throw in some extra charges to sweeten the pot, though how they could find something worse than murder was beyond me. That thought brought me full circle. How the hell had I ended up on the *Cutting Edge* beside a very dead old man I'd never met before?

I narrowed my eyes and glared at him over the table. "You ever think for one second that maybe I'm telling the truth? Maybe I didn't do it. Maybe I'm being set up."

He gave a short bark of laughter. "Lock-down is full of guys who got 'set up.' You'll meet them soon enough. You can compare notes."

The interrogation room door flew open. A man in a pinstriped Brooks Brothers suit entered, followed by a harried-looking older Latino man with stripes on his jacket.

Spider stood. "Lieutenant—"

"This is Mr. Endbury," the Lieutenant said. "He's going to be representing Mr. Zachary."

I looked from the Lieutenant to Endbury to Spider. They looked at each other, right over my head. The hostility ramped up and the room reeked of testosterone. Something was going on and I was being left out. I didn't like that one bit. This was my fucking life and these clowns were having a pissing contest. I stood up, alarming the two cops in the room. They reached for their cuffs.

"Whoa, soldier." Endbury laid his hand on the Lieutenant's arm. "Let me deal with him."

"Nobody's going to deal with me," I snarled. Now that I had their attention, I wasn't too sure it was an improvement. "Someone want to tell me what the fuck is going on here?"

Spider was clearly the only one amused. A grin slipped through his mask, and he stepped in front of me, as though to shield me from the other two men.

"This," he looked over his shoulder at Endbury, "is the man who's going to represent you."

I looked into the guy's face. "You're my public defender?"

"Actually I'm with Bergot, Sylmar, and Tyler, attorneys at law."

The name of the firm seemed to give Spider's Lieutenant indigestion and pleased Spider no end. I frowned. "Okay, I'll bite. Who are Bergot, Sylmar and Tyler? And what are you going to do for me?"

"Get you out of this place to start with."

"Who told you about me?" I demanded.

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His cool gaze swept over my half-naked form. "I have contacts in the legal system. They told me of George Blunt's untimely passing. I wanted to see the man they allege did it."

"So what? I'm a circus freak?"

"Not at all. You're a case I can win."

"Which means he makes a big name for himself and all the other bad asses will pay him big bucks to represent them," Spider said dryly. "You're better than a thousand-dollar billboard."

My glare moved between Spider and Endbury, not sure who I hated more at that moment. But Endbury might be my ticket out of here. Spider was clearly all too determined to make my life a living hell for something I didn't do.

"Fine," I said. "I accept."

Endbury became all business. "I want my client to have some decent clothes." Those cold eyes turned on the Lieutenant. "Why was this man not allowed to bring his own clothes?"

"He was in the middle of a crime scene," Spider said. "He had to be removed before he could compromise it."

"Then you admit his presence compromised the scene? Therefore, any evidence you recover from that scene can be considered compromised. How can you charge my client when you admit your crime scene was contaminated?"

"I never said it was contaminated."

Before Spider and the Lieutenant could do more than sputter, Endbury swung around to face me. "It's my understanding you worked for a Mr. Phillip Collins, the owner



of the boat where Mr. Blunt and yourself were found. Is that true?"

"Yes—"

"Were you ever on the boat the *Cutting Edge* before this morning?"

"Yes, all the time."

"And what were you doing on the boat all those times?"

"I took tours around the islands." I knew where he was going with this. I jumped in eagerly. "I work on Phil's boats a lot. I do the tours, some minor repairs. I'm a papered ABS—Able Bodied Seaman. That entitles me to do those kinds of things."

"What tours have you done lately?" Endbury kept glancing at the Lieutenant, as if to gauge his feelings. The Lieutenant did not look happy. Maybe Endbury's questions were working. "Did you ever go to the boat at other times?"

"Like when?" I asked.

"Did you ever take a friend there to show off?"

I thought hard and fast. Could this help or hurt me? I decided Endbury knew where he was going with these questions. "Yeah, I'd take a guy out there occasionally. Phil didn't care..." A lie, but how would they know that?

"Who were you with last night?" Spider slammed me with the question. Before Endbury could stop me, I blurted out, "Some guy called Roger. Talk to him. He'll tell you. He said he was from Bakersfield—"

"Give us a full name. We'll track him down."

"I don't know his full name."

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I could tell no one believed me. Tough. It was the unvarnished truth this time.

"Mr. Zachary is a known felon," the Lieutenant said. "With a history of drug use."

"I hardly call a single conviction for possession a history," Endbury said. "What are you suggesting my client was doing? Drug smuggling? Pandering sexual favors with this Roger character?"

The Lieutenant scowled. "He's unable to account for either his actions last night or this morning. The victim's blood was recovered from his person and his clothes."

"Were his missing clothes recovered as well?" Again Endbury's eyes roved over my near naked form. "I doubt very much if he arrived at the boat last night wearing just that."

"You never know with these freaks..." the Lieutenant stumbled into silence under Endbury's frosty stare.

"Did you find the rest of his clothes?" Endbury asked.

"No, we couldn't locate any other clothes on the boat."

"Hard to believe he masterminded this murder. What do you think he did? Hid his own clothes somewhere off the boat and climbed into bed with a corpse so you could find him this morning? By the way, how did you find him? I'm sure the police don't have a standing policy of walking onto random yachts in the marina. Or do they? That would be disturbing news indeed."

"The switchboard received a 911 call at five-forty that there was a problem on a boat in the marina. We dispatched a patrol car. Once they spotted signs of a crime they called dispatch and a team of detectives was sent to check it out."

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"Whereupon they discovered the body and my client. Is that correct?"

Spider nodded. "Yes, that's how it went down."

"Where did this call originate from?"

"A pay phone outside city hall," the Lieutenant said

"How would someone at city hall know about a body on a boat in the marina? Didn't that seem suspicious to you, Detective?"

"Everything is suspicious to me, counselor," Spider said.

"I'll want a copy of that 911 tape," Endbury said, then asked, "At what time did the patrol officer call for the detective?"

"Six-oh-five." the Lieutenant replied.

"And the detective arrived on the scene...?"

"At seven-fifteen."

"How far is the police station from the marina?"

"The detective on the graveyard shift was already engaged." The Lieutenant sounded like he was explaining it to a small, not very bright child. "So Detective Spider and his partner Nancy Richards were called at their respective homes."

"I live in Goleta," Spider offered. "Traffic on the freeway is always a bitch that time of day."

"So my client was, according to your report, alone on that boat, lying beside a cooling corpse while you assembled an army outside."

"A few cops is hardly an army," Spider said. "And at that time we had no idea what to expect, so it was necessary to wait for sufficient backup."

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"As I understand it, my client was sound asleep, possibly drugged, unaware of anything around him until he was awoken by you. Is that correct, Detective Spider?"

"You allege he was drugged, counselor?"

"And since then he has never strayed from his story that he had nothing to do with any of the alleged crimes. Is this also true?"

"Sure, that's what the bad guys do. That's why we call them bad guys."

"Maybe we should be calling him an innocent man, Detective."

Spider's gaze swept over me. He still wore that small, unnerving smile. "Oh I doubt that, counselor."

"We found blood on the scene," the Lieutenant said.

"Have any blood tests been performed on my client? I want a copy of those results as soon as they are available. What about drug toxicity screens?"

I perked up. "They took blood. They swabbed my hands and stuff, too. That'll prove I didn't do it, right?"

"I want a rush put on those forensics," Endbury said.

"Yeah, you and everybody else," Spider muttered.

"Has my client been formally charged? I want to see the papers on him. Has he been examined by a doctor? A nurse? A paramedic? Has anybody seen to the interests of this man?"

"He brought me a Coke," I said. Spider glared at me, no longer grinning. "I said thank you."

Endbury picked up the bright red and white can and held it like it contained poison. "Really, detective. Do they still teach you this in the Academy? Detective 101?" Seeing my

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puzzlement Endbury explained, "He hoped to get DNA from you, to compare with what they had at the scene."

"We already have his blood. We don't need to trick him," the Lieutenant said. "He has been charged."

"Then show me the arrest warrant and get your court orders. In the meantime I expect my client to be clothed and examined by a medical person."

"We've got your alleged perpetrator dead to rights, counselor," the Lieutenant said.

"I don't think so, Lieutenant. You have some bizarre circumstantial evidence from a crime scene at a place my client freely admits to frequent, for legitimate reasons. You have not demonstrated that any action on Mr. Zachary's part put him in the company of Mr. Blunt at any time before they were discovered together this morning at seven-fifteen. Has a weapon been recovered? Has a time or cause of death been established?"

"You know the autopsy won't be done for several days at the earliest. Tox screens take even longer," the Lieutenant said.

"Hey," I said, drawing every eye in the room. I pointed at Spider. "He told me they already had the autopsy results. He showed me the papers." My eyes narrowed. "You lied. Can he do that?"

Endbury nodded. "The courts give the police quite a bit of leeway to stretch the truth in interrogations. Trust me, Mr. Zachary. There has been no autopsy, there is no recovered blood. There is nothing to tie you to the murder of Mr. George Blunt."

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"Except he was found practically fucking that same Mr. Blunt," the Lieutenant snapped. "And he still hasn't offered word one about why he was there."

"Nor will he." Endbury gave me a stern look when I opened my mouth to snap a retort. "Do not speak to any member of this department again without me at your side. Is that clear?"

"Crystal."

"Then get him some clothes and get him to a doctor. I expect a full report of those events by end of day." Endbury snapped his wrist up to look at his watch. It probably cost more than my piece of shit car and the dump I lived in combined. Who was this guy? Endbury slid the cuff of his pricey suit back over the gold wristband. "That's five hours from now."

When they made me stand up I was woozy and swayed on my feet. Endbury looked grim. "Has this man had anything more than that sugar drink since he was brought here? While he's being examined by a doctor I expect him to be fed. Do not cause him more distress."

So they took me by ambulance to a white-walled room where a quiet man in white looked me over and pronounced me fit. While I waited and submitted to various blood, urine and saliva tests someone brought a store-bought sandwich to me along with a carton of milk. I'd rather have had a beer but since that wasn't being offered, I guzzled the milk and inhaled everything but the wrapper crumbs.

For the last trip I sat beside Spider who looked more and more pissed as we crawled through traffic to the county jail.

"Who is that guy?" I finally ventured.

"Your lawyer? He told you who he is."

"Yeah, but *who is he*? You guys were falling over yourselves trying to get me to confess to something I didn't do, until he shows up, then your bending over backwards being good cops. So, who is he?"

"Big guns." Spider's response was sour. "He normally handles the high-priced mucky-mucks who kill their wives. He told you what he was doing on your case." He peered more closely at my face. "You sure you're not some family scion and they want to protect your ass?"

"You should write for Hollywood. I'm just who I look like. No money, no infamy—"

"Wrong. You're famous now. This case is going to break nationwide. Blunt was a big nasty canker on this city for years. Someone kills him, that's big news. Maybe that's what this is about. Endbury could make a hell of a name for himself if he wins. Then the other scum will crawl out of the woodwork and pay him anything to get them off, too."

"So I'm a self-serving charity case."

"Hey, don't knock it. It could work."

"You still think I did it?"

He studied me for several seconds. "I've met some cool-as-cucumber killers in my day, but you take the cake. I usually get some kind of reading from a suspect. A tell, something. Off you, nothing. But if you didn't do it, then who did? And why did they go to so much trouble to make it look like you did it?"

I wish I knew.

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## Spider

**I booked the kid into county and headed back to the station to finish my paperwork for the day. Two hours and several Tylenol later, I climbed behind the wheel of my Toyota truck and headed west, back to Goleta. Before I left town, I swung off my usual freeway route to park in front of a square cinder block building some enterprising soul had painted black. There was no sign over the heavy metal door. I checked myself in the rear view before leaving the truck. At the station I had showered and changed into jeans and a black leather jacket. I smoothed my hand over my buzz cut, checked for spinach in my teeth, and then made sure my badge hung straight on its gold chain and my sidearm was secure in its shoulder holster and climbed out of the cab.. I flashed my membership ID at the bouncer and he let me pass. The Vault lived up—or down—to its name. It was a dark, cavernous place where my boot heels echoed on the slick tile floor, and the stench of long forgotten cigarettes and other smokables hung in the air. The bar was nearly empty except for a Dom at a table being waited on by his sub. He stared at me from under his peaked leather cap, nodded, and went back to talking in a low voice to the blond cutie who knelt at his feet.**

I pulled a bar stool over and sat. The bartender, a slick young banger wannabe sidled over. He had a dog collar and a



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row of tats on either arm that left almost no skin uncolored. Some were prison ink; others were gang tats. He was ex-con. Forbidden fruit. Just the kind I liked. He wore nothing but a black vest and a pair of hip hugging chaps with a jock to keep himself legal. His chest was hairless and sculpted from daily workouts. I pegged him at being just barely legal.

"Getcha?" His voice was low and husky. I could imagine his voice sliding over my oiled body. My jeans got tight.

"*Cerveza*," I said. "To start. Then you can tell me what a punk-ass sleaze bag like you is doing in a dump like this. Keep it simple, I don't feel like thinking tonight."

He gave me a small, secretive smile and got my Mexicali. When I reached for the bottle his hand brushed mine. Our eyes met. He lowered his and stared at a spot below my left ear. "I'm off at six."

It was ten to. I upended the bottle and drained half. It tasted so good I did it again. But while I studied the sexy little thing in front of me another image intruded. A golden boy in skintight parade pants, bootless, shirtless, hair shaggy from neglect, who proclaimed his innocence in the face of evidence to the contrary. It took a set of balls to deny the obvious. Most people didn't have them. Or they lost them when the pressure was applied.

The bartender served me another beer. That would have to be it if I expected to drive home. Then I saw him staring at my exposed Beretta and thought that might not be an issue. I casually flipped my leather jacket open and reached down to squeeze my crotch. His eyes followed.

"You live alone, boy?"

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He shook his dark head with regret. "But my roommate's out." He licked his lips and kept his eyes averted like a good sub should. "He won't be back 'til late."

"How late?"

"Late enough."

"You got wheels?"

"Sj."

"Then you're driving. Get me another beer."

"You a real cop?"

"Commit a felony and find out." Finishing my list of rules broken I flipped my cuffs out of my back pocket and jangled them in front of him. He got a glazed look on his face. "We can play cops and bangers later on. You'll do what you're told, or else."

He couldn't stop staring at the cuffs. "Or else what?"

"I think you know the drill."

It turned out he did. Back at his place, a low rent walk-up on the east side, it didn't take five minutes before he was on his knees with my dick stuffed down his throat and his hands in my cuffs behind his back. I had stripped my jacket and shirt off, but wore the shoulder holster and my department issued gun. The kid was good. Enthusiastic and talented. Turned out his missing roommate was another sub, and they had a closet full of toys that kept us entertained well into the evening. He even had one of those old-fashioned saps we no longer use on the force. I damn near wore my wrist out giving him that lesson in discipline he'd been begging for since I'd selected him at the bar. Behind the leather hood, he groaned and cried out at each blow. By the time I rolled him onto his

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stomach and rammed my dick up his ass he was howling. Good thing his roomie was out. I half expected the neighbors to come banging on his door. But maybe they were used to it. That thought enraged me and added fire to my assault on his ass.

And like any good sub, he loved every minute of it.

I woke at dawn and lay on my back in the strange bed, realizing where I was and who I was with. Glancing over I saw the sleeping bartender and realize how damn young he was. Maybe twenty-one, playing at being tough but not having a clue. The world was going to eat him alive. I wasn't going to be first in line at the smörgåsbord. I squeezed his shoulder and he rolled over, displaying a stiff dick I had no time for.

"Come on, you have to take me back to my truck. Maybe I'll be back tonight," I lied.

He knew better than to argue. All he said was, "Please."

He dropped me off at the Vault. Before I jumped out of his truck I touched his arm. "You should be careful who you go home with, you know. You can get into serious shit that way."

"I can take care of myself."

I shrugged and peeled out of the lot. Fifteen minutes later, I sauntered through the station doors.

I reached my desk five minutes before Nancy strolled in. She nodded grumpily and glared at the monitor in front of her. My partner was not a morning person. I waved the muffin and coffee I'd picked up, and she took it with thanks, chewing noisily. I didn't sleep a lot the night before but a good night of fucking and sucking always left me pumped. I

got down to the business of policing no one ever shows you on TV, writing reports.

"ME said the autopsy on Blunt should go down today. You going to attend?" She finished her muffin and brushed crumbs off her desk. She looked human again.

I nodded. "I'm curious to know cause of death since we never recovered a weapon."

"Maybe your friend had time to ditch it."

"Maybe." I didn't like that idea. "But if he did, why the hell would he crawl back in beside the guy and go to sleep? Did he strike you as that crazy?"

"Tweaking. He's a full-fledged 5150. Out of it. Who knows what goes through these freak's minds. Do you really want to know?"

I shuddered. "No. Bad enough to deal with them physically, no way I want to engage them mentally."

"Then let the sharks take care of him."

I thought about the golden boy and what would face him if he was sentenced. What they'd do to him inside. What if he really hadn't done it? Nothing about him said 5150. I wondered why I refused to believe he was a crazy killer? Because I thought he was sexy and I'd like to find out what it felt like to have my dick down his throat or up his ass? Now who was being crazy?

Around me phones rang and the noise level climbed. Somewhere a desk drawer slammed. My phone rang. I grabbed it. The business of the day went on.

The morgue always smelled the same: chemicals and death. I sniffed when I came through to the autopsy suite and

didn't detect any real stinkers. No aged bodies came in overnight. I was greeted by Don Washerman, the ME. He nodded at me over the corpse of George Blunt and got back to work. He dictated the vitals while moving around to let the photographer capture things from every angle. When the photographer was done, Don began a physical exam. Normally they removed and bagged a corpse's clothes at this point, but good old George wore nothing but a leather harness, which Don took off and set aside for forensic examination.

Then came my favorite part of an autopsy. Don pulled down his face shield, and wielding a scalpel, sliced George open. Something that should have been done years ago. When the mass of his inner organs were exposed to our prying eyes, Don sliced and diced, taking samples of everything, poking and prodding through the gaping cavity that had once been a man.

When he powered on the bone saw and opened George's brain I turned away. The pungent stench of burning bone wasn't so easy to avoid. It was a point of honor for me not to use Vicks or orange oil to cut the morgue stink. Sometimes I wondered why I was so damn stubborn. Don examined the cranial vault and washed seeping blood away to get a better look.

"Anything, doc?"

"No trauma to the brain." He moved back down the body. "But there is trauma on his upper torso and scapula. And his spine was damaged from a particularly nasty blow to the back of his neck."

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"That kill him?"

"It helped. I do believe his spleen was ruptured. Possibly a kidney, too."

That didn't sound pleasant. "How'd he die?"

"Blunt force trauma leading to internal exsanguination."

"Painful?"

"Oh, my yes. Quite."

"Good." I thought of the young girls he had abused and destroyed over the years.

"Yes, well, don't let anyone else hear you say that. It true you have a suspect?"

"Locked up in county. Anything you can tell me to help pin it on him?"

"One of the weapons used was fists. You need to look for a man who has very badly damaged hands."

I thought of Zachary and his near perfect skin, including his unblemished hands. My heart lightened. I shunted the feeling safely away where I could examine it later. "You said 'one of the weapons'—there was more than one used?"

Don nodded, never once stopping what he was doing. I saw him use a long syringe and draw red tinged yellow fluid from George's damaged liver. "Something blunt. A baseball bat or club."

I thought of last night and before I could censor the words asked, "What about a sap. One of those old heavy ones they've banned almost everywhere?"

"You mean like a police truncheon? Could be, could be. It would be nice to recover the weapon. Then I could match it. But nothing was recovered from the boat?"

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"We're sending divers in today, but don't hold your breath."

"I rarely do. You'll let me know?"

"As soon as," I assured him. Don and I had a good working relationship. We respected each other and never let it get personal.

"Can you give me a time of death?" I asked. That was always critical to establishing who had the means to commit the crime. But TOD was always tricky, and I'd never met a coroner who would give anything more than a broad guess.

Don didn't disappoint. "Ambient temperature was probably about the same over the twenty-four hour period. Factoring that and his body temp and rigor at the scene, I'd say dead maybe eight hours. Not less than five."

I did the math. "So sometime between midnight and two a.m.?"

"That would be my estimate, yes."

So what was golden boy doing in those hours? I'd have to start checking around. I slapped the gurney where the late and not so great George Blunt lay in his sordid glory.

"Thanks, doc. I'll catch you later. You'll get me a tox report when it comes in?"

He nodded but didn't look up from his minute examination of the dead flesh in front of him.

I left him to his corpses.

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## Jason

**Jail was worse than I remembered. I'd forgotten the never-ending noise and oh God the smell. Decades of sweat and piss and vomit coated the back of my throat. After Spider left me in the guards' not so delicate hands I was provided with an orange jumpsuit and cavity searched, which is a lot more humiliating than it sounds. Maybe I'm used to having things up my ass, but only when I choose, not because some goon with a sidearm tells me to bend over. Then the humiliation had continued with the endless, mindless questions I was asked. Was I epileptic? Did I have any medical conditions? STDs? Was I on any prescribed medications? They even asked if I was an informant for the state; was I afraid for my safety in jail? I gave a short bark of laughter at that, knowing a yes wasn't going to get me a break. It was all for show.**

They put me in with a twitchy tweaker who looked and smelled like he was coming down off a week-long binge. I huddled in the piss-scented corner of my cell avoiding eye contact, staring straight ahead and not speaking. I was about the only quiet one. The cold cement walls echoed and re-echoed with shouts and moans and cries until my head was pounding and I felt like adding my stomach contents to the miasma already present. I was told I'd be held over for first appearance tomorrow at the courthouse. Then I guess I'd find out what they were planning for me. I jumped at every loud



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noise until I was a bundle of raw jangling nerves. About midnight the tweaker started muttering and within an hour was screaming and clawing at his jumpsuit. The bugs were eating him alive.

The night crawled by. There wasn't a moment of silence the entire night. Guards came by a couple of times but all they did was yell at the tweaker to shut up. He didn't. New arrivals came and went, drunks, head cases joining the raving tweaker until everybody was seeing bugs. Three guys came in who looked like they'd gone ten rounds with Lesnar or Hulk Hogan. Made me want to ask what the other guy looked like. After they'd been there half an hour they descended on the tweaker and made him shut up.

Despair clawed at me. There was nobody I could call to offer me a sympathetic ear, or even chastise me for getting into such deep shit. In the past I've had guys who wanted to take me in, care for me, even be my Master, but they never gave me what I needed. I wanted to be fucked, but I didn't like being fucked over. Maybe I had some idealized lover, but nobody I met at the clubs came close. No one in my family had talked to me since I left for leather heaven in San Francisco. My sister once told me I shamed them, that mom and dad couldn't hold their heads up in church anymore. I bet they got a lot of mileage out of their sinful son. I thought of the hours I had spent in my room, butt and back aching from one transgression or another. My parents carried their children's life choices like a martyr carried a cross.

I didn't miss them, but when you're sitting in a cell waiting to go on trial for homicide it gets lonely. I mean, who do you

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befriend? The other homicidal maniacs who share your fate? Didn't exactly give me the warm fuzzies. I may like to play with the rough boys, but I draw a line. A sharpened toothbrush in my gut does not qualify as fun.

I had asked Endbury why he had really taken my case and he had shrugged. "I take a certain number of pro-bono cases a year. Yours was intriguing and I think I've got a good shot at winning."

Nice to know I could still entertain.

Shortly after daybreak I managed to slide into a nightmare-laced sleep only to be rudely dragged out of my slumber. The tweaker was gone, a dark stain on the cell floor the only witness to his having been there. After an inedible breakfast burrito, those of us going to court were pulled out. I was shackled arms and legs, with the chains padlocked to my waist. We shuffled and clanked into the prison bus, which we rode to the courthouse. We were left standing in our transport jewelry while the uniformed court officers bustled around. I caught a glimpse of Endbury in his Brooks Brothers suit. He winked at me. Then my gut froze when I saw Spider enter the courtroom. He glanced at me, looked away, then took a seat in the back of the courtroom. What the hell was he doing here? I'd been told there was no testimony today, we would just hear the charges against us and get a court date. Was Spider here to gloat? Remind me that he was a free man and I wasn't? What kind of cop made a case so personal? What kind of bulldog was this butt fuck?

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Asshole. I glared at him but it's hard to be threatening in bright orange coveralls with iron manacles around your wrists and ankles. I gave it my best shot.

He looked at me again then looked away and ignored me for the rest of the proceedings.

We all had our turn stepping forward. Some had a short conference with their attorney, some did not. Either way, eventually everyone heard the charges. I shuffled forward, head down so I wouldn't have to meet anyone's eyes and stopped beside Endbury.

"You okay, Jason?"

I wanted to say 'What do you think?' but it wouldn't do to alienate the one guy trying to help me, whatever his reasons. I nodded, not sure I could trust my voice. I didn't want it to crack in front of him.

"Good. Now the judge will read the charges against you. You listen. Don't speak. Don't argue. The prosecutor will argue remand, I'll push for bail. No promises. But whatever you do, don't argue. This isn't the time. You'll be arraigned and next time you'll enter a plea. We'll be bound over for trial."

"How long will that take?" Like I suspected, my voice broke.

He pretended he didn't hear. "I can't say. I'll try for bail, but even if you get it, it will be high. Is there anyone you can approach?"

"No," I said so abruptly he lapsed into silence. I shook my head savagely when he gave me a questioning look. "Just forget it."

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He sighed and gripped my arm. "I'll do what I can."

Didn't turn out to be very much. Forget bail. I think the judge was amused that Endbury would even ask. The sheriffs led me back to the waiting room where I would indeed wait—wait until there were enough out of court to fill the bus to take me back to county for God knew how long. Trial was set for ten weeks from today. Backlog, Endbury said. It would give him time to prepare my case. Lucky him.

I never saw the hysterical tweaker again. I figured he was either in the infirmary or dead. I should have cared; I didn't. The noise level rose and fell, but was always there, reverberations in hell. More of the same came and went. No one came for me.

Five miserable, sleep-deprived days later I had a visitor. I'd seen Endbury the day before to 'map out my strategy' so I wasn't expecting anyone. Who the hell would come see me? But by that point I'd have taken a visit from the Pope. Shows how pathetically desperate I was.

It was Spider.

I froze in the door to the meeting cubicle and stared at him. He was sitting down, looking around, tapping out a tattoo on the counter. He stared at a piece of graffiti some wit had carved into the wall beside him. ES. Gang tag. He frowned, looked away. Looked back. Chewed on a cuticle. I could tell by the vibrations of his body that he was tapping his foot on the floor.

When he caught sight of me in the doorway, he froze, then pointed for me to sit. I hesitated then decided he couldn't do anything more to me, so I slid into the chair.

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"What do you want?"

"Thought I'd come by to see how you are." Like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Still in one piece," I said. "You sorry?"

"No. I'm glad you're okay. Sorry you're in here."

"Well, considering you put me here, that's a load of bull—"

"About that," he started, then fell silent.

I stared at him. His gray eyes behind his glasses gave nothing away, but I sensed tension in the way he held his shoulders and wondered why. What did he have to be tense about?

"What?"

"I may be able to help you there."

"You're joking, right? What could you do to help me?"

"Prove you didn't kill Blunt."

I tried to come up with another smart-ass comment, since it seemed like the only thing I had left, but my mouth wouldn't work. It hung open as I stared at him. I rallied and shot back, "You playing with me, asshole? Get your kicks ripping wings off flies, too?"

"I also drown kittens in gunny sacks. Will you shut up and listen?"

I was too confused to argue. I opened my mouth to fire off another retort. Shut it. Opened it again. "What—"

"Shut up and listen."

I shut up.

"George Blunt died of massive trauma and internal bleeding from being beaten to death. Someone took a hard,

blunt object and literally pounded the shit out of him. But before they got the stick, they used their hands."

I tried to see the significance. Couldn't. Said so.

He sighed, like what he said should have been obvious to a child. "Skinned knuckles. Fists aren't iron. Pound them into someone's face, and the face isn't the only thing banged up. They leave DNA behind, too."

I looked down at my hands, finally getting it. "You'll testify my hands weren't banged up?"

"Exactly. We've also had zero luck locating anyone named Roger from Bakersfield. No one with that name is listed on any California missing persons lists. No John Does even coming close to a youthful blond man. But it wasn't your DNA on Blunt. So you couldn't have done it."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Don't want to shock you, but my job is to find and catch the guilty guy. You're not him." He tilted his head, looking me up and down like a side of beef. I grew aroused. "This time."

"Fuck you."

"I'll let the DA know. Once he sees there's no case he'll drop the charges. We go back to looking for the real killer. And maybe figure out who set you up."

"Good luck with that," I didn't care if they ever found out who killed the guy, but I did want to know what asshole landed my ass in jail, if only for a short time. "Hey, I owe you. You'll have to let me buy you a drink after I get out."

Something crossed his face, there and gone in an instance. His smile was blinding. "Sure. I'll hold you to that. Mexicali is my drink of choice."

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"Not many places carry that."

"The Vault does."

I went still. My mouth was open again. "You belong to the Vault?"

"Charter member. Okay, maybe not that long, but yeah, I've been going for a couple of years."

I shook my head. "Just when you think you know someone..."

"You don't know me at all. But I'm going to give you a chance to find out."

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## Spider

**Jason was released the next afternoon. He went to court in the morning and was discharged by the judge who thanked everyone for their efforts, didn't apologize, and moved on to the next case. Jason had to return to county to be processed out and collect his meager belongings. No one had brought him any change of clothes; he still wore the skin-tight parade pants. I found myself staring, only looking away when he cleared his throat.**

He wanted to take me out for drinks, but I was taking him to dinner. I knew he hadn't had a decent meal since he'd been incarcerated, so I planned something special. When I met him at the front doors of the county jail he scrambled into the cab beside me. I threw the truck into gear and peeled out of the parking lot.

"Where to?" I asked.

He stared down at himself and grimaced. "Home. I desperately need a shower and a change of clothes." He gave me the address.

I dropped him off with the promise to pick him up in two hours. I told him to dress fancy. I didn't tell him where we were going. Some things should be a surprise.

When I picked him up I was pleasantly surprised. He cleaned up just fine. A chocolate brown silk shirt that hugged his slender, but muscular, chest. No tie, but not everyone



bothered. Tan linen pants cut to show off an impressive basket. I felt a corresponding swelling in my groin.

When I wheeled into the parking lot of Holdren's he looked on with childlike wonder. "I've never eaten here before. I've heard it's good."

"Trust me." I put the truck into park. "It's as good as you've heard, and better."

He followed me inside, smoothing his hands over his dress pants. We were shown a table by the window. The city had put up Christmas decorations and the palm trees outside the restaurant were covered in tiny white jewels. The host handed us menus and left, promising someone would return for our drink orders.

I'm not much of a fancy drinker. I ordered a beer and was relieved when Jason did the same.

He met my eyes over the menus. "What's good?"

"Steak," I said. "Or, if not that, there's always steak."

"I take it you're having steak."

"It's my second favorite kind of meat."

He ignored my innuendo, though I thought I saw his eyes darken. "Then I guess I'll have to have steak," he said.

The meal was as good or better than the first time I had eaten there. Maybe it was the company. The first time had been with my ex-wife when I told her I was leaving her, and why. I had figured she wouldn't cause a scene in such a public place. Shows you can't always trust your instincts.

To say she freaked out is the understatement of the year. I ended up wearing her Caesar salad and most of her linguine, which unfortunately had been crab. I smelled like fish the rest

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of the night because she also locked me out of our house. I had to wait until the next day to get clean clothes. When I drove by in the morning in hopes of catching her before work I found my things, including my classic movie collection piled on the front lawn. It had already been looted by the neighborhood brats. Most of it I never saw again.

To add insult to indignity, she waited until I was collecting my stuff and turned the sprinklers on. Never underestimate the fury of a woman thrown over for another man, or in my case, men.

She did her best to ruin me in the department, but this is the enlightened twenty-first century so no one would touch me. God knows the brass tried. But I weathered the storm and now they just think I'm their happy faggot with no more secrets. They don't tell me what turns them on in bed, so why do they need to know what flips my switch?

Jason and I didn't talk much over dinner. He was shy, something I like in my subs, so I didn't encourage much chatter. I kept trying to gauge how far he wanted me to go. From what I could tell he was getting into the sub role in a big way. Made me wonder what was in his past to make him so eager to please. Was it just sex? Even if it was, we were going to have fun tonight. After I paid the check we made our way through the other after-dinner crowd that strolled under the phony cheer strung between spindly palms.

"Still buying that drink?" I asked after I unlocked the Toyota's doors. Wondering if he was going to back out of the coming game, or whether he wanted it as badly as I did.

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He nodded and without another word I put the truck in gear and headed west. The Vault's parking lot was packed. The stuffy interior was wall-to-wall leather, rubber and denim. The brass beat of something hard and grinding thrummed through my boots. Beside me, Jason listened intently. I touched his arm and pointed toward the far corner. We found a spot in a pool of shadow and I leaned down to speak in his ear.

"Get us a couple of Mexicalis."

He vanished into the crowd and returned minutes later with two ice-cold bottles of beer. I took mine with a brisk nod and upended it. When I caught him looking sideways at me I shouted. "Don't worry. You're driving."

"I am?"

I didn't answer him. If he wanted to play sub then he'd take the orders I gave without question. In the beginning there was always the game of seeing whether they were willing to go as far as they promised. Would they back out at the last minute? I thought this one might go the distance. I had two more beers and a couple of shooters of tequila while he sipped his single beer through to last call. When the lights flashed I took his arm and led him toward the front door, passing a trio of leather-clad Doms I knew from previous visits. They eyed Jason with appreciation. I made sure by my possessive hold on his arm that they knew he was taken property and no one did more than look. The older of the three, a gray-haired bear grinned, displaying a gold grill and grabbed his crotch as we passed.

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Then we were outside and I cleared my lungs of the stench of stale hops and poppers that always hung over those places. Jason seemed relieved to be outside, too. I tossed him my keys, he caught them underhanded and watched me approach.

"Where to?"

"My place. I'll give you directions."

"Goleta, huh?"

He remembered. I nodded.

"I've never been."

"Not much to look at. It's home."

Home was a tiny Spanish-tile stucco-sided bungalow tucked at the end of a dead end street on the north edge of town. My two nearest neighbors were shift workers at a nearby hospital and it was rare for them both to be home. It was quiet. Just the way I liked it.

I led Jason into the front room and pointed at a stool beside my butcher-block bar. I pulled a pair of Mexicalis out of the bar fridge and set one in front of him. He opened it and swung around to study my living room. It was small, like the rest of the house, small and sparse. I don't go for decorating much. I missed that part of the fabled gay gene. The focus of the room was a forty-two inch plasma TV and Blu-Ray system. Over the four years since the abrupt meltdown of my marriage, I had rebuilt and added to my movie collection. I mostly have old classics, a few hokey, old-style horror and sci-fi flicks like the original *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Forbidden Planet*. I stepped up behind him. He tensed briefly

then relaxed again. I wanted to pull him into my arms and taste him. I resisted the urge. For now.

I waved my beer at the collection lining one whole wall. "Want to watch something?"

Along with Hollywood classics I had a pretty hefty collection of porn. Mostly bondage stuff. Covers full of big leather men in chains and bonds. I saw him looking them over but he didn't pick anything. I swung the swivel stool around to face me and slipped my hand behind his neck. I squeezed. He shivered and leaned into my hand. I shifted to lessen the pressure in my groin.

"Is this a good idea, Alex?"

I liked the way my name sounded on his lips. But at the same time I didn't want him getting the idea he was calling the shots here. Not when he'd surrendered those rights to me by coming here.

"I know what I'm doing, Jason Aaron Zachary. Do your friends call you Zack?"

"Jason," he said. "My friends call me Jason."

I stroked the soft skin below his ear, lightly touching the Chinese tat I had noticed earlier. It was about the size of a silver dollar and looked like a figure standing beside a tree.

"What does this mean?"

"Fate," he murmured.

"Whose? Yours? What is your fate, Jason?"

"To be alone, I think."

"You're not alone." My fingers moved down to his collarbone and lingered over the grooves and bumps there.

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"You're a cop," he said. "I just got out of jail. Is this a good idea?"

I pushed his legs open and moved between them. My hand moved down his arm, fingers caressing the curve of his biceps under the fine silk shirt he wore. The silk felt cool, his skin underneath was furnace hot. I smoothed the heel of my hand over his nipple until it poked into my hand and his breath came hard and fast.

"It's the best idea I've had all day."

I pressed closer, touching, my face less than an inch from his. His eyes dilated and I smelled his desire, felt his warm breath on my cheek.

"Take your shirt off."

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## Jason

**My hands moved of their own volition. I skimmed my raw silk shirt off and dropped it into a puddle on the carpeted floor. Outside a dog barked. Or maybe it was just my heart. I sat, hands resting lightly on my knees, never taking my eyes off his face. The pores of his fair skin, the light dusting of freckles across his nose, the incipient beard that was the lightest down on his cheeks and chin made him beautiful. He had full red lips, parted slightly and a strong jaw I longed to touch. He had taken his glasses off. I waited. Waited for him to tell me what to do.**

I didn't have to wait long. "Stand up."

I complied. He stepped back, studying me. I desperately hoped he would like what he saw. He must have. He raised both hands and slid stiff fingers through my tousled, newly washed hair. Then he moved over to the side of my head, fanning his fingers over my neck. He tugged at the gold studs in my ears.

"Those should be diamonds," he said. Fingertips skimmed down my back and circled around to the front. He pinched my right nipple and the gold ring in it between his thumb and forefinger, twisted it, then soothed the burn with a softer touch. I was pebble hard and wanting more. "Don't move," he said when I tried to step closer.

"You got anything else pierced?" he asked.

"No."

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"Too bad."

His fingers traced the outline of my tat, stroking my shivering skin. "What's that?" he murmured. "Some kind of fantasy? A phoenix? A gryphon?"

I closed my eyes, savoring his touch. "A bird of paradise."

He bent and touched his lips to my chest, his tongue sliding over the bird shape. "You mean it's real?"

My eyelids fluttered and I wound my shaking fingers through his short hair. "Very real. South New Guinea tropics..." I moaned as he moved up my body. I felt the tickle of his breath on my eyelashes. He explored the canvas of my face, touching everything until he arrived at my mouth. His first touch was feather light. Then he pressed his open mouth over mine and I gasped when his tongue invaded me.

He tasted of beer and garlic and something that was uniquely his own. He grew rougher, shoving his tongue deep into my mouth, pressing me back until my spine was against the bar. One hand skidded across my bare back, sliding around my ass and pulling me against him. He broke free and pressed trembling lips against my throat. Tugging at the waistband of my pants he said, "Get those off."

I skimmed pants and underwear off, tossing them in the same pile as my shirt and would have stepped back into his arms except he stayed me with a flat palm against my chest.

"Stand there," he ordered. "I want to look at you."

His gaze tracked down my shivering form, pausing to study my straining cock. His eyes widened when he saw my other tattoo. A slender, green vine circled my erection, ending in an unopened bud over my piss slit. The tattoo had cost me



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a small fortune and three hours of unforgettable pain. Until that moment I had always wondered if it had been a costly mistake, done at the spur of the moment. Seeing the look on Alex's face made it all worthwhile. Before I could even guess what he was going to do he knelt in front of me and took me in his mouth. The shock was incredible. I swayed on my feet and would have fallen if I hadn't had the bar behind me. His hot mouth enclosed me in wet warmth, his tongue swirled around my tattooed head and veined shaft. I moaned and rocked forward. With shaking hands I cupped the back of his head and urged him on with hoarse words. My balls tightened and I knew I was seconds from coming. Before it could happen he squeezed the base of my cock, stopping the ejaculation. He pulled away from me and stood in one smooth move. His face was flushed, his pupils black holes. His mouth glistened with saliva.

"I'm going to fuck you. Tell me you want me."

"Yes. Please."

He led me into a dim bedroom that had black-out curtains on the windows and walls painted some dark color I couldn't make out. He didn't turn on a light. A pale glow spilled in from the other room. It was enough to see his eyes glitter. He opened a drawer and plastic rustled. He handed me a condom and a small tube of lube.

"Get me ready."

I held the condom wrapper in my teeth while I unzipped his linen pants and slid them off. His legs were covered by fine hair that I knew would glint red in the light. He wore no

underwear. Even in the dark room I could see the bobbing outline of his swollen cock pressed against his belly.

"Suck me."

I knelt and pressed my face into his crotch. I could smell him now, earthy and raw. I inhaled, then slipped my lips around him. He sighed and thrust his hips forward. After less than a minute of sucking him, he pulled me off and pushed me back onto my heels.

"Put it on."

I rolled the condom down over his fat cock and lubed him up.

"Get on your knees."

Shivering with anticipation now, I did as he ordered. He smoothed his hand over my back and covered me with his body. He stroked my flank, then probed my puckered hole. When he inserted one finger into me I whined in need. A second finger followed the first and slid over the flesh of my prostate, sending electricity singing along my nerve endings. I humped his hand, eyes closed at the building sensations. His other hand gripped my hip, holding me steady. I trembled and rocked my hips into his touch. I moaned when he withdrew his fingers and with the latex covered tip of his cock, probed my wrinkled orifice, forcing it open while his large hands held me still. He entered me slowly, letting me adjust to the invasion. After a brief spasm of pain there came heat. I welcomed him with guttural sighs. He began to move, first in slow steady strokes that rapidly increased in tempo until he was pounding into me with a ferocity that left me mewling helplessly, unable to catch my breath. I braced

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myself against the floor and waited for the storm to end. It did with a grunt as he emptied himself into the condom. He roughly stroked me to orgasm moments later.

We stayed like that while our hearts settled back to a steady rhythm and we could breathe again, then he peeled away from me and stood, helping me to my feet. I swayed and he steadied me. He disposed of the condom and took me in his arms.

"You'll stay."

It wasn't really a request. That was okay, I wasn't about to argue. We slipped between the covers of the double bed and I drifted into the first deep sleep I'd had in weeks.

I awoke to darkness so total it was like I had lost the memory of light. I remembered a poem I had read once in the last year I spent in high school. It was by Lord Byron and even then everyone said he was a fruit. Maybe that's why I liked him so much. The line that always stayed with me was about darkness—'Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day.' A story of eternal darkness that never ended. I rolled over and collided with warm flesh.

It was so much like the horror of the grisly discovery of George Blunt that I squeaked and lunged to the edge of the bed. A hand snaked out and wrapped around my arm saving me from tumbling to the floor.

"Jason. It's okay. You're safe."

I was hyperventilating and Spider pulled me into his arms, soothing me like I was a child terrified by a bad dream. Maybe I was. I took a deep breath and pushed away from him.

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"Sorry, I didn't know where I was. I freaked..." I laughed shakily. "I swear, I'm not usually so jumpy."

"You got good reason." He helped me sit up. "Hold on, cover your eyes."

I did, and light filled the room. I blinked and looked around. The room was as much like a cave as you could make something above ground that had windows. There were no pictures or decorations anywhere. Instead one whole wall was dominated by a black sling and a rack with various whips, restraints and bondage tape. I'd never seen such a well-equipped Dom room outside of a club.

"Jesus," I whispered.

He grinned. "You like it?"

"Wasn't what I was expecting."

He slid his arm around my bare shoulder and nuzzled my neck. "What were you expecting?"

I shook my head. He kissed me hard enough to leave me gasping again. Then he swatted my thigh. "Regretfully there's no time to play. I have to get to work and so do you."

"I don't have a job anymore, remember."

"Yeah, you do. I talked to your boss and explained things to him. He's willing to give you another shot. You agree to stay out of dead guy's beds and he'll keep you on."

"Funny."

"Come on, I'll feed you and then I can drop you by your place." He stooped to catch another kiss. "We'll meet back up tonight."

Now that he had my whole day mapped out, I hurried to get ready. Quick shower and bacon and eggs—I scrambled

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the eggs, he got the bacon on, insisting that growing boys needed their protein to function. Afterward he dropped me at my apartment, where I found my ancient Honda sitting in front of the graffiti covered crap-hole I lived in. So obviously wherever I had gone the night Blunt died I hadn't taken my own car. The puzzle grew. I frowned.

Spider saw where I was looking. "That yours?"

I frowned. "Yes, but what's it doing here?"

"What do you mean?"

"It wasn't here the first time you dropped me off, was it?"

He shook his close-cropped red head. "No, it wasn't. So where was it?"

"I don't know. I remember driving to the Vault ... I would have left it in the parking lot there. If I drove it after, I don't remember." Scary thought, driving around in a drunken haze.

We both approached the vehicle. Nothing seemed out of place. I had the keys on my key chain. I popped the front door and a cloud of stale hot air puffed out. My second set of keys, which fortunately didn't include my apartment key, hung from the ignition. Clearly the car had been shut up for a while. A litter of McDonald's food wrappers and drink containers covered the back seat. I wasn't exactly a neat freak.

"Is that all yours?" Spider peered into the interior, taking in everything. When I nodded he asked, "Anything missing?"

"Don't think so."

He pointed at the emergency parking brake. "You always leave your car with the emergency brake on?"

I looked and frowned. "Not usually. Never saw the need."

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He pointed to the car key. "Give me that. I'll have it printed. Maybe it was a helpful neighbor."

We both knew that was a crock. Spider went back to his truck and pulled a tool kit out of the truck bed. From there he pulled on a pair of gloves, crossed back over to my car and slid into the driver's seat. Careful not to touch the gearshift, he opened the glove compartment. He rifled through the papers there, holding up a handful of condoms. "You know the heat in a glove compartment will damage these things."

I rolled my eyes at him and snatched the wrappers out of his hand. "Thank you, Dr. Ruth."

He collected the keys and followed me inside.

The apartment next door to mine housed a family of four who were classic white trash from Okie country. She was already hanging out the door, avidly watching us approach. Behind her a TV played Jerry Springer and one of her kids was screaming. Welcome to my neighborhood.

"Sorry," I muttered, gripping my keys in my hand. "It's not much, but it's home until I can find something better." I didn't say the obvious: if I could afford anything better I wouldn't be here.

He lightly touched my back, which was riddled with tension. "Don't worry about it. Pack up some things. You can spend the weekend at my place. I'm low down on the duty roster, so unless we have a major crime wave in the next few days I'm pretty well free till Monday."

"You want me to come stay with you?"

He stepped so close to me I felt the heat from his body. I shivered at the intensity of his gaze. "I intend to keep you at

home and fuck you until you can't walk straight. What do you say to that?"

I was already feeling weak-kneed. "Yes, sir."

"Good." He spun around and trotted back down the steps. At the bottom he cocked and aimed his hand in an imitation gun. Then he was gone. The neighbor looked on. She had a Marlboro dangling from her slack mouth. Gil came out into the hallway. Jerry Springer played on their TV. A string of bleeped out expletives followed them.

"Fuck's that? Christ, where you been, man? Cops was by looking for you. What you do now?" He peered down the hall toward the entrance. "Who was that?"

Gill was not the most enlightened of apes and I usually kept my private life private from him. But I was too giddy from the night spent with Alex to care what Gill thought.

"That was my boyfriend," I said proudly.

Gill snorted and stomped back into his apartment. His wife followed silently. They banged the door shut on a rising wail from one of their kids.

"Good morning to you, too," I called after them. Shaking my head I entered my home and went to pack a bag for the weekend. After a while I found myself whistling while I packed.

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## Spider

**I spent the morning in court waiting to testify, but the case was adjourned for another day so that was a waste of time. Back at the station I changed out of the monkey suit I only wore to trials, pulled out the file on George Blunt. I fell to re-examining the skimpy evidence we had built our even flimsier case on.**

Nancy came in from her own court duty and, throwing her jacket over the back of her chair, dropped into her seat. The swivel chair creaked alarmingly.

"That thing dumps you on the floor I'm going to be too busy laughing my ass off to help you up."

"I don't need your help." She flipped open a blue binder, one of our current open murder investigations and started studying the contents like they were nuggets of pure gold. After a while she looked up and met my gaze. "It true you picked the kid from the Blunt case up at county yesterday?"

Cops gossip worse than little old ladies leaning over picket fences. I grimaced. It shouldn't surprise me that she had already heard. It still pissed me off that people couldn't mind their own business.

"So what if I did? I wanted to pick his brain about anyone else he might have noticed hanging around the docks lately." A lie, since I'd barely talked to Jason. I'd had too many other things to do with him.



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"You aren't ... getting involved with him are you? You know Garcia will freak if you hook up with an ex-suspect who's got a record."

"Ex being the operative word. He should never have been charged in the first place. We got sloppy. One of us should have noticed his knuckles."

"Christ, you are involved. Garcia's gonna have your ass."

"He can try." I turned back to my computer, signaling the discussion was over. I heard her humph once in disgust then she went back to looking at her murder book.

After several minutes of silence, she asked, "Want to grab lunch?"

"Sure. Rudy's?"

My phone rang. I scooped it up and cradled it under my ear. When I hung up I met Nancy's gaze. "Cancel lunch. The dive team recovered something near the George Blunt crime scene."

I grabbed my jacket, checked that my Beretta was in its holster and accessible. Nancy was closing down her PC.

"I'll go sign a car out. Meet me out front."

The dive team was just wrapping up when we pulled into the Marina Four lot. The head diver, Carl Frame, flipped his hand at me as he stowed his gear in the department SUV.

"What have you got for me?"

He hefted a plastic evidence bag up and let me see the contents: a triangular looking brass and hardwood device I couldn't make heads or tails of. Several round attachments looked like magnifying glasses, though what they were supposed to magnify I couldn't see. It didn't look like any

microscope I'd ever seen. It was heavy enough to pack quite a wallop in the right hands.

"What the hell is it?"

He shrugged.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"You mean besides the half a dozen shopping carts, twenty-six license plates—two from Canada—and a Schwinn bicycle?"

"Yeah," I ruminated over the list. "I had a Schwinn when I was a kid."

"Really." Nancy appeared at my elbow. "I took you for more of a Harley guy."

"They make my kidneys hurt."

Nancy crouched down and studied the object through the plastic. "You're right, what is it?"

"You tell me," Carl said. "I bring 'em up. It's up to you to figure out what they are."

"Looks like some kind of ship thingy," Nancy said peering into the bag.

I shrugged. "Ship thingy. How scientific sounding. Forensics will have to go over it. Maybe we'll get lucky and they can put a name to it." I signed off on the chain of evidence card attached to the bag and carried it over to my department issued Crown Victoria. I locked up and pocketed the keys. When Nancy came up behind me I nodded toward the marina. We passed through the gate to the wharf crowded with boats of all sizes and shapes. The murder scene bobbed gently in the swells, the rear entrance still blocked by crime scene tape.

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"I'd like to take another look."

"You aren't seriously suggesting anything was missed, are you?"

"We missed the significance of Mr. Zachary's injury-free hands." I spoke over my shoulder as I climbed onto the rocking boat. Suddenly I felt a wave of nausea. Nancy must have seen something on my face.

"You're not going to tell me you get seasick, are you?"

I grunted and tried to ignore her.

"Christ man, you live by the biggest fucking ocean in the world and you get seasick? Why'd you leave Podunk anyway if you're not a water guy? Next you'll tell me you don't surf."

"It was Kansas City, not Podunk. No, I don't surf." I did my best to ignore the pangs in my stomach and gamely moved into the cabin. The bedroom where Jason and Blunt had been found was toward the front of the boat. I could never remember what it was called. "And I left because I got married. Remember?"

"Oh, right. Bambi. Another mistake."

"Her name was Barbara. It's been four years. You going to keep rubbing it in?"

"Every minute of every day."

"I seriously need a new partner."

"Ain't gonna happen. Captain thinks we're golden, higher solve rate than anyone else in the department. Makes him look good, makes me look good. I'm going to be Captain one day, just you see."

I knew she'd already taken her Lieutenant's exam. She just might do it. "And that, my friend, will be the day I retire."

"I'll buy you a gold watch."

"Good, something to hawk when I hit the skids."

"Seriously, what would you do if you quit?" she asked as we moved through the boat, peering into nooks and crannies, looking for anything that seemed out of place. Like I'd know what should be in place on something as alien as a boat. Underneath me I was aware of water pressing against the bottom of the boat. I imagine it trying to get in. To swallow us up. Talk about an overactive imagination.

"I don't know. Become a PI," I said. It was a popular topic among cops, frequently disillusioned by the bald-faced hatred and lack of respect cops faced daily. We all wondered what we would do if we quit. "Open a donut shop." I grinned maliciously. "Sell guns. Always money in guns since law enforcement is going to hell in a hand basket."

In an alcove above a bench seat I found a tall, narrow glassed-in cabinet. It was inset into the wall beside a small fridge. I opened the cabinet and shone my flashlight into the shadowed interior.

"Come here," I called to Nancy. "Have a look at this."

She came up behind me and studied the cabinet and its contents. "What is it?"

I shrugged. I swung the flashlight up to peer into the top of the cabinet and the single shelf built into the lower section to allow room for something a lot bigger than was in there right now. I could make out a faint outline on the dark surface. Something had obviously sat there until recently. No sign the crime scene techs had printed the cabinet for latents.

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At least I wasn't the only one who had fucked up this crime scene. We were all getting sloppy.

"Maybe that ship thingy was in here."

Nancy pulled out her cell and called CSU to get their asses down here and finish their job. How to win friends and influence people. She'll make a marvelous Captain some day.

"You got your camera with you?"

She went to retrieve it and I prowled the boat some more. We missed something once, maybe we missed more. This case was FUBAR all around.

I tried to visualize what might have happened that night, but there were too many unknowns. Just how and where had Jason crossed paths with Blunt? Blunt was killed on the boat, that much we knew. But Jason was the enigma. When had he entered the picture? Had he come on his own for some reason he wasn't talking about, was he brought here, or had he stumbled on something, somewhere else and become part of ... what? I shook my head. If I kept this up I'd be seeing Kennedy conspiracies coming out of the woodwork.

Because if Blunt's killers had wanted Jason gone they could have just killed him and left his corpse cooling beside Blunt. But they hadn't and he had been genuinely confused. Well join the club, so was I.

I made a mental note to remind the lab to check his blood samples for drugs. Tox screen for something like coke or methamphetamine might show up hours later, but date rape cocktails like GHB were more ephemeral. The effects could be devastating but the drug didn't linger in the system long. With our blood sample taken we just might prove what I now

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suspected—Jason had been doped up with a date rape drug, which would explain why he didn't remember a thing about that night. So when had it happened? And why?

I was back to trying to trace his movements that night. With his help I'd have to establish a time line. I had to know everything he had done that day. According to him he had been at the Vault earlier in the evening. Probably after I had been there picking up whoever it was I had gone home with that night. They were such fleeting, nameless asses and mouths that blended into one faceless body after a while.

Only Jason stood out. I wasn't sure if it was the circumstances of our meeting or something unique about the boy. But he lingered in my thoughts. I was looking forward to the weekend. I intended to test the limits of Jason Aaron Zachary's tolerance in more ways than one. I guess we'd see where we stood come Monday.

Nancy took some more pictures so we'd have a reference. Then we trooped back out onto the dock and took our possible murder weapon in to log it into evidence. Let the forensic geeks sort it out. I was going back to what I did best. Good old fashion leg work.

I started by walking into the morgue and meeting up with Don about our new piece of evidence plus some theories I had. He wasn't very happy to see me. That suited me just fine. I didn't like being there. I hated going to the morgue. And it wasn't the smells or things I saw. It wasn't even those dead people lying around in various stages of turning back into worm food. It was my dead people who got to me. I've brought too many people here, seen them newly dead, seen

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them little more than pathetic bones hidden away like litter collecting in the bottom of a lightless well. I escort them to this place and try to find out why they're here. How they ended up on the wrong end of a gun or knife, or the business end of someone's bumper. People are amazingly adept at finding new ways to kill each other and it's up to me to find out why.

Some are quickly forgotten. The banger who got caught in a turf war, the meth head who blew himself up in his makeshift lab. Then there are those you never forget, no matter how many trips you take into your own personal pharmacy. The four-year-old boy whose mother thought she was safe to drive after a couple of martinis with the girls, the sixteen-year-old who hitchhiked to school. I had to stand on the ditch beside the road and document the atrocities done to her by the sick fuck who picked her up.

I see dead people. They haunt me sometimes in the dead hours of the morning when I can't sleep and there's no one beside me in bed. It's my job to give some kind of peace to the ones the dead leave behind. But there's no one to give me peace.

Only the dead are always there.

"You know I could be so much better at my job if you brought me the evidence at one time, instead of dishing it out in dribs and drabs."

"I'll ask the bad guys to be more accommodating next time and leave the murder weapon in plain sight so we don't have to go hunting for it." I backtracked. "It is the murder weapon, right?"

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"It's a fine example of an antique sextant, maybe circa 1800s." At my puzzled look he added, "Navigation tool in early days. But whether it's the murder weapon, it's far too early to say with any certainty." Don slapped an X-ray film up on the light box. He studied it over the rim of his glasses. "Could very well be. Injuries to the torso and shoulders are consistent with the blunt object. I would say your victim was lying down when he was struck, repeatedly on the back and neck. I think they missed his head because he was covering it with his arms, which received considerable damage."

"So he was cowering ... he knew what was going on. Where? On the bed? On the floor?"

"You mean deck? Was he on the deck when the blows were struck." Don shook his head. "I suspect he was in the bunk and he died there."

"Now, what are the chances someone could be in the bed—bunk—with him and not remember some of it at least?"

"I've seen GHB users have no memory of the most horrific things that have occurred to them."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"Any chance of recovering trace from the weapon?"

"Unlikely," he said, then seeing my disappointment he added, "But not impossible. Sometimes blood and tissue can get into the unlikeliest places. Don't worry, Alex, if there's anything there we'll find it. And even if we can't, we can still match the tool marks on the body to the object. They're certainly unique enough. You recovered it in the water near the boat?"



"Yes, I suspect it was dumped overboard when the killer went ashore."

"Did he bring the weapon with him or use something that was already there?"

An important question. A critical one if we ever got a case to trial. Did the guy come with the weapon, which showed premeditation, or did he pick something up in the heated spur of the moment and swing without thinking. That was a whole other animal and a good lawyer could get charges knocked down or dismissed all together if nobody knew what to charge the guy with.

"It looks like the sextant or whatever it was, was already onboard. We're checking with the boat owner and the guy who manages the charter company. See if any of them recognize the thing. Meanwhile, you hear back from tox on any of the blood samples we sent you?"

"Patience, Alex, patience."

"I know, doc, it's a virtue. Well I've never been a very virtuous man." The guy didn't know the half of it.

"Well, I'll hurry them along as fast as I can. I know you're eager to clear your young man."

If this was a classic moment in a slapstick comedy, I'd have been drinking something and would have spewed it everywhere. Christ—

"Is there anybody in this city that doesn't know my business?"

"Probably not. But look on the bright side," Don said. "They think highly of you despite your shortcomings."

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"So glad to hear it," I muttered and beat a hasty retreat after getting Don to agree to tell toxicology he wanted results ASAP.

Back in the car I flipped on my cell and called Nancy's desk. She sounded harried when she answered. When she recognized my voice she calmed down. "Don give you anything useful?"

"Your ship thingy is a sextant. Antique navigation device. He's pretty sure it was the murder weapon. But you know Don, he won't commit."

"A sextant, huh? You learn something new every day. Well that's a help. CSU is printing as we speak. Maybe something useful will come of it." She chewed noisily. I remembered our aborted lunch break. "I'm heading back to the Marina. Maybe I can catch up with the boat owner or that charter guy."

"Phil Collins."

"Right. Like the singer." Wonder how much he got ribbed about that. "That's the guy." Jason's boss. Jason should be at work by now. Would he have gone for lunch yet? "I'll call you later."

"Do that, partner." Had she read my mind and knew what I was up to. God, I hoped not. I'd hate to be that easy to read.

Back in the Marina I headed for the Channel Charter's offices set within spitting distance of the docks where the murder had occurred. The young girl at the desk, who introduced herself as Marley, seemed flustered to have a big cop leaning on her counter asking about her boss. Finally she told me he had gone for lunch and wouldn't be back for at

least another hour. I gathered this wasn't a busy time of year for tourists or charters so long lunches were the norm.

Casually I asked, "Jason Zachary around?"

"He's down at slip seven, working on *Expressive*."

I got directions from her and hurried down to the dock, refusing to admit to myself how eager I was to see Jason again. I found the boat, smaller than the *Cutting Edge*. There was no one in sight. I stepped onto the dock within touching distance of the front of the boat and called his name. Seconds later a head popped out from below deck.

"Alex?" Jason hauled himself out and stood looking down at me, a rag and screwdriver in his hands. "What are you doing here? It's not six o'clock yet, is it?"

"I was in the area." I waved back toward the office I'd just come from. "Your boss is out, so I thought I'd see if you'd had lunch yet."

He stuffed the screwdriver into his back pocket and hopped down beside me, wiping his hands on the rag. I could smell oil and diesel fuel on him. It overrode the harbor stink of rotting fish and brine. "No," he said. "But I need to finish up here. Phil wants to take the boat out tomorrow."

"You get charters this time of year?"

"Not many, but every now and then someone comes along and wants to go out." He looked regretful. "I gotta stay, man."

"I can grab something. Bring it here."

"Sure, I can stop for a few minutes to eat. I just can't leave..."

"Hamburger okay? Coke?"

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"Cheeseburger. Coke is good."

I found a nearby Jack-in-the-Box and grabbed us both sirloin bacon and cheese burgers, fries and drinks. Back at the Marina we sat on the side of the dock, legs swinging out over the dark water below us, defying the local gulls to try and take our food. A particularly persistent bird kept dive bombing us until I threw a scrap of bun at it. It scooped it out of the water and flew off, pursued by several other birds.

"Rats with wings," I muttered.

"Hey. I like gulls. All birds really. I once thought of going through for a degree in ornithology."

"Why didn't you?" I edged closer to him on the rough dock until our hips almost touched. He tapped his foot against the pylon holding us up. He looked pensive.

"Life. It has a way of interfering."

"Something happen?"

"I ... left school kind of suddenly."

"Why?" I don't know why I persisted. Usually I didn't care that much about the twinks I picked up. They were too temporary to concern myself with their shallow lives.

He chewed on his burger, idling tossing scraps to the hovering birds. "Shit happens."

"Come on, Jason. I want to know."

It didn't seem to occur to him that he could just tell me to go to hell. He sighed and threw the last piece of bun to the most persistent bird.

"I was a confused kid. What kid isn't right? But being gay makes it worse somehow. Know what I mean?"

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All too well. I didn't answer. He barely seemed to notice my silence.

"I went out with this girl for a while. I was trying so hard to be normal, it used to make me sick. She had this brother, Brad, and we got to be friends. Then we were more than friends. His sister caught us one day." He shook his head ruefully. "To say the shit hit the fan is an understatement. Poor Brad, his folks shipped him off to some reorientation place that summer. I never saw him again. His sister..." He lowered his head and stared into the restlessly moving water below us. "His sister made my life a living hell the next year in school. I had to leave, but the rumors followed me. In the end I dropped out. Said fuck everybody, if I was going to be a faggot, I was going to be the worst one I could." He gave a short bark of laughter. "I ran away and ended up in San Francisco. Do you know what a place like that can do to a naïve sixteen-year-old who thinks he's so tough but really doesn't know jack shit?"

I did. Some of my dead people were kids like that. I stroked his back, not surprised at the tension there. "What brought you back here?"

"Family," he said hastily. "What else can bring you back to a place that has nothing but bad memories. My father died..."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well, he was actually a pretty good guy. Didn't have a clue how to deal with me, but it's not like he didn't try. He just wasn't any good at bucking public opinion."

"What about the rest of your family?"

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He shook his head again. "Mom and dad broke up years ago. She went back east someplace. No one knew where. For a long time it was just dad and me. Then I left. I don't think he ever got over that." His voice went soft and I had to bend over to hear him. "So maybe I killed him. Maybe if I'd been stronger I could have stayed and been there for him."

"You don't know that."

"No, I don't." Abruptly he jumped to his feet, brushing crumbs off his pant legs. "I gotta get back to work. I'll, uh, see you later."

"I'll be here at six. You got things ready for the weekend?"

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## Jason

"Sure," I said, not telling him I wouldn't miss this weekend for the world.

A sunburst smile broke over his face. His beauty almost took my breath away. Funny, I never thought of men being beautiful. Sexy yes, Hollywood handsome sure, but beautiful?

"What, did you think I was going to let you get out of this weekend?" Spider spoke softly.

I forced myself to smile back. "Of course not."

I had said way too much about Brad and told too many lies about my family. Did I really want him to know that my family was alive and well and living in Santa Barbara and Oxnard and none of them had given me the time of day in years? That we had moved to Santa Barbara when I was a teenager to escape the sordid rumors that destroyed what was left of my family. How I had fled to San Francisco and avoided the pit of turning into a street hustler by the skin of my teeth. Maybe it was wishful thinking that my father had died. Sometimes I wish he had. I'm sure they wished I would die and stop embarrassing them.

I wasn't going to tell him any of that. Guys like Alex were chicken hawks, with a yen for younger meat. He didn't want to hear my sob story. To him, I was just a biddable twink who would let him play his control games until he moved on to younger and greener pastures. I didn't kid myself that it meant anything. I stared down at the ship-to-shore radio I was working on and felt despair grip me. I hated thinking

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about my family. It was so lame. It gave me a burning need for some joy juice. Fortunately, I knew just where to get it.

I scrambled back on board and got my cell out of my backpack. It only took two calls to locate Trip. He agreed to meet up on Leadbetter beach. This time of year the beach was empty, the waves that attracted surfers and families alike a sullen gray, the picnic tables and volleyball nets abandoned to the gulls and the wind. I snorted the first of the two Oxys I bought and headed back to finish the day's work, flying high. Family forgotten. Spider lurked in the forefront of my mind, like his namesake, entangling me in his web of desire. God, I wished it was six o'clock.

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## Spider

**Phil was back from lunch. I stepped into the office building and showed my badge to the older man. He was stooped over a computer that looked like it was open to Mapquest. "Mr. Collins? I'd like to ask you some questions if I can."**

He looked up in surprise, flicking off the screen as he did. I could see his wheels spinning. Everyone did a quick mental check of recent activity when a cop showed up on their doorstep. I watched his face closely to see what he might give away.

"Questions about what?" he finally managed after he'd studied my badge with interest.

I'm the permanently suspicious type. I always want to know why people react the way they do. Usually it's nothing, just a lingering paranoia about youthful indiscretions. But sometimes there was fire with all that smoke.

First I had to ask him something. "That your legal name?"

"Yeah," he said, boredom kicking in. He got asked that question all the time. It set him at ease. "Just like the singer. You're not here to ask me about my name. What are you here for?"

"To talk about your boats," I said. "And about who might have access to them."

"S-sure. Right now?"

"Unless you have something better to do."

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He indicated an open door behind him. "We can talk in my private office."

I followed him.

He sat behind his desk, in a high-backed leather swivel chair that probably cost more than my last truck payment. Chartering boats must pay well.

"I'd like to start with a list of recent employees, anyone who's still here or who was employed within the last six months. Plus a list of anyone who might have keys to the marina itself. You must keep records of those, right?" The heavy iron door we had come through to get on the dock was locked and required keys. There had to be some kind of control over who had access. I might be setting myself up for reams of paper to mine, but it needed doing.

Phil frowned. "I'll see that you get it. What else?"

"Who are the regulars who hang around the docks? Anybody who's here all the time. Or someone who used to be here and hasn't been in a while." If the killing was the result of sudden rage, the killer might have freaked and gone ghost.

I would have to visit all the local watering holes. The one on the marina and the ones nearby. See what turned up and who had what to say about it. Cops might be gossips, but crooks weren't much better at keeping their mouths shut.

At the far end of the office a printer whirred and spit out several pages, which Phil handed to me. I asked a few more questions, none of the answers were evasive or very helpful. I left him, telling him to call me if he thought of anything else. He assured me he would.

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I pulled out a photo of the sextant Carl had pulled out of the harbor and held it up for Phil to study. "This look familiar?" I asked casually.

He tilted his head sideways and frowned. Finally he nodded. "Sure, it's the sextant from the *Cutting Edge*. My father left it to me. Always claimed he picked it up off an old Boston sailor. I always figured he found it in some garage sale."

I nodded in turn. "Was it there the last time you were onboard the *Cutting Edge*?"

"Yes. Far as I know it was." He shrugged. "I didn't pay that much attention. It's always there. Why? Where did you get that? Did that kill that guy?"

"We aren't sure," I said, adding the photo to the printouts he had handed me earlier. "I'll look these over. Is the contact information current?"

"Should be. If it's not, I'll be only too happy to help you find them."

"I'll let you know."

Outside his office I scanned the printouts, noting I knew a couple from previous legal interactions, mostly drugs, burglary and other petty shit. I'd pay particular attention to them. The whole thing might be a botched burglary gone wrong? An inside job or someone with a stolen a key? That still left Jason as an anomaly. The fact his car had been returned to his place, looking like it hadn't been driven in days, played havoc with my logic. I made a note to check latents to see if any prints had shown up on those keys. Either Jason had driven the car into town, left it there and

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gone back to get it later and was lying about everything, or he had driven it into town and been drugged and the car returned by someone else. Or someone had picked him up and brought him to town. All possibilities. If he was lying, he was the best I'd met in a while, and I was a master at the art of detecting a lie. I knew he'd lied about his family. I doubted his father was 'a pretty good guy' or even dead. I didn't doubt for an instant that Brad had existed in his life, but the rest ... I could check of course, though there was a limit to how much scrutiny I could apply to the background of a man who was no longer of police interest. Garcia was going to have my ass as it was if I got into a relationship with Jason. Unless he was laying back, letting me hang alongside Jason when he came up dirty which would implicate me in all kinds of actionable dirt. Garcia could take us both down. The smart thing here would be to walk away. There were other cute subs out there. So why did part of me not give a damn?

Could Jason's family have set him up? You might be able to stretch the definition of motive to say they had reason to want to see him ruined or dead. But who went to such elaborate lengths to do that for a five or six year old issue? Still I needed to look at his family more closely. If there was an inheritance involved then that was motive enough.

Only one way to know. I had to start digging.

Next I interviewed the only other available person who worked for Channel Charters, the girl up front who had told me where Jason was. Her name was Jen Marley. She was only eighteen and didn't know the man who had died on the boat.

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In a soft, breathless voice she told me how terrible it was. That poor man. Who would do something like that?

Who indeed. Clearly Jen hadn't heard about good old George.

I glanced at my watch. Not yet four. I still had two hours. I decided to troll the local bar scene. Sometimes a fishing expedition yielded unexpected results.

The Pilot House was everything you would expect in a tacky-tacky tourist bar that tried to be original. It failed miserably. Anyone who thought badly rendered paintings of tall ships sailing the seven seas or shell festooned nets was classy, needed some lessons in decorating. Even I could do better than this.

The bartender looked the part. A peg leg and a cursing parrot would complete the look. He threw me a surly look when I flashed my badge. He was a fat parody of a pirate, unshaven, crooked teeth and hair everywhere I looked. I wasn't looking too far.

I don't know if he was hired to play a part or if the owner had another reason for keeping him around. We'd investigated the Pilot House before for fencing stolen property. The last bartender got popped for that offense last month. I guess goons of that caliber are hard to find.

"Help you, officer?"

"Start with your name." I picked up a fistful of shelled peanuts out of the bowl and shelled each one before popping it in my mouth. "Where's Gerald?" Gerald Monteforton was the owner.

"Out a town. Family business."

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"Family." Didn't know Gerald had one. Did slithery things that crawled out from under rocks have families?

"They're down in Victorville."

"They have my sympathy. When did he leave?"

I could see the wheels turning in the guy's head. I hoped it didn't hurt. He squinted and stared at a rack of clean glasses. "Last Tuesday. Don't ask me what time. I don't get up for this pig job till I have to."

Tuesday. The day after we found Blunt's body and hauled in Jason. Coincidence? I hate coincidences.

I pulled my dog-eared notebook out of my jacket pocket and opened it to the last page. Making note of the time and where I was, I leaned toward the bartender.

"Name?"

He shrugged, scratching the back of his neck, his ragged nails scraping the flesh. "Cleveland Bennet."

"How long you worked here, Cleveland?" I shelled a couple more peanuts and chewed.

"Six months. You want a beer? Boss don't like to see people sitting around not drinking."

"Thought you said the boss wasn't here."

Cleveland looked around. Besides me there were two other people in the place. Neither one of them looked like tourists. He dropped his voice, "He's not here, but he's got people."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Didn't everyone have people these days? "I'm investigating the incident at the marina a few days ago."

"That dead guy? The one got his head bashed in?"

Interesting. Blunt had been beaten, but not around the head. "You know him?"

"No, who was he?"

"You hear anything about him? Anyone come in talking about him?"

"Sure, guy getting whacked like that, on one of Captain Phil's boats. Everyone talks."

"Captain Phil?"

"Yeah, he was some big shot Captain in the Navy years ago."

I wrote that in my notebook. Phil —] Navy Captain. "How many years ago?"

"God, I don't know. He was in some war overseas. It's all he'd talk about."

Phil —] Navy Captain —] war. Korea? Vietnam? Some other nameless skirmish? So, he probably had a pension, as well as his income from the charter business. It was still hinky. Everything was hinky when you were investigating a homicide. I made another note, aware Cleveland was watching me. I looked up and met his gaze.

"Anything else you want to tell me about the Captain? Maybe about George Blunt? Your boss?"

"Nothing to tell," he huffed.

"Suit yourself." I snapped my notebook closed and made a show of getting up. Then I paused and dug through my jacket pocket. I came up with a card, which I handed over to him. "Change your mind, give me a call. Save yourself some grief if this goes down hard like I think it will."

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He took the card without a word. But he was still holding it when I slipped into the fading gray light. Overhead one of Jason's gulls screamed.

"Yeah, I know how you feel."

I checked the time. I had one more stop to make before I could meet Jason

The Happy Hour Times Two was a league above the Pilot House. The bartender wasn't anywhere near as colorful. In fact she looked something like my ex-wife the day she showed up in court for our divorce hearing. Not the most pleasant memory.

I approached the nearly empty bar and nodded at her as I took up a place by the service area. She came over, her face alert and alive with interest. When I showed her my badge the interest flickered and changed, but it remained. Her gaze scanned my face, coming back to my eyes.

"Help you, officer?"

"I'm investigating the murder in the marina last Monday." I pulled my notebook out again. "You hear anything about that, Miss...?"

"Lorna Ridd. I heard about that. Terrible thing. You don't expect it to happen so close to home, so to speak."

"Yes, ma'am. You own this bar?"

She nodded, smoothing wisps of hair off her forehead. "Well, me and the bank. Mostly the bank these days."

"You know people from the marina?"

"Sure, they stop in here most days." She leaned over the bar. "Was he really a child molester?"

"Who? Was who a child molester?"



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"That guy who got murdered. I heard he did that kind of thing. I'd have killed him myself if I'd known."

"Why is that, ma'am?"

"I got kids. If a monster like that touched them..." Her eyes flashed. "You guys could do us a favor. Lock them up, throw away the key. You're too easy on them."

I didn't bother getting into how we followed the laws. Sometimes with the George Blunts of the world the law sucked. She didn't need to hear that, either.

"Yes, ma'am. Did you know George Blunt personally?"

"Who?"

"George Blunt. The man who was killed on Monday."

Lorna's eyes skittered sideways. "Oh, was that his name? I guess I didn't know." She grew brisk. "You want something to drink? Beer? On the house."

I shook my head. "No, thanks." I was still on duty. There are some rules even I won't break. I've seen too many good cops end up at the bottom of a bottle, or eating their own gun when the despair got to them. "So you knew George, then."

"I said I didn't," she snapped.

In my experience everyone lies to cops. Sometimes it doesn't mean anything, other times it means making or breaking a case. But a lot of time gets wasted trying to sort out which was which. I sighed.

"I didn't much like what the guy was either, Mrs. Ridd, but I still need to find his killer."

"Why?" At least she was open with her hostility.

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I shrugged. "Sometimes vigilantes get it into their heads that they can clean up the streets on their own. Trust me, that's never a good idea."

"Why not?" she sneered. "You guys do a piss poor job of it."

"Frontier justice works just fine, until they decide the wrong guy is guilty. What happens when they lynch an innocent man? Is that the kind of justice you want? How many times you hear about DNA clearing some old case? What chance you think any of them would have if people took the law into their own hands? Do you have DNA testing equipment? Labs to check trace?" I shook my head, plastering a rueful grin on my face. "It may not be the most perfect system, but do you really want to live in a world where brass justice rules? I don't."

"Brass justice?" She seemed intrigued despite her anger.

"Justice at the end of a gun or a rope."

"I guess not. I still think you guys let these assholes walk too easily."

Funny thing was, I agreed with her, but I couldn't admit as much. I could just see Garcia's face if *The Independent* published a story about a cop who promoted vigilantism.

She shrugged. Not convinced, but willing to let the argument go.

"So, you did know Blunt?"

She made a face, but this time she nodded reluctantly. "Back before we wised up to what he was, he used to coach Little League. My older sister's daughter was on this baseball team. He singled her out for special attention ... my sister

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was so thrilled. She thought he picked her out because she was good—" Her voice broke. She furiously looked around but we were alone in the bar now.

"I'm sorry," I said. Even after over a decade in law enforcement I never knew what to say to the family left behind by tragedy. Maybe that was a good thing. As long as I could feel their pain, I was still human, right? Sometimes I wondered.

"Everybody was sorry then, too. No one did anything about it. The DA said they couldn't prove he did anything to her. They didn't believe her, though the DA swore up and down that wasn't true."

I could share that pain. I don't know how many cases I've run down and handed over to the DA's office, only to have them refuse to file charges because they might lose. DAs, like most people, don't like losing.

"How is she now?"

"She says she's fine. She moved down to Texas to go to some bible school there. We don't talk much."

"Well, he's not a problem anymore," I said.

"If you expect me to be sorry the son of a bitch died, I'm not. I wish they had made him suffer first. It's what he deserved."

I didn't bother telling her that from what the ME told me, George suffered plenty. I doubted it would help, despite her words.

I steered her back to the matter at hand. "Did you ever see George down in this area?"

"I saw him. A few days ago. He was talking to some kid."

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"What did the kid look like? You describe him?"

"Young. Cute." She smiled.

"White? Black? Latino?" I leaned forward. "What color was his hair?"

"Light. Wasn't paying that much attention."

"When did this happen?"

"Few nights ago."

"Must have been before Blunt bought it," I said.

Her mouth quirked in a self-satisfied grin. "Guess it must have been. Maybe that's the guy who shot him."

"Who said he got shot?"

"I guess I'm hoping he got it bad."

If I was feeling more charitable I might have told her Blunt had 'got it' really bad. I wasn't feeling charitable.

"He come down here a lot?" I pressed.

"He wouldn't have the guts. He'd be strung up if he showed his face around here."

I didn't doubt it. I wondered how many others shared her passions?

"Anyone else mention seeing him?"

"No. Why, you think one of us killed him?"

I spread my hands in a gesture of peace. "Just asking some questions ma'am. It's my job."

The door banged open behind us and she glanced over at the new customers, a trio of suited men clearly just leaving work. She straightened and glared at me. "I've said everything I'm going to, detective. I have nothing else to tell you."

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I slipped out of the bar while she went to serve the new arrivals. Outside, night had descended on the city. Street lights threw baleful light over the nearly empty parking lot as I made my way back to my Toyota.

Back at the marina I stepped onto slip seven to find Jason sitting with his legs dangling over the pier, staring down at the dark water lapping at the *Expressive*. I don't think he heard me approach until I was right behind him. Then he swung around and I saw why.

Jason was stoned.

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## Jason

**I was mesmerized by the water. Under the marina lights it looked like dark silk. I could imagine diving into it and having it carry me away to someplace where pain was a memory. It would be cool and soft, like a lover's touch. It would close over my head and I would welcome its embrace.**

Oblivion. What a wonderful place—

Footsteps behind me. I swung around and saw Spider. He had come back. I scrambled to my feet, stumbling in my haste. His hand closed over my arm and stopped my fall.

"Thanks," I said.

He jerked his head toward the parking lot and I followed after him. I still felt muzzy from the O I had snorted and followed along contentedly. Once in the truck I grinned at him.

"You're late," I said, leaning toward him, wanting his touch. Wishing he'd kiss me.

Instead he slammed me against the door and shot the key into the ignition, firing up the Toyota. With a screech of rubber we peeled out of the lot north toward the freeway.

"What the fuck—"

"Shut up," he ground out. The drive passed in stony silence, his foot rammed down on the pedal. We had to be going a hundred. I was still too hyped to be scared. Exiting the freeway into Goleta, he suddenly pulled off the road into a boarded-up gas station covered with graffiti, the pavement

bursting apart with weeds and littered with broken beer bottles. He swung around in his seat to face me. I lifted my chin, not sure what he was pissed at, but not about to let him bully me.

"What the hell did you take?"

"What—?"

"Don't waste my time denying it. I can tell a fucked up stoner when I see one. *What did you take?*"

I was going to keep on denying I'd taken anything, but one look at his face and I knew it would never fly. "Just a couple of Oxys."

"Oxy! Get this now, you don't take drugs. Not as long as you're with me. Got it?" When I didn't answer he reached over and shook me. "Got it?"

"I got it." Sullenly I shook off his grip. Rubbing my arm where he had left bruises, I tried to glare at him. "It was just a couple of hits. I don't do it all the time, for Christ's sake."

"You don't do it at all."

"Yes, sir. Boss, sir." I could live with a dominant man, but this was carrying things too far, wasn't it?

"Don't give me lip, boy."

I stared down at my feet, sure he was going to toss me out of his truck in the middle of God-forsaken hick country. Good luck trying to get home from here. I frantically assessed my situation. What would I do if he did put me out? Was there someone I could call? Would Phil come get me ... ?

Spider threw the truck into gear and roared out of the lot. Five minutes later we pulled into his cul-de-sac and he got

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out of his truck. I followed, at a loss as to what else I could do. Without a word he let us into his dark house.

He took his jacket off and slid his shoulder harness off. He carried it into the living room, coming back minutes later, tieless. He still wore his boots and made no attempt to remove them.

Instead he led me into the living room where he had turned on a single light. Turning, he put both hands on my shoulders and made me look at him.

"Do you know why I'm angry?"

"Because you don't think I should be doing drugs."

He shook me. "You don't do anything unless I give you permission to do it. You need to learn that lesson here, now."

"I don't understand. What—?"

"No talking either."

I fell into an uneasy silence.

"You will pay for that mistake." He wasn't mad as far as I could tell. There was something else in his voice, a suppressed excitement that vibrated through his big body.

"Do you understand?"

I nodded. He pulled me after him into his bedroom. This time he turned on the light right away.

"Strip," he said without turning.

I hesitated, trying to figure out what he was doing.

"I won't tell you again." This time his voice was soft.

I stripped. When I went to toss my shirt on the floor he barked, "Clean up after yourself. You will not make a mess of my bedroom."



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It was weird. I should have told him to fuck himself. Should have stomped away from the autocratic asshole. Instead I obeyed, neatly folding my clothes up and putting them on top of his dresser. When I stood in front of him naked and as vulnerable as I ever had been, I was astonished to find I had a massive hard-on. My cock jutted out from my groin, already wet with precum. He glanced down at me then ignored it and me altogether.

He crossed over to the wall that held the bondage equipment I had glimpsed my first night here. While I watched, he sorted through things leisurely, finally selecting a pair of leather cuffs, a matching black hood and something metallic that slithered down his fist as he returned to where I stood waiting. My body tightened as he approached.

"Are you ready to pay?"

"Alex—"

"You will call me Sir until I tell you otherwise. Is that clear?"

"Yes," I whispered. Then hastily added, "Sir."

He slipped the hood over my head, securing it with straps. The rich smell of leather filled my senses. He dragged my hands behind my back and cuffed me in a move too reminiscent of the day we had met, and he handcuffed me. My erection grew thicker, my cock was so hard it hurt. I groaned behind the hood.

"Hold still," he ordered.

Then he was gone. I heard the whisper of his passage. When he returned I heard an oddly familiar buzz. Seconds later my skin was caressed by an electric razor. He was

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thorough. I don't think he missed an inch of my body, he even swept the razor between the cheeks of my ass. The only thing he didn't touch was the hair on my head.

Then came the oil. It smelled like some kind of exotic fruit and he slicked it over me in broad, gentle sweeps, pausing to slide his fingers between my ass, teasing the opening behind my balls.

When he was done he stepped back. His military boots clunked on the hardwood floor. I could see him in my mind's eye as he had looked when he picked me up at the marina. Tight blue-jean-clad ass, the impressive bulge between his legs. Broad shoulders encased in crisp linen. The buzz cut head, and piercing gray eyes behind his glasses.

Metal hissed and I started when the cold length of chain passed over my chest. I jumped when the first clamp went on my right nipple. He clamped the second one, sending a jolt of pain straight to my groin. A thin chain hung between them on my newly shaved chest.

The darkness shaped my senses, sharpening them into brilliant bursts of pain and pleasure, with a need that burnt bright and hot. My blindness was liberating. I could feel the air currents every time he moved, every time he breathed, every time he touched me. The rasp of his jeans rubbing together, the flutter of his fingers over my body, whispering promises of unbearable pain and pleasure to come.

"Are you going to be a good boy?"

"Yes." The words were muffled by the hood. "Yes, Sir," I said louder.

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He jerked on the chain attached to the nipple clamps, sending pain lancing down my chest. "I can't hear you."

"Yes, Sir. I'll be good, Sir."

My shoulders ached from the unnatural position they were forced into. When he spun me around I almost lost my balance and pitched forward on my face. He steadied me and barked, "Stand still."

I froze. His hands on my hips, he crouched behind me and parted my ass cheeks. When his mouth covered my hole I shouted and locked my leg muscles to keep from toppling forward.

My cock strained toward release, but before I could come he reared up behind me and pressed his denim-clad groin against my ass. I moaned.

"You like drugs?" he murmured into my ear.

"N-no."

"Yes, you do." His arm swung around and his hand swept under my chin. "But that doesn't matter anymore. You will never take them again. Right?"

"W-what? I don't understand—"

"Who do you belong to?"

"You."

"Say my name."

"Alex."

He jerked at the clamp, twisting my nipple. Pain shot through me. "My name."

"Alex Spider. Detective Alexander Spider!"

"That's a good boy," he purred. His mouth closed over the nipple he had so recently twisted, soothing the lingering burn.

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He lavished attention on the other one then he stepped away from me again. His zipper slid down and cool gel-covered fingers probed my anus. It was followed by his latex covered cock. He twisted my clamped nipples again.

My heart jolted in my chest at the same time he rammed up my ass. There was nothing gentle about his assault on me. He hung on to my shoulders and pounded into me, grunting and muttering obscenities in my ear. Behind the hood I shut my eyes and released myself to the sensation of having him inside me and holding me, enfolding me in his essence.

One of his big hands wrapped around my cock and pumped me. The storm abruptly ended in orgasm and we sagged together. He quickly released my bound hands and I collapsed in his arms. My Oxy-induced daze lingered, my ass and nipples ached. My head buzzed, still fired up. God forgive me, but I wanted more.

He walked me over to the bathroom and with a slap on my sore butt, pushed me toward the shower. "Get cleaned up. Get dressed. You can cook supper."

"I can?" I was totally enervated and couldn't even think about food.

"Yes, you can. You're going to learn how to cook a decent meal, and you're going to serve me supper. If you're especially good, I'll even let you do the dishes."

"Oh, would you," I muttered and stopped in front of the bathroom mirror to see myself. My skin still glistened with the oil he had covered me with and my totally hairless body looked ... odd. He'd even shaved my pubic hair and my cock

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stood out against my pale skin where it would normally be nestled in my dark pubes. The sight was oddly arousing.

I stepped away from the mirror and into the shower, where I screwed up the controls and turned on the cold water full blast, giving myself an Arctic blast. Jolted awake I scrambled into the bedroom where I found the clothes I had brought from home laid out on the neatly made bed. My parade pants—that made me smile, I guessed I had made an impression on him the day he busted me—a leather and metal cock ring I eyed dubiously, and the mesh shirt that really made me look like I had a decent body. I always got picked up right away when I wore that to the clubs. No underwear. I struggled to put on the cock ring. I'd only ever worn one once before and let me tell you, they are damned hard to get on when you've got a boner. Every time I thought of what was coming my cock would swell and I couldn't get the thing on. The idea of course was you weren't supposed to lose an erection once you had the cock ring in place. Getting it on was another issue. Finally I thought of every undesirable thing I could. Baseball. Cold showers. Women. Suzie. I eventually got it on, then struggled into the skin tight parade pants. All this for a man I barely knew.

Somehow the gesture of choosing my clothes didn't infuriate me. I whistled while I pulled the black mesh shirt on. Sliding my fingers through my mess of damp hair. Smoothing the material over my hips, I followed Spider into the kitchen. I found him fishing out pots and pans and mixing bowls from various cupboards.

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He indicated a sink filled with potatoes, carrots and broccoli. "Start peeling the potatoes. Cut them into small chunks, they'll cook faster. Ditto with the broccoli. Only with that you trim off the stem."

"What are you going to do?"

"Take a shower." Spider patted me on my still tingling butt. "When I come back I'll get the grill going for the chicken."

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## Spider

**All I can say is: incredible. The kid is incredible. I never expected our play to be so fulfilling. The drugs had surprised me, though they shouldn't have. I'd seen his jacket. But it was the perfect way to get the upper hand so fast.**

He was so eager to let me be in charge it was all I could do to draw it out as long as I did, when all I wanted to do was fuck him until we were both squealing. It was better this way. He was biddable now. He might not know it yet, but he was mine.

I thought of the little surprise I had for dessert. It promised to bring the evening to a wonderful close.

He was a passable cook. Under my tutelage he would learn to be so much more. I let him have a single bottle of beer during the meal. I didn't want him getting any more fuzzy-headed than he was. I toasted him over the chicken he had grilled to perfection, with my help and watched his eyelids droop in exhaustion. He gamely hung on, every so often giving a little jerk as he almost slid into a doze. Can't have that. I left the room and when I came back he pulled himself up in his chair and shook himself like a dog.

"Sorry, Sir. I didn't mean—"

"Here, this will help." He set a bottle of thick, greenish liqueur on the table, along with two small glasses. "It's called absinthe. It's illegal to sell and make, but not to own. This is the only drug you can take with me."

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I nuzzled his neck, loving the smell of his freshly washed skin. He shivered under my touch. Wonderful. I bit his throat, then soothed the bitten area with soft kisses. He hissed and twitched under my attention.

He reached for the shot glass then stopped and met my eyes. "How do you take it? Straight shot?"

I produced a spoon and a sugar cube. Jason's gaze never left my hand while I poured cold water over the ice cube and slowly mixed it into the absinthe, turning it a milky white. I stirred the rest of the sugar into the bitter drink and handed it to him. He upended the shot glass and downed it with practiced ease. He sighed when the first shot hit his throat. He turned glittering eyes toward me and silently asked if I wanted any. I shook my head and he poured another shot. This time he performed the louching exercise as I'd shown him. He sank back, resting his head on the back of my dining room chair, eyes closed.

"Oh man, that's bitter shit."

"They say it has mild hallucinogenic effects. What do you think?"

"Cool."

I kept nuzzling his neck, biting hard enough to leave marks. "That's what you get for being a good boy."

Jason's lethargy was gone. He bounced to his feet, buzzing, laughing, reminding me of how young he really was. I watched him for several amused minutes then grabbed his arm. He was giving me a contact high. "Whoa, there, boy."

He stood in front of me, vibrating. "Come on," he said. "Let's go dancing."



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"Dancing? This is Goleta. Two guys show up anywhere here and the only dancing you'll be doing is on the end of someone's boot."

"Come on, you're a big guy. You've got a gun. Who's gonna bother you?' He stroked the front of my shirt, playing with the buttons, eyes glazed as he contemplated some inner wonder.

I smiled and tipped his head up to meet my gaze. "We're going to have to make our own entertainment."

"Okay." He dropped to his knees and jerked open the fly of my jeans. He looked up at me slyly. "You mean like this."

He pulled out my already half-hard dick and swallowed it to the root. An electrical charge slammed through me. I steadied myself on his shoulders and watched him suck me. He had a talented mouth and had me on the brink in seconds.

He had the presence of mind to pull off me before I came, shooting thick streamers of come over my stomach, and his head and shoulders. I shuddered and released him.

He climbed to his feet and grinned at me.

"Now we both have to shower again," he said.

We made it a quick one, then retreated to the living room where I let him pick out a movie for us to watch. Not surprisingly he chose Psycho, though he did complain I didn't have anything better, like Saw. I grimaced at the suggestion and said curtly, "Not in this house."

We settled onto the couch together, his head on my shoulder, his knees drawn up as he pressed against me. After a while my arm grew numb but when I tried to pull away I

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found he was sleeping. I left him until the movie ended and the final credit rolled, then I pushed him off me.

"Come on," I said. "Let's get you to bed."

I don't think he fully woke up as I led him into my bedroom. It didn't make it easy to undress him, but I managed and rolled him under the covers. I shed my clothes and followed him. The mess in the kitchen would have to wait until morning.

He snorted and rolled over in his sleep, throwing his arms around me and settling against my chest. I looked down at his sleeping form and felt a tug in my gut I hadn't felt in years. No way, I thought savagely. No way I was going to fall for this little mall rat.

My last thought before I fell into darkness was, *he smells good.*

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## Jason

**My blankets were wrenched off me and my shivering flesh exposed to the cool air. I protested but Spider's harsh voice told me to get up. I ignored it for two seconds when a hand landed square on my ass.**

Yelping, I rolled out of bed and stood facing a fully clothed, smirking Spider.

"You really do look pretty, boy, all spit and polished clean and shiny as a billiard ball." His voice grew sterner. "You sleep when I tell you to," he said. "You have chores to do. Duties you neglected last night."

Chores? Where was I? On my Grandpa's farm? I glared at him, rubbing my stinging butt.

"Don't give me lip, boy. Remember last night."

I did, and my body immediately clenched into full arousal. He glanced down at my fat erection and his sternness increased. "Not yet, boy. Save that until you've done your chores."

"What chores?" I asked in growing exasperation.

"That mess you left last night to start." He took my jeans and T-shirt off the dresser and tossed them to me. "Get dressed. Then you can come and inspect the damage."

Word of advice: don't leave food on plates overnight without rinsing. It took me nearly two hours of hard-ass scrubbing to get the congealed shit off those plates and cooking pans, not to mention the tile and wood surfaces through the kitchen. The barbecue grill was the worse. I stank

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of burned charcoal and oily soap by the time I was allowed to crawl into the shower and make myself as clean as the kitchen I had just left. When I came back out he was standing by the cupboard minutely examining the plates I had cleaned.

I went up to him and snatched the plate out of his hands. "What? You think I didn't do it right?"

He looked at me lazily. "They look okay. Now you can do the rest of the kitchen." He gestured to where he had set a broom, bucket and mop. Water and something that smelled of pine steamed gently in the basin of the bucket.

"I'm going to get some groceries for dinner. See that it's done when I get back."

As he went out the front door I shouted after him, "I didn't join the fucking army and I don't take orders from anyone, Mr. Drill Sergeant."

I half expected him to come back and ream me out, but all I heard was the roar of his truck engine then silence broken only by a distant dog barking.

I cursed the black-hearted asshole but swabbed his deck when I really wanted to give him a piece of my mind. By the time Alex returned I had finished, put the tools and empty bucket away and had wandered out to the backyard. I sat in an Adirondack chair to study the nearby cottonwoods and bushes. I wished I had my binoculars with me. I thought I spotted a hermit thrush and a yellow-billed magpie dancing through the leafless branches looking for something meaty to eat. Around me the air was alive with bird song. This area had an entirely different ecosystem, full of birds not found on the coast. It would be fun to spend a few hours roaming the rural

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areas out of town. But somehow I doubted Alex was the least bit interested in woodland hikes.

The door banged open and Alex came out on the patio. He had a beer and wore a battered San Francisco Giants baseball cap.

He took a slug of beer and dropped into the Adirondack beside mine. "Get this straight right now. You are in the army, mister. You're in my army now. And you will do what you're told when you're told to do it."

"You say jump and I say how high on the way up?"

He gave me a lazy smile. "Something like that."

"Can I have a beer?"

"No." He looked around his backyard. It was pretty obvious he didn't use it much. The grass, what there was of it, was brown in patches. Weeds filled in the rest. None of the bushes had been trimmed. "What are you doing out here?"

"Admiring the view," I muttered.

"No, really. What are you doing?"

"If you must know, bird watching."

I waited for the ridicule. Instead he looked thoughtful. "There lots of them out here? I never noticed."

"Can't you hear them?" I listened to the mournful coo of a several mourning doves and the nearby screech of a scrub jay complaining about something. Maybe a neighborhood cat; I'd seen a few around, slinking through the underbrush hoping for a quick meal. I hate cats.

He paused to listen. "Yeah, I guess I can," he said. "Not much traffic noise out here to drown things out."

It was quiet. "You like this kind of solitude? It must get lonely out here at times."

He played with the label on his beer. "You angling for an invitation to keep me company? I like being alone. People not knowing your business."

I wasn't surprised to hear that coming from a man who clearly had a lot of secrets to keep. Still, it *must* get lonely at times, despite what he said. Maybe that's why the Vault was so important to him. It was the one place he could indulge his kinks and not be labeled a freak or worse. So why did I want to be the one who filled his void? I didn't think he was a freak. He was a man I wanted to know more deeply. What kind of fool did that make me?

Abruptly he stood up. "Come on, you earned yourself a car ride. I'm taking you out for lunch."

I hurried after him. "Do I need to change?"

He looked me up and down. "No, that's just fine. We're not going anyplace fancy."

"Right, this is Goleta."

He took me to the local Sizzlers. It wasn't gourmet, but the food was plentiful and filling. He let me have a beer with lunch.

He ordered the steak. I opted for something different, ribs. I don't know what it is, I have a thing for chomping on bones. I was on my final rib, sticky fingers and face drawing amused glances from Spider, when his cell rang. Looking peeved, he pulled it out, checked the caller ID and frowned. His voice was cool when he answered, "Spider."

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He listened for several seconds, growing grimmer by the minute. I put my rib back on the plate, appetite gone. I waited for him to get off the phone.

When he did, he glowered at me as though I was to blame. "There's been another homicide. It looks like it could be my guy."

"You have to go in?" I hastily wiped my fingers on the napkin.

"Yes."

No apology. No regrets. What did I expect?

He signaled for the bill and slapped a Visa down on the table. Upending his ice water he drained it and stood up, grabbing his jacket.

"I have to stop by the house. If you want, you can stay there and wait for me, or I can drop you at your car in town. Your choice."

He signed off on the charge and took my elbow, and headed for the door. I hurried to catch up. Spider in overdrive was a sight to see.

In the truck he turned and noticed my slowness in obeying him. He frowned and tapped an impatient rhythm out on the steering wheel.

"Which is it, Jason?"

I shook myself. Did I want to sit around a strange place, not know when he'd be back? Didn't sound like much fun. He might even come home tired and cranky and did I want that?

"I think I'll go home. I have things to do..."

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Without another word he swung the truck toward his place, changed into a suit and tie and strapped on his gun. When I went to collect my things he stopped me.

"Leave them here. It'll give you a change of clothes when you come back. Besides." He stared at my parade pants and the mesh shirt I wore to please him, "I don't want you wearing that anywhere except for me."

That cheered me, that he assumed I was coming back. I wasn't sure about the rest. Was he saying I couldn't go out anymore? I didn't hustle, though he seemed to have a hard time believing me, but to be a virtual prisoner in his home? Just for the privilege of being fucked by him? Wait a minute—

I said nothing. I did want to be with him. If it made him feel better to think I was going to rot away in some kind of tower, then let him have his illusion.

I nodded and he swept me into his embrace. It gratified me to feel his erection pressed against my stomach.

"Keep it warm," he murmured, pressing his lips into my hair. His hands roamed my backside.

I swallowed against the sudden arousal his nearness brought. "Right," I managed to croak.

He left me at Marina Four where my car was parked while I dug out my key. He sped off toward yet another dead body.

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## Spider

Once I dropped Jason off I put my Bluetooth dongle in my ear and speed dialed Nancy. I did not ask for details in front of Jason, but I wanted them now. I wanted to know why she'd called me out of rotation.

"This better be good," I said when she answered. Traffic sounds from her phone told me she was on the road, too.

"DB at Rancho Verde, retirement home," she said. "Dispatch got a 911 call at ten-forty-five this morning. Patrol went out to check, found the deceased, a resident."

"What makes it look like ours?"

"Same MO. The guy was beaten to death with a weapon that wasn't recovered. Beating was excessively nasty."

"Just like Blunt."

"Just like. I'm thinking this is personal. Whoever did this really hated these guys."

"Anything else?" I knew there was. That's why she called.

"Got paper on the DB, name of Clarence Dutton. Suspected of molesting two young boys when he was a camp counselor fifteen years ago. No charges ever laid—"

A link that definitely might imply the deaths were related. Or maybe not. But it warranted consideration. I guess she was right to call me.

Rancho Verde was a squat, pale pink stucco structure nearly overgrown with clinging vines and a royal palm-lined drive. Numerous carefully tended flowerbeds and fountains cluttered the massive, sloping lawn. There were very few

people outside, though the day was bright, if cool. December in paradise.

A pair of radio cars crowded the curb outside the front doors. Nancy pulled in behind me. People were leaving the building. The specter of violence always attracted a crowd.

Nancy and I entered the building. Red earthen tile covered the broad lobby and a nervous knot of medical personnel clustered around the marble topped front desk, along with a gangly uni I'd seen before. He nodded at me and spoke to a barrel-chested gray-haired man in a navy suit and sedate tie. I pegged him as management.

Gray-hair held out his hand and I took it. "Mr. Spencer, director."

I introduced Nancy and myself, and he nodded briskly. For a guy who had one of his patients butchered, he was iceberg cool. I caught Nancy's eye behind his back and we shared a look. We'd been partners long enough to be on the same wavelength. We were both wondering why this civilian wasn't more upset.

In my experience there's no right or wrong way for innocent people to act in the face of horrendous loss. Some are calm, and give nothing away. Others become hysterical and almost require medical care themselves. Of course I've seen the guilty mutts run the same gamut. Some killers can make you cry for their loss.

I signaled the first responding officer to join us. Caldicott, that was the uni's name. Geoffrey Caldicott. He'd been around almost as long as me and was a damn fine officer. One without the ambition to be in plain clothes.

I left Nancy to talk to the director and I met Caldicott at the door. "What have you got?"

He scanned his notes. "I responded to a call-out at ten-forty-five. I arrived on scene at two minutes after eleven. I found a man the resident nurse identified as Clarence Dutton. He's been a resident at Rancho Verde for the last eighteen months. According to her, he was in full-blown dementia, couldn't remember his own name. They were preparing to send him to a chronic care hospice for his final days."

"Terminal?"

"Very much so. If the killer hadn't been in such a hurry, all he had to do was wait. According to the nurse, he had maybe two months left."

"No satisfaction in letting him die peacefully in his bed, now is there?" I flashed back to the brutality of Blunt's death. Would this be as gruesome? "How bad is it?"

Caldicott swallowed. "It's bad. I don't know what your average profiler would say but whoever did this had a lot of rage in him."

My thoughts exactly. Our killer was very unorganized. I clapped Caldicott on his back. "Make sure I get a copy of your notes. Check that the scene is secure, then you can head out. And thanks."

Nancy finished up with the director and we headed to the crime scene.

"The guy's son has already been called," she said. "He said he'd be out this afternoon."

I nodded, focused on the coming task. Yellow tape blocked the door to the room. We signed the log in sheet and I made

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note of who had arrived before us. CSU wasn't onsite yet, but someone else was. Someone I really didn't want to deal with right now.

I stepped into the room, with Nancy one pace behind me. Lieutenant Garcia looked up from where he stood over the bed studying what had once been a white bedspread. It was now mottled red with blood. I could smell the sharp metallic smell of fresh blood and the raw stink of excrement.

"Detective." He stood over the blood bath on the bed, no gloves, his shoes perilously close to blood spatter on the linoleum floor. Idiot. I made a point of pulling on a pair of gloves and gestured him to follow me over to the window overlooking the idyllic lawn beyond. "You have anything for me?"

"I just got here, Lieutenant. We're still appraising things."

"Well we want some answers, fast. The Chief is not happy that this kind of thing is going on in his city. He wants this man found and stopped."

"So do we all," I muttered. "I'll be sure to call you as soon as I have anything to report."

Garcia sucked on his teeth. His nostrils flared as he stared his nose at me. "Do you have something you want to tell me, Detective?"

"No sir. Nothing."

"What's this I hear about you associating with known criminals? I've tolerated your lifestyle, as abhorrent as I find it, but being involved with a known felon who was only recently accused of homicide is beyond the pale."

"With all due respect sir, my private life is my business."

"Not when it impacts my police department."

"It won't ... sir."

"See that it doesn't, Detective."

I watched him leave, seething, barely aware of Nancy joining me. Only when she stepped into my personal space did I realize she was there.

"What?"

She held up her hands. "You know I'm not the type to say I told you so."

"But you'll make an exception for me?" I approached the bed from an angle that would avoid the blood spatter on the floor but give me the best view of the body. Until CSU and the ME arrived we couldn't touch anything and my partner had more to say.

"You know you invite it. What did you expect, rubbing his nose in it?"

"Stay out of it, Nancy."

"I sure hope he's worth it."

Eight hours later we released the crime scene to a grateful director and headed back to the station to start the first of many reports. Tomorrow I'd be back at my desk doing it again. I wasn't looking forward to it.

I started a search on the victim. Clarence Dutton had never been formally charged with any crime and only had a handful of vehicular paper—mostly speeding and illegal parking tickets. One sheet I pulled made reference to a three-year stint in the Army. I looked up his record. The information on my screen made me sit up. I glanced at Nancy slogging away at her own machine.

"You need to see this." I sent the output to the nearest printer. Nancy stood up. I pointed at the printer, spitting out several sheets of paper. "Get that, will you?"

She read it on her way back to our desks. I knew the moment she saw what I had.

"Ah, our boy was dishonorably discharged. Court-martialed and did a year in Leavenworth."

"Just like our friend Blunt."

"What are the odds, two dishonorably discharged pedophiles?"

"Odds I'd love to take to Vegas. Is that our connection?"

"But which side? The dishonorable or the pedophilia?"

"Both?" I knew she was throwing out every oddball idea that came to see what would stick. "Someone's cleaning house? Taking out the scum that slipped through the cracks."

"Cracks? Try gaping chasms," I said. Before I moved to homicide I investigated my share of assaults on children. So much innocence was lost to soulless people who couldn't or wouldn't control their impulses. And the courts never seemed to know what to do with them. Crimes against the spirit are never taken as seriously as crimes against the body. The law didn't seem willing to admit that there were some criminals that couldn't be fixed no matter what you tried. The recidivism rates for pedophiles were sickeningly high, but again and again the rapists and kiddie porn purveyors got slapped on the wrist. I stopped my internal rant. It didn't fix anything, just left me angry at a system I was supposed to support.

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But it was getting pretty bad when I started thinking the guy doing this 'clean up' was doing a public service. I was a cop for God's sake. I wasn't supposed to think that way.

I shut down my PC and stood up. Nancy looked at me in alarm. "You going somewhere?"

"I need to get out of here. You should go home, too. We can start again tomorrow. None of the record offices are open till Monday. By then maybe we'll have something to use."

She cracked a yawn, then gave a sheepish grin. "Yeah, sounds like a smart move. Go home. Get some sleep." She threw me a dark look. "And that means you, too. Go home. To your own bed. Sleep."

"Sure boss." Only I knew right then I wasn't going home. At least not to my home.

Ten minutes later I was in front of Jason's place. The lights were on, his car was out front. He had to be home.

He better be alone.

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## Jason

**The banging on the door dragged me off the Murphy bed I'd turned down a few minutes ago. I'd been reading a library book I'd found on western birds and their behavior. It wasn't as dry as I feared and I'd settled in for a long quiet night. Even better, it came with a CD of bird songs I could upload to my iPod.**

I padded over to the door, barefoot, and peered through the eye-hole. It couldn't be—I threw the locks and pulled the door open.

"Alex?" I was suddenly aware I had nothing on but ratty pajama bottoms. I danced on the cool air that flowed through the open door. "What are you doing here?"

He moved past me without a word and stood in my tiny living room/bedroom, filling it. He peered into every corner and studied the bed as though he expected to find something important there. Shit, was he checking for visitors?

Pissed off now I grabbed his arm and hauled him around. "What the hell are you doing here? You don't just barge in here like you own the fucking place."

In response he took hold of my arms in a powerful grip and shoved me up against the wall beside my bed. "No?" he whispered as his mouth descended on mine. "Then tell me to go away."

His mouth was hot and alive on mine. I moaned as his tongue invaded me. Moaned again when his hand went



between my legs and cupped my growing hardness through the thin PJs.

He broke away from me. "You still want me to leave?"

I stared up at his half-open mouth, his wet lips and I reached for him. "Fuck, no."

"Good."

I tugged at his jacket, encountered the leather harness that held his gun and backed away, startled. He must have come right from work. I swelled with pride as he peeled out of his holster and set it down on the floor beside the Murphy bed. He kicked off his boots and went for his shirt buttons. I stayed his hand.

"Let me." I made a production of undoing each button, slowly exposing his broad chest. I smoothed the heel of my hand over the hard nub of his nipples and the crisp hair around them, loving his harsh intake of breath. He hissed when my hand dropped to his waistband. I skimmed his wool pants down his legs, pausing along the way to explore the furred thighs and smooth ankles. Once he kicked off his pants I went back up and pressed my mouth against his belly. He held my head in his hands and trembled.

I pulled away from him and leaned over to pull a condom from my bedside table. I opened the packet and slicked the condom over his thick cock. Then I took him in my mouth. He cried out when I brought him to climax. His legs were shaking when he stripped the condom off and disposed of it. When I stood he pulled me into his embrace.

I nuzzled his throat. He didn't speak. I leaned back to look up at him. "Why are you here?"

"Do I need a reason?"

"Most people have one when they do something."

"You angling for an 'I missed you?'"

I sighed. "From you? No."

"Good." He looked around my tiny kitchen. "You got coffee?"

"Instant," I said. "Powdered cream."

He made a face. "I'm going to have to do something about that. Well, get the kettle on and make me some coffee."

I took the battered pan I used to heat water and filled it with tap water. The stove sizzled and smoked from the last meal I had spilled on it. I could only hope Alex didn't notice. Fat chance of that. He came up behind me, still naked, and ran his finger over the counter beside the stove.

"Hey," I said. I knew what he was going to say. "If you gave a guy some warning I'd have cleaned."

"I'll remember that next time."

"Do that." The water boiled and I poured two mugs of strong black coffee. I put the powdered milk and sugar in mine. He took his black. I led him back into my living area. "Sorry for the lack of sitting space. There's really no room for furniture." I sat on the edge of my Murphy bed. He sat beside me.

"There's plenty of room at my place."

He said it so quietly I barely heard him. He was staring at me with an unnerving intensity. "What?"

"Why don't you come out and at least finish the weekend we started? I have to leave for a while tomorrow, we caught a new case today, but you can watch movies or cable."

Supposedly I get nine-hundred channels. You can tell me if I do."

My mind scanned frantically through his offer. What was he offering? Two days of mind-blowing sex and who knew what kinks? I already knew I was dangerously close to falling for this hard man and even I knew that wasn't a good idea. He was sure to break my heart if I let him. But how the hell could I say no? Like a moth drawn to open flame, I had no will to resist.

"S-sure."

He put his mug down and pulled his clothes back on. "Grab some more gear. Pack for a week. Let's see where we stand on Monday."

I shivered, knowing full well what awaited me at his place. The toys in his bedroom would not sit idly on the wall if I was there. How much could I take?

I realized, for this man, there were no limits.

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## Spider

**There was no absinthe this time. Only a raw, unbridled need for each other. We fucked and sucked until dawn crept over the eastern sky the next day. I would have kept him in bed for the rest of the day but I knew Nancy was waiting for me. I climbed from under the warm covers that smelled of sex and Jason and after a quick, hot shower dressed and headed to town. Figures the first person I ran into outside the detective's room would be Garcia.**

I clutched the Starbucks coffee in both hands and sucked the caffeine rich brew, wondering how much the guy saw. Ignoring his glare, I crossed to my desk and booted my PC. Might as well start with some of the reports I needed to write while I waited for Nancy.

She arrived in a flurry of cold air. "Damn," she threw her jacket over the back of her chair. "What ever happened to global warming?" She started to say something else then looked at me. "Oh, Christ man. What did you do last night?"

"It shows?"

"Trust me, it shows. That's probably why Garcia was glowering when I passed him in the corridor. You want to put your ass in a sling over this guy?"

I almost grinned, tired as I was. It hadn't been my ass in the sling last night. Jason had looked so delectable hanging suspended in my rarely used leather toy. So open and ripe for all the things I did to him. So many guys who played at being

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subs balked at that final surrender. Jason had not only met my advances with enthusiasm, but pushed me further than I had meant to go.

He wasn't awake when I left. I hoped he got his rest. I had plans for him tonight.

She slapped her desk and stood up. "Come on, let's hit the road before he comes back to find out how messed up his senior detective is this morning."

I followed her out to sign out a car. We had a busy day ahead.

Our first stop was the victim's son, who lived in a condo near the ocean front. Raymond Dutton was a stout forty-something man who favored leisure suits and scuffed Adidas. He waved us in, apologized for the mess and promptly lit a cigarette. An overflowing ashtray sat on the glass topped side table. Beside it was a pale leather recliner he sank into. Though it was barely nine in the morning, a glass of suspicious brown liquid sat beside the ashtray. The chair squeaked when he moved.

I started off with the normal spiel, "We're sorry for you loss, Mr. Dutton." We hadn't delivered the notification yesterday. That onerous task landed in someone else's lap. It was the part of my job I hated most. My dead people always seemed to hover over my shoulder as I broke the news to loved ones.

He nodded his grizzled head, a shock of silvering hair falling over his forehead. He brushed it back. Flicked ash into the ashtray. He pointed at a sofa opposite him and Nancy and I sat.

"We need to ask you a few questions, if you're up to it," I said.

"What kind of questions?"

"We just need to find out more about who your father was. Maybe get an idea of who might want to cause him harm."

"My father was a sweet old man who never harmed anyone. I don't understand any of this—"

"Yes, Mr. Dutton. These tragedies never make any sense," I said. If the rumors and unfiled charges were true, Dutton senior had harmed more than his share of vulnerable children. I wondered if his son had a clue. Maybe even been a victim himself. With some people, denial ran deep.

"I understand your father was in the Army? How long did he serve?"

"My father was drafted to fight over in Korea when he turned eighteen. He went because he didn't know what else to do." Dutton shook his head and stared down at his drink. "It was a terrible war and he did terrible things..." He drained his glass. His haunted eyes met mine. The guy knew. He knew and it broke his heart. "They forced him to go over there then complained when they turned him into a monster."

I don't think I've ever heard that excuse from a child molester; that the US Army had turned them into one.

"Did he ever talk about his war years? A lot of men, they prefer to forget what they saw. Kind of a conscious amnesia."

Another head shake. "No, he wouldn't talk about it. Not unless he went on one of his benders. Excuse me..." Dutton got up with his glass and retreated to the other side of the room where he poured himself another tumbler of joy juice

from what looked like a bottle of Crown Royal. The guy drowned his sorrows with some top-shelf booze. He sat back down in his recliner, looking sullen.

"He talked about his Korean experiences, then?" I prodded.

"He did. You have to understand something. My father was a sensitive man. He liked people and he didn't harbor any bigotry. But when he started drinking it was like another man emerged. A foul, hate-filled man." His voice broke and he gulped more whiskey. "He spewed filth about the gooks and the chinks and lousy trolls he had to work with. How this Lieutenant or that Sergeant needed fragging. The next day he wouldn't remember a thing. He was so tormented. They broke him then discarded him like a used roll of toilet paper."

Clearly Dutton had plenty of time to build up resentment over the years.

Nancy leaned forward, her hands folded in her lap. "Sir, how often did you see your father in the last six months?"

"I tried to go once a week, but sometimes business kept me away, family..." He gave us a haunted look, asking for our forgiveness, like his neglect had caused this tragedy. "I was there for a few minutes the day before..."

Nancy could turn on motherly gentleness like a faucet. She cranked it on full force now. "How long had he been like that? Dementia, right? When did the doctors diagnose him? That must have been devastating to your family."

"Dementia and liver cancer. You have no idea. After the ugly things they said about my dad, then that."

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"Must have been rough," Nancy was all sympathy. I knew she had stronger feelings about child molesters than I did. The words castration and hot vats of oil often came up in her conversations. But I knew she could be all honey during an interview. Just like she could turn into a cobra in an instant.

So far Dutton registered as honest on my bull-shit-o'meter. He had nothing but grief for his father and had compartmentalized the horror of what his father was so he could still love the man. It never ceases to amaze me what people are capable of believing when the motive is strong enough.

It was time to bring this interview back on track.

"Can you think of anyone who had it in for your father?"

"I think it all the time. When people found out, and God knows they always seemed to find out, the threats would start. We moved here a year ago when he started getting sick. We thought we'd finally found some peace."

"What happened, Mr. Dutton?" Nancy leaned forward. She would have touched him ever so gently if she were close enough. "Did the threats start again?"

"I don't know ... I mean there was something, but was it a threat? I don't know."

"Tell us, sir. If we know what it was maybe we can say if it was a threat and who made it."

"I can do better than that." Dutton jumped to his feet. He'd had enough booze to make him wobbly. He righted himself then charged out of the room, to return seconds later with a shoebox he thrust at Nancy. "See, this is what those bastards sent dad while he was in the home. And they have



the gall to call him a monster. I already opened it ... you'll see."

Nancy pulled on a pair of nitrile gloves and held the box, testing its weight. She moved it gently. Something slid around inside it. Finally she eased the lid up and peered inside. She grimaced and passed it over to me.

I took the lid off. Inside, on a crisp bed of pale blue tissue paper, lay a bird. A crow, I thought. Dead, but ... I took a cautious sniff. No smell of decay. "How long ago was this delivered?"

"A week, week and a half, maybe."

"Who was it addressed to?"

"My father."

"Any return address? Do you still have the address label? It may have a post mark—"

"I don't think it was mailed. I think it was dropped off in our mailbox when we were at the hospital visiting dad."

"Was there a note of any kind? Any sort of message?" Nancy asked.

"No, just that."

We looked down at the bird in the box.

Gingerly I reached in and picked the thing up all the while thinking of Jason and his bird fixation. Jesus, could he have ... No, I refused to believe it. I had to get home and ask him. I kept my panic to myself and hefted the bird in one hand. It was surprisingly light. I touched the glossy black breast and stared into the shiny black eye. And leaned closer. The eye was glass.

"It's stuffed. It's a stuffed bird."

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"What kind?" Nancy asked.

"I don't know," I said with some exasperation. "I don't know anything about birds. But I know someone who does." I swung around to face Nancy. "You got your camera with you?"

"No, but I've got my cell and it has a camera."

I instructed her to take several shots from various angles. "Email them to me, will you?" I instructed her.

She did, then stuffed the cell back in her bag.

Back to business. "Why would someone send you a stuffed bird? What's the message in that?"

"I don't know." Dutton was distressed.

"Do you know any taxidermists? Did your father?"

"Taxi—No, is that who did this?"

"A taxidermist would have had to prepare the thing. Guess we have to start looking at taxidermists. How many can there be in Cali?" I muttered.

"We'll get back to that." Nancy's impatience showed. "Was that the only incident you remember?" she asked Dutton.

"Did anything happen after the dead bird was delivered?"

Dutton squinted as he struggled to remember. I'm sure the booze didn't help. "Do you know a man by the name of George Blunt?" I asked.

"Blunt? No, I don't think so. Is he the person who did that to my father?"

"No, he didn't."

"Then who is he?"

"That's the sixty-four thousand dollar question, isn't it?" I repacked the stuffed bird into the box and closed the lid. I

bagged it in a plastic evidence bag and with my permanent marker I wrote the date and location of the recovered object. I'd include a more detailed history of it in my reports. "Where did your father serve in Korea? When was he there?"

"His enlistment period was from July 1951 to June of '52." Dutton's face darkened. "It was '52 when the Army started making those wild accusations."

"What accusations?" Nancy did her maternal 'I really care' voice again. "It's important that we know, Mr. Dutton. May I call you Raymond?"

My partner was a sly one. That was okay. I wasn't above playing the same game when we interviewed a woman.

"S-sure. That would be nice." Dutton shot me a look as though wondering where I stood in Nancy's life. I smiled at him encouragingly. He turned his full focus on Nancy. "I'm afraid the Army had it wrong. He never did those things to those village children. He loved kids. He was always coaching them or being a camp counselor for underprivileged kids. They were always so grateful—" He froze as though aware of what he was saying. "I don't mean that. I know that's what that prosecutor thought. She wanted to throw my father in jail because of the lies some gook brat told her."

"Thank you, Mr. Dutton," Nancy said, cool as mountain ice. She stood up. I followed, clutching the box in one gloved hand. "We'll get back to you with any new developments."

We made it to the car before she reacted to his words. "Jesus, you see how fast he turned? Guess daddy raised him well."

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"Think he had anything to do with Dutton's demise? Lot of strong emotion there. He has to resent the cloud the old man brought into their lives. How many times did they move because the local League for Decency ran them out of town? Kid's gotta grow up with a shit load of bad feelings about that. Or maybe daddy diddled him, too."

"But why wait until the old man's on death's door before enacting his revenge? I think the military record needs investigating, both Dutton's and Blunt's. That's going to take a federal warrant. Plus I want a warrant for Blunt's place. We never considered it a crime scene, since we know the murder occurred on the boat. But I want to look the place over." I rolled my wrist over and checked my watch. "Want to grab some lunch? Go over some strategy for the rest of the day? We'll have to ask Garcia about pursuing the warrant for the military records."

"Sure. Let's drop this feathered doorstep off to forensics first. You want to meet someplace?"

"IHOP suit you?"

It did. Over a lunch that included three cups of black coffee, much to Nancy's amusement, we discussed the people we wanted to talk to, the angles we needed to run down. I'd write up the warrant to search Blunt's home this afternoon and get it into a judge by day's end. We could do the search first thing tomorrow.

"Unis are running a canvass of the staff and residents at the home," I said. "Anything pops they'll let us know and we can do follow-up interviews. We need to follow that with those records searches. Check state databases. Maybe NCIC."

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I scribbled notes through lunch. We bounced ideas off each other until we had the whole week mapped. We would split up for the rest of the day, then meet back at the station at four to transcribe our notes. That way we'd have something to hand to the anxious Garcia in the morning and just maybe I could get him off my back.

After we parted in the IHOP parking lot I returned to Rancho Verde, where I spent the afternoon interviewing the staff with the most day-to-day contact with Dutton senior. I came away with the sense that no one knew he was accused of anything. They saw him as a frail old man who was terminal when he came to them.

I couldn't see any reason why anyone, even someone grieving over a distant event in the past, would bother to kill the guy at this point. I returned to the station before Nancy. When she came in I was buried in reports. I flipped one hand at her and never took my eyes off the screen in front of me.

Later I took a break from keying in data, leaned back in my chair and stretched kinks out of my muscles. "Find anything?"

"One old coot who used to run deliveries to the home. Over the counter drugs, pizza, groceries for those who were still mobile. He brought Dutton things—magazines, the odd newspaper. The magazines were catalogs for kids clothing stores. Guy thought he had grandkids he was buying for. Pretty blatant, you ask me. Cigarettes once, though there was no smoking allowed on the grounds. He thought that was quite scandalous. You come up with anything?"

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"A back that's killing me and calluses on my fingers from taking notes." I waved my hand. The wall clock told me it was time to go. I stood.

"I'm outta here."

"Got plans for tonight?" she asked, too casually.

"Not one," I said cheerfully. "Going home and I can just about promise you I'll be going to bed early."

"Yeah, well stop doing whatever it is you're doing."

"I assure you—"

"Yeah, yeah. Put it in writing. I'll see you tomorrow."

I didn't think she needed to know that the source of my exhaustion was waiting for me back at my place.

Some things are better left unsaid.

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## Jason

**I had no idea at first where I even was. Then I moved under the heavy duvet and remembered. My muscles were so depleted I could barely push the warm cocoon off me, but my bladder demanded action and I obeyed. I shuffled through to the bathroom and stared groggily into the mirror over the sink. God, was that really me? My eyes were burning coals in a too pale face. Burns from Alex's beard left my face and neck red and raw. My lips looked like he'd chewed on them. Maybe he had. My hair was a rat's nest. I didn't even want to think what my mouth tasted like. I ached in places I didn't know I had. But over it all, I was tired but sated, relaxed into a place I had never been. It felt like home.**

Not ready to face the world I crawled back under the covers and let myself drift in and out of sleep. The bed smelled so much like Alex that I dozed in a semi-permanent state of hardness. Memories of last night kept me that way. I'd done some bondage play in the past when someone asked for it, but I had never really gotten into the scene. But last night ... surrendering so completely to another person had been totally liberating. I had felt and done things I had never imagined possible before. I'm pretty sure Alex had the same experience. Certainly his enthusiasm had burned through the night and I was amazed he could get up and go to work today. It was safe to say neither one of us got much sleep.

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As I drifted down into a deeper sleep I wished Alex would come home. I needed him.

Eventually I woke up, showered and went in search of something to eat. I wasn't up for anything heavy, so I settled for cold cereal and OJ. And coffee. Lots of coffee. I carried the fourth cup out to the neglected backyard. I had brought my Bushnell binoculars from home. I slid into the Adirondack chair and fell to scanning the shaggy crowns of white-limbed sycamores, twisted ficus and bare branches of cottonwoods that separated Alex's property from his neighbors.

In my search through the kitchen I came across a set of house keys. I pocketed them. Alex hadn't given them to me, but he hadn't specifically forbidden me to leave the house, either. As the day lengthened I grew restless. If I'd had my car, I might have driven into town. Instead I decided to take a hike, literally.

Along with my Bushnells I brought a pair of sturdy hiking boots. I rarely went very far without either.

I wasn't planning on going far today. Maybe some other time I could plan a more extensive hike. I knew Goleta was in the shadow of the Los Padres National Forest and someday I planned to visit it. For today I would be content to cruise some of the back roads, see if I could scare up anything interesting. Trying not to look like some sissified city boy, I threw on jeans and a flannel shirt over a plain black T-shirt. I hung my binocs around my neck, grabbed a bottle of water from the well-stocked fridge, tested the key on the front door, wrote a short note for Alex—I knew he'd be pissed if he came



home and didn't find some explanation for my absence—and set off north, out of town.

Alex lived on the northeastern side of Goleta. It wasn't long before I left the last straggle of houses and small ranches and entered wilder country. Large treed lots and fields of tule and rabbit grass crowded along the lower areas. Yellow willow bushes, cottonwoods and alders lined the road and on the distant slopes massive California live oaks and sycamores swayed in the gentle down slope breezes, before giving way to the evergreens on the upper slopes. It was mid-morning, so the bird population was hunkered down for the day. Still, I managed to spot a rufous-backed kestrel. I watched him hunt, hovering over the ground, looking for morsels in the grassy verge. An olive flycatcher flitted through the yellow willow, and I think I even heard the yick-yick of a Lewis's Woodpecker. I needed to get out a lot earlier if I wanted to do any serious birding. Not a likely prospect given Alex's nocturnal drives.

The day got away from me. The sun was dipping down over the distant ocean when I turned back. By the time I climbed the front driveway, passed Alex's Toyota, it was almost full dark. The door banged open before I could set foot on the front step.

Alex grabbed my arm and hauled me in to the foyer, which suddenly seemed a whole lot smaller than it had earlier. "You want to tell me where you went?"

I shook his hand off my arm. "I went for a walk. Or is that forbidden, too? I left you a note."

"I saw it. You expect me to believe you were out all day *bird* watching?"

I lifted the binoculars and glared at him. "What the hell do you think I was doing? You think I was out there getting butt-fucked in the bushes?" He grabbed me again and I jerked away from him, stamping into the bedroom. "Think what you want. I think it's time I went home."

He came to stand in the doorway. "I don't want you to go," he said. It was probably as close to an apology as Alex was capable of. He stood, half-in, half-out of the bedroom, arms folded over his broad chest.

"I went for a lousy walk," I muttered, yanking off the heavy flannel shirt, leaving the T on. I folded the shirt and put it in my pack. "Am I supposed to be some kind of fucking prisoner here?"

"Of course not. But this isn't San Francisco or even Santa Barbara. Some folks up here might give you trouble if they find you walking out by yourself."

"You think I'm going to get gay bashed?"

"It's happened. Good ol' boys get a few beers in them and they're spoiling to find an ass to kick." He came over and put his hand on my shoulder. This time I didn't shake it off. "I just don't want yours to be one of them."

"You say the sweetest things," I muttered, too aware of the heat from his hand penetrating the cotton shirt. When he started kneading my shoulder I closed my eyes at the sensation.

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"I'm not going to fight with you," he said softly, stepping closer. His other hand closed over my collarbone and drew me against his hard body. His hands moved down to cup my ass.

"No? What are you going to do?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

My body clenched in response to his promise. I shivered when he lowered his mouth to mine. "You belong to me," he whispered. "Don't you ever forget it. Do you need me to show you again?"

I knew I should tell him I didn't belong to anyone, but the words wouldn't come. Instead I stared into his dilated eyes and tasted his tongue when he shoved it into my mouth. I reached up and stroked his unshaven cheek. "Yes, show me."

"Show you what?" he asked, twisting my nipple just hard enough to send a jolt of pain into my cock.

"Show me, Sir. Please, Sir."

"Strip." He left me while I obeyed, crossing over to his toy wall. When he came back he had a vial of oil and a thick acrylic dildo that must have been ten inches. I stared at the massive thing in awe. Did he really think I could get that inside me? He was going to tear me apart. Instead of scaring me the thought only sent a surge of blood to my dick, which swelled, jutting out of my hairless pubes. He stopped two feet from me. His gaze swept down me, stopping at my cock.

Handing me the oil he said, "Show me how much you want me. Touch yourself."

I poured a few drops of slick, sandalwood scented oil on my hand and smoothed it over the head of my cock. I closed my eyes at the sensation, imaging him doing the same thing.

I took up the familiar rhythm, pumping myself, slipping down to pull and tug at my balls, then back up to stroke my cockhead. My chest hitched and I pumped more fiercely, seeking relief. Viscous precum smeared my belly. I opened my eyes to watch—

"Stop."

My hand froze, dropping away from my cock in silent protest. Not fair. I was so close. I focused my glazed eyes on him. He simply stood there, watching me through hooded eyes. Every nerve ending in me screamed for release, but I dare not finish it. The anticipation was killing me. I opened my mouth to beg him but a stern look silenced me. He circled, pausing every now and then to brush warm fingers over me: hips, thighs, chest, nipples, open mouth, each whisper of flesh touching me sent shards of exquisite pleasure straight into my already straining cock.

I rocked my hips forward. He slid the tip of the dildo between my ass cheeks. I clenched the cool object when it poked me. "Relax," he said.

I obeyed and he pushed the lubed-up acrylic tube up inside me. It was ridged perfectly to catch my prostate.

He leaned forward over my shoulder and breathed in my ear, "Let the games begin."

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## Spider

**I left him in the bathroom cleaning off my spunk and went in to the kitchen. I had picked up a couple of steaks and baking potatoes at Mediterra. When he came out I'd get him to work on the salad and setting the table. No way he was getting anywhere near my steaks, though I might show him the right way to do them. Jason was proving to be a pleasure to have around, even outside the bedroom. I knew I needed to kick this thing to the curb, before it caused me trouble, but I wasn't ready to just yet. Surely in time I'd grow tired of him and he'd go off to someone else. That thought bit at me unpleasantly. I wasn't ready to share Jason with anyone. Until I was, I was keeping him close.**

He came into the kitchen wearing skin-tight jeans and the black mesh shirt that showed off his delicious body to perfection. I paused in putting the cracked pepper on the thick strip loin, lightly salting it with sea salt I also picked up at the market.

He brushed by me, rubbing his packed groin against my ass. His hand brushed my hip. I swung my hand up and pinched his nipple, twisting the ring in it. He gasped.

I use the nipple ring to pull him closer to me. "Don't tease if you don't plan on following through."

He opened his mouth to speak and I pushed him back. "I'll take care of you later."

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"Now." He rubbed against me like a cat in heat.

"Brat." I smacked his ass, hard. He yelped and took a step back, rubbing bruised skin. "Don't push me, Jason. Make the salad."

I left him to cut up tomatoes and cucumbers. I already had the grill hot and soon the sizzle, pop and smell of cooking meat filled my property. He came out carrying two plates and utensil.

"We eating here or inside?" He kept his eyes averted.

I noticed he was shivering in his short sleeves and jerked my chin at the house. "Set up the table in there. See if you can find some candles. I'm sure I have some in one drawer or another. Then check on the baked potatoes. They should be done soon."

He nodded and vanished back inside.

The steaks were cooked to perfection, the potatoes, a dieter's nightmare with dairy butter and sour cream. The salad provided an excellent balance. This time, he cleaned up right after supper. One lesson learned well.

I selected the movie we watched that night. After studying each title long enough to have the younger man squirming in impatience, I picked *A Streetcar Named Desire*, causing Jason to mutter, "Don't you have anything in color?" I was feeling too laid back to punish his insolence. Sometimes I wonder if he uses his mouth to get me riled up so I *will* punish him. I'm sure he'll do something again in the future that will warrant a severe penalty. That was okay. I had some new suspension cuffs I hadn't yet had the chance to try. Jason would like those.

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The movie was almost over when I remembered the dead bird sitting down in forensics. No telling how long it would take them to get to it. We weren't exactly a high-profile case. It could easily be weeks, if not months.

I left the room and went into my small, rarely used study where I kept my computer. Except for the odd download of porn or purchase of toys I didn't spend much time on it. I opened my email program, ignoring the rush of several hundred emails that promised to give me inches on my dick, sell me a Rolex for a song and entice me with all the millions I had already won in the Euro Lotto. I went straight to the folder I had set up to collect Nancy's emails. The one with the images attached to it was there. I didn't have a color printer so I needed Jason to come in here and look at them. Fortunately I had splurged on a twenty-one inch monitor—the few times I watch porn online I liked to have the bigger images.

I left the monitor on the first image and returned to the living room for Jason. He padded after me, his bare feet soft whispers on my carpeted office floor. He stopped when he saw the screen images.

"What is that?"

"You tell me." I swung the monitor around to face him. He leaned over my shoulder and peered at the image of the shiny black bird in the box. I forwarded to the next one, then a third. There were five, from every angle. In some you could see my gloved hand holding the bird up so it was easier to see.

"What is it?" I asked. "And don't tell me a bird. I know that."

"It's a raven," he said.

"Raven? Not a crow?"

"No way." He pointed at the image. "See the beak? It's a lot heavier in a raven. That beard on the breast is only found on ravens. *Corvus corax*." He must have caught my look because he said, "Latin name. They're a passerine, in the crow family." His enthusiasm for the subject showed in his voice. "Did you know they have images of ravens playing, something they used to say animals didn't do. But I saw these videos of ravens sliding down an icy hill on their backs—and they kept going back again and again. Like kids sledding. Tell me that's not playing." He stopped as though he realized I didn't share his enthusiasm. "Why do you want to know? What is this picture?"

"Somebody sent it to the son of a dead man."

"Jesus." He looked at me sharply. "Not Blunt? Did he have a son?"

"No, not Blunt at least not that we know of. Another guy." Then in case just maybe he knew the guy, I said casually, "Clarence Dutton." No flash of recognition.

"Why would someone send a dead raven to anyone?"

"Not only dead, but stuffed. That took some thought. I don't imagine just anyone knows how to stuff an animal."

"I never liked stuffed animals. I know why they do it, but to me it seems ... creepy," he said. He stared at the screen. "Beautiful birds. There are a lot of myths associated with ravens. More so than most birds."



"What kind of myths?"

"They were deities to the Native Americans, not always benevolent ones. Some of their stories make the raven sound like coyote—a trickster. A game player. They're part of almost all creation myths. Sometimes ravens led dead souls to the underworld, other times they are harbingers of doom." He shrugged, clearly embarrassed by his overabundance of knowledge. It didn't suit his image as a party boy.

"Would the underworld be like hell?"

"Could be. Hades was the underworld in some stories. The overworld was heaven, I guess."

"Someone sending a message that this guy was going to hell?"

"Maybe," Jason said cautiously.

"Dutton was like Blunt. A pedophile who never got convicted. It's beginning to look like someone wanted to rectify that." More than anything I needed that warrant for Blunt's place. Tomorrow.

"Not necessarily a bad thing."

"Maybe, but it's still a crime and I have to investigate it."

He put his hands on my shoulders. I smelled him; clean musk and the lingering scent of sandalwood. "Do you ever wish that you aren't successful sometimes?"

"I can't be." I covered his hand with my own. "If I don't believe in the system, then it's time to quit."

I started the shut down process on the PC and stood up, signaling the conversation was over. I took his arm.

"Come on, I want a beer before hitting the sack."

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He cocked his head at me. "You mean I can have one, too?"

"Sarcasm, boy? You think that's a good idea?"

He flushed. "No, Sir. I'd love a beer. Thank you, Sir."

I headed for the living room. "Then go get us each one."

"Yes, Sir." He disappeared toward the kitchen. In the living room I sank back down on the sofa we were sharing. He came in and handed me an open Mexicali. Didn't sit.

I waited a good minute before looking back up at him.

"Sit."

He slid down beside me.

"Are you not happy with me?" he asked softly.

I didn't look at him. I raised my beer to my lips and took a deep swallow. Finally, "You have reason to believe I'm unhappy?"

"No ... I don't know. You don't make it easy to tell what you're thinking."

"And you think you're entitled to know my thoughts?"

"No—oh, forget it."

"No, I won't forget it. You want to challenge me, that's okay, but know what it means. I will rein you in. I think that's what you want." I reached over and took his chin in my hand, forcing him to look at me. "Is it?"

"No—Yes!" he said when I pinched his jaw. "Yes, it is what I want. What I need. You—"

I pushed his face away from me. "Not tonight." I stood up. "Tonight you sleep here," I indicated the leather sofa. "Now, I'm going to bed."

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And I left him in the living room, the blank TV screen hissing softly in the background. I closed the bedroom door behind me. The whole time I spent preparing for bed I didn't hear a sound from the other room. Then after a while I heard the soft sounds of the TV. He was channel surfing. Was he restless with his need? Or just pissed off?

Eventually my exhaustion from nearly thirty-six hours of not sleeping caught up with me. I drifted into an easy sleep.

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## Jason

**I hugged one of the sofa's pillows to my chest and fumed. Asshole. Couldn't even say thank you when I helped him identify that bird. Why the hell did I put up with it? Why didn't I tell him to go fuck himself and the jackass he rode in on? What was it about this guy that I put up with this shit? I—**

Except I knew why, didn't I? My body craved him, it was an addiction sicker than any desire I'd ever had for drugs. I wanted him and only him. I had no illusions that he understood the concept of monogamy. Yet he seemed to expect it of me. I threw the pillow across the room. The TV showed some insipid late night infomercial with an equally insipid anorexic blonde bimbo hawking some insipid cooking utensil. I watched as she dumped meat and vegetables into a pan and seconds later produced something that looked like what I might feed a dog—if I didn't like the dog.

I retrieved the pillow and grabbed the other one, pumping them both up under my head. I lay on my side, still watching the moving images on the TV without really seeing them. I wish I hadn't taken off my flannel shirt. I could feel the chill invade the room. I thought about going in search of a blanket or sheet, but knew he'd hear my snooping. More punishment. But this was worse than the punishment he'd meted out earlier. At least then he'd delivered the pain. Pain which so quickly become pleasure. But this, this was terrible. I felt more alone than I ever felt when I was by myself in my

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apartment for days on end. When I didn't have money enough to put gas in the car to go find someone to hold me for a few hours. Putting myself in danger every time I climbed into someone's car or took them home. I knew I had barely made it out of San Francisco in one piece. I was damn lucky I wasn't dying alone of some nasty plague like I had seen happen to others. I'd managed to avoid hustling on the streets for my living expenses, but only barely. There were times when I almost gave in to the offers, but I figured, why prove to my parents that they were right all along?

I never wanted to visit that place again. Was that why I put up with this shit? So I wouldn't be alone? How fucking sick was that? But he wanted me, didn't he? Had come looking for me when he could have found someone else down at the Vault. The Friday night he came to get me the Vault would have been alive with twink and tweakers, happy to give him what he wanted in exchange for something. But he had wanted me. He invited me back here, even after he firmly told me he didn't want anyone in his life. So what had made him change his mind? Me?

Then why the silent treatment? The cold shoulder? To teach me a lesson?

Well, lesson taught. Grumpily I turned on my side, curling into a fetal position trying to get comfortable and warm enough to get some sleep. Eventually exhaustion dragged me down into a shallow sleep plagued by unpleasant dreams where a big black raven kept trying to pull me down into the earth to face unspeakable horrors, while Alex stood beside me, and didn't try to save me.

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I woke the next morning when the day was breaking with the first soft blush of pink. I was stiff and could barely move when I tried to sit up. Leather creaked and my face stuck to the pillow under me. I shoved it onto the floor and nearly followed it when two legs appeared in my narrow field of vision.

Hands grabbed me under the armpits and hauled me upright. "You look like you had a restful night." Alex looked down at my morning erection chafing against my jeans. "You might want to take care of that."

I shuffled past him into the bathroom, which was still filled with steam from his shower. I longed to take one too, but Alex appeared in the doorway. "Hurry up. I've got something for you."

"I can hardly wait," I muttered to his retreating back.

In the kitchen he had a mug of coffee already in front of him and had set out a second mug which I filled with blessedly hot strong coffee. He waited until I prepared a cup then pointed at the bar stool beside him.

"I want you to go to your place this morning," he said.

Despair filled me. He was sending me home. "I—"

"Listen first. I want you to get your car and bring it back here. You have a key. Bring some more clothes if you want."

"My car? Why—?"

"I don't like you being out here on your own without a vehicle. I wasn't kidding about some people looking for trouble. Most don't know about me, but once they realize you're staying here, they're going to put two and two

together, and it's not going to paint a pretty picture. You got a cell, right?"

I nodded, confused by the turn the day had taken. The guy kept me permanently off-balance.

"Don't go anywhere without it."

"Where am I going to go?"

"You like to hike through the woods right? I don't want you getting caught out there. Keep your cell phone close. Does it have a GPS locator in it?"

"I-I don't know—"

"If it's less than five or six years old I'm sure it does. Try to keep it charged, so that when you're out you can keep it turned on."

"Jesus, what do you think is going to happen?"

"Nothing if I have anything to do with it."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I don't want anything to happen to you. Be content with that. You're coming to stay here. I want to keep you close."

No mention of needing me, or caring. Just that he wanted me close. But ... was that so horrible? Alex wasn't the type who got sentimental or soft for anyone or anything. He must care in some way to go to all this extra effort.

I nodded solemnly, suppressing the urge to grin like an idiot.

"Come on, get dressed. I need to get going. Do me a favor when you get back. There's some laundry in my room. Take care of it." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. "When do you get paid?"

"Next Thursday."

He handed me two twenties. "This will tide you over. Put some gas in the car, I don't want you getting stranded up in the hills somewhere trying to chase down whatever it is you're chasing down. I'll be back around six. We'll talk about dinner then."

I was torn between telling him I couldn't take his money, to throwing myself in his arms. He did say until payday, so he probably expected it back. I stuffed it in my jeans pocket and said, "Thanks."

We were silent on the ride to my place. When he let me off he gave me a smoldering look and said simply, "Later."

"I'll be there," I murmured. He nodded and sped away.

I made my way inside my musty, empty room and carefully closed the door behind me. Then I let out a whoop that shook the thin walls and dashed to where my Murphy bed lay unfolded, and unmade, the blankets still rumpled from where I had risen to find Alex at the door. I started pulling out clothes and thinking of what I wanted to take. There wasn't much I needed from the place. Clothes and books. My notebook with the life list I had been assembling of the birds I sighted over the years. Damn, I had that library book ... I still had two weeks left on it. Surely I'd be back in town in time to take it in or renew it. I decided to take it rather than swing by the library on my way out of town. I was in a hurry to get back before ... before what? Alex came to his senses and changed his mind? It had been his idea, without any prompting from me, so why would he do that? I had the feeling Alex Spider didn't make decisions lightly, nor did he change his mind often.



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For better or worse I was committed to this.

I was whistling again as I finished packing and loaded my little Honda up with everything important in my life, and headed back to the most important thing of all.

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## Spider

**"We need a federal warrant to access those military records."**

I had arrived at the station ten minutes before Nancy. She hadn't even got her jacket off before I hit her with my announcement.

"Good morning to you, too." She dropped into her chair and stabbed the power button on her PC. She didn't wait for it to power up before she swung around to glare at me. "Least you could do is bring me coffee if you're going to drop bombshells. What makes you think we can get a judge—a federal judge, no less—to sign off on a federal warrant on a couple of old Army gits?"

"My winning charm?"

She rolled her eyes. "Seriously, you think it's going to lead to anything?"

"Who knows? It's a long shot, but I got a feeling..."

"Oh right. That old Spidey gut."

"Hey, if it keeps Garcia's nose out of my affairs then it works for me."

"You could keep him out of your affairs by being a little less in his face about said affairs."

"If I was boffing prime pussy you think he'd give a fuck? He can't stop thinking about me and whoever I'm getting it on with."

"You think?"

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I bent over my keyboard. I intended to get that warrant. It was too much of a coincidence that both our recent victims were ex-military. There had to be a connection but without the records of their service days, I was fishing in the dark.

I spent the morning fielding calls. The papers had made a connection between Blunt and Dutton and splashed it all over the front page. The papers made a big deal of there being no suspects. By eleven-forty I had listened to three confessions, a half a dozen people who swore they saw either Blunt or Dutton, one psychic who said the killer lived near the water—good one, I felt like saying, we live on the fucking Pacific ocean—and a 5150 who said Elvis did it and was going to do him, too.

Well give him my regards I wanted to say. Instead, per our exalted leader's instructions, I listened to each caller through their rants and thanked them for their help. I'd be sure to get back to them if I had any other questions.

At twelve sharp I slammed the last phone call—a little old lady, convinced her husband was the killer, since she hadn't seen him in three months. I probed her story and it turned out she had buried him at Calvary cemetery four months ago. I wasn't sure what happened during the month that she claimed she did see him. I decided I didn't want to know and snatching my jacket off the back of my chair I thumped to my feet.

"One and only call: Lunch, El Torito. On me."

"Wow, big spender. That how you keep the young ones coming around for more?"

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"Shut up and go get us a car. After lunch we've got some people to see."

"Who?"

I checked the clip in my Beretta. "Taxidermists."

The server led us to a table in the back when she saw we were cops. A lot of restaurant patrons lose their appetite when they see a cop and his piece hunkering over a meal. Maybe they think we're going to shoot the waiter if our eggs aren't cooked right. I ordered Red Bull and she went with decaf coffee. I kept throwing glances at the other diners, looking over at the front door then back at our table.

"What's up?" Nancy asked.

"What do you mean?"

She pointedly looked at my foot, which was bouncing off the floor, my whole leg vibrating. She raised one eyebrow. "You only get this agitated when something's upsetting you. Is it Garcia? The boy from the boat?"

"Nothing." I took a hit of Red Bull, knowing damn well it was something. My mind kept spinning back to this morning. What the hell had possessed me to invite Jason to practically move in with me? Was I nuts? Sure the kid was hot in bed, and even out of the sack he was entertaining, but *live with me*? When had that happened?

Part of me said pick up the phone right now and tell him to forget it. I didn't need some flaky kid that I knew next to nothing about crowding my living space. Tell him to go back to his loser apartment, and what? I'd go back to mine?

I shoveled a mouthful of spicy *carne asada* and glared at her. She looked back impassively.

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"How long we been partners?" she asked.

Too long if she was going to go all psychic momma on me.

"You ever think this," she indicated my bouncing leg, "means you're doing the wrong thing? Maybe you need to stop and think about whatever it is you are doing."

Or maybe it meant for the first time in my life I was doing the right thing and part of me didn't want it to happen? Forming ties, even tentative ones ... I haven't done that since my marriage failed. I pushed my palm against my leg, holding it in place. I took another slug of energy drink, though clearly the last thing I needed was more caffeine.

Her plate was empty.

"Ready to hit the road?" I sure as hell didn't want to carry on this conversation.

"You line up some taxidermists?"

I flipped my arm up and looked at my watch.

"Appointment at one-thirty. Mr. Geoffrey Lowe, spelled with a G—do not forget that."

She threw some cash on the table. I threw it back. "My treat, remember."

"Jesus, you really are soft on this guy."

"Let it go."

The taxidermy was in a small, red brick building with a green awning over the front door. Parking was shared with a podiatrist and a real estate office with a for-lease sign on it.

The interior was dark after the brilliant light outside. The walls were all dark paneled wood and covered with a surreal collection of animal heads. In front of the till there was a display case with several smaller animals, including a couple

of birds. But no ravens. Or crows. All game animals as far as I could tell, though I didn't have a clue what a game animal was. It included an impressive looking black boar with tusks on it that looked like they would mean business.

Somehow my nine didn't seem really adequate anymore. Nancy cleared her throat and I looked back to find a hulking bear of a man standing behind me. He followed my gaze.

"Mean looking sucker, ain't he? Bagged that one in Hawaii. Let me tell you that was a trip and a half."

"I can imagine."

"No, I don't think you can."

I ignored the slight and held out my hand. "Mr. Lowe?"

He allowed as he was. I introduced Nancy and myself. We both flashed our badges. "We need some information. We're hoping you can help us."

"Sure. If I can." Like most civilians, he looked less than happy to have us here. I gave him the usual request for name, occupation and contact information. Then:

"How long have you been a taxidermist?"

"Six years."

"Decent job?"

"Pays the bills." Clearly not a talker.

"This your place?" I knew it was, but like any good lie detector, you threw out control questions and monitored the answers.

"Six years."

"Lots of people want things ... stuffed?" I looked back up at the boar's menacing black head.

"Enough."

Maybe he liked taxidermy because his clients didn't talk to him.

"As I told you on the phone, my partner and I have few questions we were hoping you could answer."

"Ask them."

"If we were to show you a stuffed animal," Nancy cut in. "Would you be able to tell us who did it?"

"First of all, they're not 'stuffed,' they're mounted. What we do here is art."

"Then would you recognize a particular artist's work?"

"Probably. I'd at least know if it was mine. You have something you want me to look at?"

"You do many birds?" I was reluctant to release the identity of the bird. It was a hold back, an item that could be identified only by the killer or close accomplices. As this morning had demonstrated, the world was full of yokels who got a kick out of confessing to crimes they didn't commit.

"Sure. Geese, ducks, pheasants, did a wild turkey once. That was a beauty."

"Any other birds?"

"Lot of birds are protected," he said cautiously. "Can't touch 'em."

"Like what?"

He shrugged. I tried another track. "Say I brought in a crow? You do that?" I wished Jason was here, he'd be able to rattle off a dozen names of birds. I thought of all the birds I knew from personal experience. "What about sea gulls? Pelicans? Eagles—"

"You better not bring any eagles in to me. Or pelicans for that matter."

That struck a nerve. I pressed on, maybe I'd hit some more. "Penguins? Ostriches?" Even Nancy was looking at me. "Ravens? Robins?"

"I don't know where you're from, mister, but I've never seen any of those things. Can't imagine why anyone outside a museum would want them."

"But you could do it, right?"

"Could. Haven't. Probably wouldn't. I serve the hunters around here who want to display their trophies."

"To remember them by?"

"Why else?"

I stared into the glass eyes of the monstrous boar head. I smiled. "Trophies."

Nancy nodded as she picked up on my thought. "Thank you, Mr. Lowe. I think we're done here."

"Don't know what good it was."

"You never know," she said. I followed her out the door back into the brilliant sun that wasn't doing a whole lot to warm things up. A trio of raucous sea gulls flew over our heads, heading out to sea. I followed their flight path and thought again of Jason. Waiting at home for me. Or was he? Would he decide enough was enough, take my money and split?

Nancy unlocked the car door and leaned on the roof. "Good call, that. Trophies, huh?"

A lot of serial killers collected trophies from their victims. The occasional one left them.



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"Let's go get that federal warrant rolling," I said, slapping the roof and climbing into the passenger seat. "Then we'll work on the logistics of getting our talkative friend to take a look at our bird."

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## Jason

**I put thirty dollars in the tank and used the rest to buy a six-pack of Mexicali beer. Back at Alex's I gathered up every scrap of clothing I could find that I suspected was dirty and went in search of the laundry room. I found it in the very back of the house, beside a utility closet. I separated the lights and darks with a lot more care than I gave my own clothes and soon had a load on.**

I did some channel surfing after looking over Alex's selection of movies and deciding they weren't for me. I slouched on the sofa, my bird book open in my lap, the remote in my hand, restlessly flipping through all nine hundred plus channels. Up until now I never knew what they meant when they said there was nothing on. You'd think with nine hundred freaking channels someone could put on something decent. I finally settled on *here!* and some sex show, though I wasn't really watching. White noise to fill the background spaces.

I fell into the zone, reading about Tofino spring migratory birds until the alarm went off and it was time to go back to my Cinderella chores. In between loads of laundry I cleaned up the kitchen and the bathroom, found clean linen and changed the sheets, smoothing my hand over the covers before I spread the burgundy and black duvet back over it. The domestic diva strikes again. Get back, demon dirt.

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When the place was as clean as I could get it, I took my book and binoculars and headed outside. Feet propped up on the second chair I idled away the time watching for anything that moved. I thought of having one of the beers I'd bought, but decided Alex wouldn't like that. Then I thought, *fuck that shit*, and went to get a beer.

I settled back into the chair and scanned the skies. A turkey vulture glided through a domed sky so blue it bounced light back into my eyes. I flipped my binoculars up and followed his flight. He was joined by another bird, then a third. Looking for road kill, no doubt. The beer went down just fine.

I was tempted to get another one when I thought: car, binoculars, hiking boots, beautiful day. I was going to find someplace to enjoy it. I still had four hours before Spider would return. I'd watch the clock and get back in plenty of time.

In about five minutes I was on Gibraltar Road and climbing. My Honda labored, unfit for the journey. I pushed on. I had no idea how high I climbed. I passed Rattlesnake Canyon Park and a cluster of towers and power lines, taking the steep switchbacks slowly. When I finally pulled off the winding road into a side spur on the juncture of Camino Cielo and the San Marcos Pass and got out of the car, the air was crisp and cold with the definite bite of winter. Snow had fallen here recently; it still dusted the sprawling distant pines and the nearby scrub brush rattled in the moaning wind. The vultures had disappeared. Maybe they'd found their midday snack. Very few cars went by. This time of year there was

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little reason to travel the pass, aside from communities like Santa Ynez and Solvang, this area was pretty much recreational. I didn't have time to drive through to Solvang, the tiny transplanted Danish town complete with windmills, cobblestone streets and gingerbread houses. I wondered if I could ever talk Alex into visiting? Probably not. Alex didn't strike me as the touristy type who bought silly souvenirs and ate candy floss and roasted peanuts from a street vendor.

I raised my eyes and looked north, toward the higher peaks. I'd never make them in a day, but I had time to go a bit further.

I climbed back in the car and drove another half hour. When I spotted a lookout jutting out over the steep hillside, I pulled off the road. My binoculars revealed a stretch of miles upon miles of raw green forest and white fingers of the odd sycamore and gray cottonwoods. In the other direction snow stained the distant peaks, a reminder that winter was here.

I pulled my cell out and flipped it open. I had a signal. Good to know. I tried to think of someone I could call but no one came to mind. Scanning through my meager phone book, I realized how empty it was. Twenty-two years old and the social life of a slug.

A cloud of dust resolved into a battered Ram pickup truck. It turned onto the dirt track that ran across from the lookout area. I had a brief glimpse of a red shirt before it drove past me, vanishing around a sharp bend into some heavy brush. The dust cloud followed it. Then stopped. Overhead a new vulture, or maybe the same one, cruised by, wings unmoving in the thermals.

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I returned to my car. I was paying so much attention to the first truck that I didn't see the second until it pulled in behind my Honda. A skinny red-headed guy wearing shit kicker boots and a thick flannel shirt climbed out of his brand new Ford F150. A gun rack in the back window was empty but still managed to be menacing. I didn't feel any fear until he strolled over to me with that kind of rolling hipped gait men who are full of themselves employ. Movement out of the corner of my eye told me we had company. The red-shirted guy from the other truck. Were they tag teaming me? I backed toward the open door of my car, my cell phone firmly clenched in my fist.

"Hey, I was just heading home." Somehow I didn't think it would work to say my big bad-ass cop lover would be looking for me. "You guys lost?"

"We're not," the red-head said. He had a hoarse smoker's voice. His fingers were stubby nubs, stained with nicotine and probably gun powder. I swore I could smell the reek of beer even from this distance. "But I think you might be. We been watching you. We don't much like your type up here."

I straightened and stared him in the face. Treat them like wild dogs. Don't show fear. Fear turned guys like this on.

"You followed me?"

"Fucking pansy, driving a fucking pansy car. Why don't you go home where you belong?"

"Sure, anytime. Just on my way..."

"Why? Mommy waiting?"

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These guys were clearly spoiling to fight. "I'm not looking for trouble," I said, still backing away. The car door hit my ass.

"Maybe we are," the guy behind me, a fat blubbery man who probably outweighed me two to one said. He was a smoker, too. And he was carrying a tire iron.

In Hollywood movies these days only the bad guys smoked. Cliché come to life. I tried tough. "Give it a rest, guys. We all know you're meaner and tougher than me, so what are you going to prove by beating me up?"

"Makes me feel better. You, Davey?"

"A whole lot better. Kick some faggot ass."

"Assholes." I dove into the car, slamming the door and ramming the key to on. The engine roared in protest but didn't stall like I feared it would. I skidded out onto the main road, barely missing Neanderthal two with the tire iron. He took a swing at me and the window behind me on the passenger's side imploded in a shower of safety glass. Shards slapped the back of my head and something wet trickled down my cheek. My little car fishtailed as I slammed down on the gas pedal. I didn't dare look back and I didn't take my foot off the gas until I almost sideswiped a Volkswagen coming up the hill. When his angry horn forced me to pay attention I made my foot relax and got down to a speed that wasn't going to kill me or anyone else.

Still, it took me what seemed like hours before I pulled into the driveway of Alex's home. I kept looking behind me, expecting to see the monster grill of a big pickup with a rifle rack in my rear view. Talk about a Stephen King moment.

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I slammed and locked the door and went in to the bathroom where I stood over the sink hyperventilating. The vision in the mirror wasn't me. I was pale and glassy-eyed. A trickle of blood dripped down my face below my eye, leaving a bloody track all the way to my collar. I stood there taking deep gulps of air, and shaking.

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## Spider

**I presented the first draft of the proposed federal search warrant to Lieutenant Garcia ten minutes before end of shift. I spent the next twenty minutes telling the bonehead why we needed the search warrant and what we hoped to accomplish with it. Asshole finally pretended he got it and said he'd take it 'under consideration.' Which probably meant he wasn't going to do anything. I'd have to bring Nancy in with me for a second assault tomorrow. She had a way of sweet-talking even the biggest jerks into cooperating and seeing things our way.**

Without that warrant we were dead in the water. No way anyone was going to tell us anything about two dead Korean vets, even with their dishonorable discharges.

Plus, I needed to arrange to bring the raven to Geoffrey Lowe's shop to have a look-see at the bird. If he could point us toward someone who might have done the work it would give us a real person to talk to. Something this case had a shortage of. Or maybe I could shake his story that he'd never mounted a raven for anyone.

Everybody lies. Fact of police life.

Nancy was already gone by the time I got back to my desk and pulled my jacket on. It was full dark with a waxing gibbous moon. It would be full all too soon, then the real crazies would come out. I stopped at the Mediterra and picked up some salmon steaks and asparagus for dinner. I



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threw in a six-pack of beer. Jason would be drinking with me tonight. We'd be doing a lot more, but that was later. I let the anticipation work through me, leaving me with a low level hard-on that rubbed against my wool pants and made the promise of the night to come exquisite torture.

The sight of Jason's Honda in the drive brought a brightness to me. I tried to shove the feeling back down inside, but it persisted. The damn kid was getting to me.

But for once I wasn't interested in nipping it in the bud. I wanted to play it through and see where it went. Meanwhile I had every intention of making this night play out for me.

I pulled the groceries off the seat beside me and trotted up to the front door. It was locked. Pleased, I slid my key in and popped the door open. Immediately the smell of pine cleaner and laundry soap wafted over me. The kid had been busy.

I didn't hear the TV so I figured he was in the backyard again, though it was full dark and there couldn't be much to see. I was right. The backyard was dark and empty. Had he laid down for a rest? I don't imagine he got much sleep last night. I should feel bad for that, but he had brought it on himself, openly challenging me like he had. He was part of the game now, and knew the rules. Tonight would more than make up for that.

The bedroom was empty, too. Feeling the first twinge of alarm I hit the kitchen then threw open the bathroom door. I sighed with relief when I saw him standing in front of the mirror, no doubt getting spruced up for my return.

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Then I saw his face. He seemed barely aware of me as he stared blankly into the mirror. His skin was no longer golden but pale and tight. His eyes ... Was that blood?

I spun him around. "What the hell happened?"

For one brief second I saw terror in his eyes. He gave a startled squawk and tried to jerk away from me. Then sanity returned and he moved into my arms, clinging, unnerving me even more. "What the ... what is it, Jason?"

He shook his head. "N-nothing. It was nothing. I'm sure they didn't mean anything ... I just freaked out is all. Stupid."

"What's stupid? What happened?" I wanted to shake him, snap him out of it, but he seemed so fragile. Instead I folded him in my arms and soothed him. Eventually he relaxed and I was able to put him away from me. "You're going to tell me what happened."

I led him into the living room, which showed signs of recent cleaning. Every surface gleamed and the rich smell of furniture polish filled the room. He had been busy. Which sure as hell didn't explain what had turned him into this.

I went back to the kitchen and pulled two beers out of the fridge. Without a word I handed one to him and took a slug of mine. I urged him to drink and he obeyed. After almost emptying the bottle he met my gaze and tried a smile on for size. It looked ghastly.

"Ready to talk?" I asked.

"They must have followed me," he said so softly at first I had to lean in to hear him. "I don't know why, but they must have."

"Who followed you?" I asked. "And where did they follow you to?"

"I took a drive. It was such a nice day." He twisted the beer bottle in his hand and stared down at it. "After I finished up in here I needed to get out. You can understand that, can't you?" He beseeched me. "It's hard, being cooped up in here all day, alone."

I could understand it. But he also had to understand that his life was changed now. I was going to take care of him. He couldn't do it on his own. "I know, Jason. But there are rules—"

"You were right." Jason hiccuped from the beer. He fumbled to finish the bottle, spilling golden liquid out of his mouth.

"What was I right about?" Under normal circumstances I would have told him of course I was, but this wasn't the time or the place for Dom games. I stroked Jason's rigid back. "Tell me."

"I shouldn't have gone out on my own. You warned me, but I didn't listen."

I thought about the warning I had given him. About gay-bashers. Was that what this was about? I lifted his face to mine, soothing the hard lines of his mouth. "What happened, Jason? Talk to me."

"Can I have another beer?"

I took the bottle from him and stood up. "Sure. Are you hungry? Do you want to eat anything?"

"No." He shook his head. "Just the beer, please."

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I came back with another two beers. Whatever he was going to say made me want another one too. I sat down, pressing my thigh against his. He seemed cold and withdrawn. "Start with who followed you?"

"Two guys in pickup trucks. I stopped at that lookout, way up the Pass there? I just wanted to look..."

I stared at his face. Looking for signs of what? That he'd been beaten? Or worse? But the trauma didn't seem that deep.

"They followed you and when you stopped they confronted you?" When he nodded I plowed ahead, all too aware I was starting to sound like an interrogator going after a suspect. "How many of them were there? Were they armed? Did you get a good look at their faces?"

"There were two of them. At first I thought it was just the one guy, but then the other one was there. He had a tire iron. There were rifle rack on the 150. But I couldn't see any rifles..."

"Did they threaten you?" I touched the blood on his face. "Did they attack you? What did he hit you with? Are you injured—"

"No, nothing like that. I think maybe he would have. They wanted to, I don't know, teach me some kind of lesson. I don't know what they were about." He set his beer down and rubbed his shoulders. I covered his hands with mine. "I got into the car and took off, but one of them hit the car, broke out the back window. You didn't see it? That's when I got this." His hand went over top of mine. His fingers were trembling.

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His voice rose, and then as though he thought I didn't believe him, he grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet, dragging me toward the front door.

"Come and see it for yourself."

I stood beside the little Honda and stared down at the shattered glass. Thoughts poured through me, a dull fury that escalated into full-blown rage. If they had done that to the front window while Jason was driving he might have spun out and gone over those cliffs. I knew the spot he had stopped in. In the summer it was a favored make out place for drunk and horny teenagers. Every so often one of them drove up there drunk and ended up over the side.

The rage burned bright and hot in me. I was vibrating with it. I wanted to kick ass, and if I couldn't kick the right ass I'd settle for any hillbilly stupid redneck who crossed my path. I almost forgot Jason in my wrath, until his warm hand crept into mine.

"What were they driving? Did you get plate numbers?"

"Two trucks. Ah, one was red I think. The other might have been black. It all happened so fast." His eyes were still glassy. He met mine. "Are you mad?"

"No, not at you." My cop mind was still in high gear. To give myself time to damp down my fury I led him back into the house, carefully shutting and locking the door behind us. Once I had parked him back on the couch and sat beside him, our thighs touching, I asked, "Did you recognize either of them? Ever see them down in the clubs? On the stroll?"

He looked indignant. "I told you I don't do that."

"But you know the kids who do, right?"

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He wasn't willing to concede anything. "They weren't part of any scene I've been around. And if you saw these guys you'd know they'd be easy to remember."

"So you didn't know them? Did they seem to know you? Did they talk to you?"

"Not very much." He squeezed his hands into his shoulders and leaned into my touch. He brightened. "One of them called the other one Davey. He was the one in the red shirt."

"The other one have a name?"

"Not that I heard. They seemed more intent on beating the crap out of me than carrying on a conversation."

"Either one of them call you names?" Our conversation had accomplished one thing. Jason was no longer shaking like an aspen leaf. On the other hand I was still thrumming with unspent anger. He looked up at me sheepishly.

"I really did screw up this time, didn't I?"

"Not completely," I said with a grin. I pulled him closer to me, until he was almost sitting in my lap. "You weren't in the wrong. All you wanted to do was go for a fucking drive. Who were those asswipes to go after you like that?"

He was pleased with my vehemence. With a secretive smile he lay his head on my chest. His fingers played with the buttons of my shirt. "So if you're not mad at me, do I have to sleep on the couch again?"

I ran my fingers through his thick hair. The clean scent of my shampoo wafted off his head. He had taken a shower sometime today. He smelled clean. And I knew he was as hard as I was under those tight jeans.

"Not unless you want to," I answered him. "Do you want to?"

"No."

I tilted his face up. His cheeks felt smooth under my fingertips. I brushed my index finger over his lips. "Hear this again, Jason. I am not going to let anyone hurt you. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, Sir."

"No." I shook my head without breaking away from his eyes. "No Sir tonight. No orders. Just you and me. You ready for that?"

I leaned down and touched his lips with mine. I waited to see if he was ready to respond. I didn't have long to wait. He surged off my lap, twisting around and grabbing my shirt in both hands. He whimpered and rammed his open mouth over mine.

That was all the answer I needed.

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## Jason

**It was like a switch was turned on. One minute I was scared, remembering how close I had come to being beaten up or even killed. What gay man doesn't remember Matthew Shepherd at a time like that? The next I was infused with a need so powerful I almost climbed out of my skin. My only fear at that point was that Alex was going to punish me for what had happened. If he made me sleep on the couch again I would scream.**

When he said the games were off for the night I was confused. Didn't he get that I needed the games? I needed him to control me. I knew I was safe then and I wasn't feeling all that safe right now. But when his mouth touched mine, I swear a dam broke.

I lunged at him and we fell over on the sofa. His knee rode up between my legs and I rocked on it, pressing my swelling cock against him. I wanted him inside me, his cock rammed up my ass, riding us both into oblivion. I fumbled with his zipper but before I could pull him out he rolled me off him and stood up.

"Oh God, don't stop—"

He hauled me up after him. "Not stopping. Come on. In here."

He led me into the bedroom and pushed me up against the bed while he searched through his bedside table in the dark. He ripped the condom packet open. I reached for his



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waistband again, wanting to expose him to my hungry touch, but again he sidestepped me.

"No, like this," he said and sinking to his knees in front of me, yanked my jeans down and slid the condom over my pulsing cock. I cried out when he wrapped his mouth around me. I steadied myself on his shoulders, bunching his shirt up as I clung to him while thrusting myself down his throat. His fingers slipped between my legs, teasing my hole, tugging at my balls. I ground against him, my breath coming in sharp gasps as my orgasm slammed through me.

He disposed of the condom and shoved me down on the bed, rolling on top of me. He rose above me, arms planted on either side of my head. He rocked his wool-clad hips against my pelvis. "Do you trust me? Do you feel safe now?"

I looped my arms around his shoulders and pulled him down. "Yes. Always." I nuzzled his throat, his five o'clock shadow rasped under my lips. "Do you want to fuck me?"

"Later." He moved over so we lay side by side, no space between us. "I bought salmon steaks. You up for cooking supper?"

I'd walk on hot coals if that's what he wanted from me. "It means getting up."

"Bed's not going anywhere. Neither am I."

He got up first and tossed me my jeans and jock from the floor. I reluctantly followed. Dinner was followed by a movie, another one of Alex's ancient films. Something that had an old-fashioned bi-plane dive-bombing a couple in a cornfield. Don't ask me the plot. All I wanted from the evening was to curl up on the sofa beside him sipping the two beers he gave

me, forgetting the day that had passed. I was absorbed watching his face in the silver glow from the TV screen. The room was dim. It was as though all color had been leeches from the world. But I had never felt more alive.

Every so often he would turn that serious gaze on me and I would melt. The movie ended and I was afraid he was going to put in another one. Instead he collected the empties and carried them into the kitchen. He moved through the house, checking windows and doors, making me feel safer by the minute. When he came for me I followed him eagerly.

In the bedroom he became all business. He led me over to his bondage wall and told me to strip. When I was naked he slid a pair of soft leather cuffs around my wrists and pinned them over my head to the wall behind me, forcing me to stand on my toes. I stood facing him, my cock already stiffening again. He was still fully clothed. The last thing I saw before he slipped the black leather hood over my head was his hand going to the thickening bulge between his legs.

"Who's being a good boy," he whispered as he slid his hand down the skin of my chest, pinching and pulling my nipples and sending shards of pain straight to my groin. He replaced his fingers with the metal clamps, the pain became wave after wave of pleasure pulsing toward a release he was a long time giving me.

My Alex was back.

The next morning I mumbled into wakefulness, slowly growing aware of a pressure on my legs and the dull ache in my ass and wrists. I blinked the remnants of sleep out of my eyes and stared up into Alex's amused gray eyes.

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"For someone who was so sound asleep you thrash around like a piked fish."

"I suppose you'll be saying I snore next."

"Wasn't going to mention it—"

I went to take a swing at him and stopped at the look in his eyes. Some lines couldn't be crossed. Instead of belting him I slid my hand over his chest.

"Come on." Alex threw aside the sheets that were tangled around our legs and rolled out of bed. Once the pressure was off my legs I flexed them to get the feeling back. Regretted the action when my feet started tingling. It was another minute before I followed him. By then he was in the bathroom with the shower running.

I went into the kitchen and started a pot of coffee, knowing he'd want a cup when he got out. Not sure what he'd want for breakfast I got some cereal down and bread for the toaster. A glance at the wall clock said it was probably too late for a cooked breakfast. Apparently we had both slept in. That gave me a warm feeling. I must have done something right if he had overslept.

He looked crisp and handsome and so very butch when he entered the kitchen, doing up the buttons on his shirt, tucking it in to his navy wool pants. I pushed his hands away and finished the job for him. He smelled amazing and his gray eyes behind his glasses were bright. He kissed me on the forehead and poured himself a mug of coffee.

"Can I make you some breakfast?"

"I'll grab something on the way. You work today, don't you?"

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"Yeah, Phil has a charter going out tomorrow and he needs the boat made ready. He may want me to go out with him. He hasn't decided yet."

"He likes to leave it to the last minute."

I shrugged. Phil was ... Phil. "There are a couple of other guys he could get."

"So he what? Keeps you in line by having you vie against each other, playing favored son? You need to get a better job."

"Right, with my job skills I can walk into corporate America and start pulling down those million dollar bonuses."

When his eyes narrowed I thought I'd gone too far. I straightened and raised my chin. Let him think I was being defiant.

"Did last night mean nothing to you? Do you like being punished?"

It was totally insane and I probably needed my head examined, but I did need his punishment. I don't think I would have taken it from any other man, but even thinking about it now, in his tidy kitchen, I got hard. He saw my reaction and cocked his head to the side.

"What time will you be home tonight?" he asked.

Home. I liked the sound of that. My whole body was tight with need. I wanted him to drag me back into the bedroom right now. "I won't be late."

"See that you're not," were his parting words.

I waited until he pulled out of the driveway and set about cleaning up the kitchen. Then I called my insurance company and arranged for someone to come out and look at the car.

I'd have to drive it until I could square that away and get the thing fixed. Meanwhile I prayed it wouldn't rain.

I was in the marina just before noon. Phil gave me a laconic nod and told me to look at the instrument panel on *Weeping Lady*, the charter he planned to take out tomorrow for some Audubon society types. There was a good chance I'd get the gig, since Phil knew I could talk to the animal crowd on their own level and they always appreciated that. He kept me busy on one thing or another until six when he called it a day.

"The charter leaves at eight tomorrow. Be here at seven-thirty to help me load up the supplies. We'll be out till around four, weather permitting."

I flipped a hand at him and hurried to my car. Traffic on the 101 was a nightmare with a big rig in the ditch and Caltrans doing their best to break records for incompetence. It took me nearly an hour to get to Goleta. I rushed for nothing. Alex wasn't even home yet.

I let myself into the house, bringing the day's mail with me and dumping it on the kitchen counter. I browsed the fridge and freezer and came up with a package of pork chops. I prepped potatoes and cut up some cauliflower. If I could have gone online I would have found a recipe for cheese sauce, but Alex had never given me permission to use his computer so I settled for a jar of processed cheese that I would microwave.

Everything ready, I retreated to the living room and channel surfed until the front door opened and Alex's boots clumped on the tiled floor. I'd have cracked up if he had

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called, "Honey, I'm home," like some 50s sitcom. Somehow I don't think Father Knows Best ever envisioned this scenario.

His boots thumped when he pulled them off. He padded into the living room in bare feet, leaned down and kissed me. His hand lingered on my shoulder.

I captured his hand and held it there. "Have a good day?"

"No," he said, dropping into the seat beside me.

I was going to say something stupid like, "Poor baby," but decided that wasn't too smart. Instead I jumped to my feet.

"Get you a beer?"

He rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. "Sure. Get yourself one, too."

I got two, handed him one and set mine on the glass coffee table in front of the sofa. When I went around behind him he looked over his shoulder, a question on his lean face. His glasses caught the glint of light off the TV that was playing in the background.

"What are you doing?"

"Giving you a back rub. You look tense."

"You're a masseuse, too?"

"Strictly amateur. But I've been told I'm pretty good."

His voice grew cool. "Told by who?"

"Nobody. All before your time."

"Good," he said and leaned forward.

"It would be better if you took your shirt off. Where's that oil you used the other night?"

"Bedroom. Second drawer."

When I came back with the oil he had stripped off his shirt and was flexing muscles and wincing.

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The oil evoked memories of the other night. I closed my eyes and stroked his bare back, gently at first then digging into muscles riddled with tension. The oil slicked over warm flesh; the scent of sandalwood overwhelmed my senses. My cock pressed against my jock, straining to get out. I shifted to ease the pressure, wishing I could wrap my oil-covered hand around myself. Wishing I could wrap it around him.

He made a soft sound in his throat and every muscle went slack. I leaned over.

"Lie down."

Without any questions he did as I ordered after removing his glasses and putting them on the coffee table. I moved around to the other side and straddled his butt, smoothing my open palms down his spine ending at his kidneys and worked my way back up. He had a small scar above his left hip. I rubbed it and kneaded it then moved up. By the time I reached his collarbones he was totally limp, his breathing shallow and slow. Was he asleep? I kept up the massage, kneading his arms and the side of his neck, prodding and digging at the tension there. He must have had a terrible headache with that much tightness in his head. The soft moan that came out of him told me it was working. The pain was leaching away.

I straightened up, my own back beginning to ache. I flexed my fingers that were cramping up. He rolled his shoulders and turned his head to the side.

"Are you done?"

"Only if you want me to be."

"I'm going to turn over. Don't stop."

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He maneuvered himself over, holding my hips in both hands. He closed his eyes when I used the oil already on my hands to slick down his chest, paying special attention to his nipples. They swelled into hard nubs that scraped the palms of my hands. I traced a path across his abs, along his rib cage, following the line of fine hair that snaked down under the waistband of his pants. Already the bulge between his legs had thickened, pressing against my ass as I rode him. I swept back up to his shoulders, massaging the knots there, stroking his throat where a strong pulse beat, then returned to his nipples. More sighs and guttural moans from him. Back down to his washboard stomach. When I slipped the top button of his pants off and slid the zipper down he made no protest. I rose up on my knees long enough to shove his pants open and down to his hips, freeing his cock which bounced off his stomach and left a smear of juice. I poured a tiny amount of oil on my hands and wrapped my fist around him, using my thumb and forefinger to circle the fat head already slick with precum.

He was so hot and hard he felt like tempered steel just out of the smelter. I traced the outline of veins circling his erection then rolled his balls around in my fingers finally sliding a stiff finger behind his balls. I alternated between watching his cock and the play of emotions across his flushed face. He rocked into my hand and tremors passed from between my legs as he tried to thrust up. His engorged cock throbbed in my hand and he spilled his seed all over his stomach and chest.



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I only released him when he grew soft and pulled away from me. He blinked his eyes open. He was still struggling to get his breath back when I bounced off him and went into the bathroom where I dampened a towel and brought it back to wipe him clean.

He grabbed my wrist as I wiped his belly.

"I want you to swear to me you will never do that for anyone else."

I allowed myself a small, smug smile then nodded solemnly. "I swear."

He raised his hips up and pulled his underwear and pants back up, standing to zip them up. He looped his arm around me and drew me in for a lingering kiss. "You are definitely a keeper," he said so softly I doubted my ears. Arm still around my shoulder he led me into the bedroom. "Get spruced up. We're going out for supper."

It turned out Goleta actually had some decent restaurants. Who knew, right? He took me to the Ming Dynasty where he patiently taught me the difference between Hunan and Szechuan and the regions they came from. We ordered—well, he ordered and I ate—tea-smoked duck, delicious soup with minced beef and cilantro, ta-chin chicken, sichuan hotpot and too many others to remember. None of which I'd ever heard of. My exposure to Chinese food was egg rolls and chicken balls. Even with his tutelage I still couldn't resist the lure of a dozen deep-fried wontons dipped in sticky red sauce.

Over our fortune cookies and green tea he asked what was going on tomorrow.

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"Going out with Phil. He said we should be back around four."

"Good." He shifted in his seat. "If he wants to talk about the murder, let him. Don't tell him about us, though."

"Sounds very James Bond-ish."

He shrugged easily. "People will tell civilians a lot more than they'll tell the cop. They tend to clam up when we're around."

"Well you are pretty intimidating," I said, touching his foot with mine under the table.

"I can demonstrate it again when we get home."

"I'll hold you to that."

"Yes, you will."

He didn't take us straight home. When we pulled into the parking lot of the Vault I sat up in the passenger's seat. I hadn't been back here since the last time we had come together. A lot of water under that bridge. I glanced over at him and found him staring at me with an unreadable expression on his face.

"What?"

"We're going in there. You got a problem with that?"

Since I doubted it would matter to him if I did I shook my head. He climbed out, clunking the door behind him. I followed, trailing him into the dark bar. Business was brisk tonight. Almost every inch of floor space was occupied by men. There must be some kind of contest on, nearly everyone was giggered out in leather or vinyl and there were enough dog collars to dress the Westminster Dog Show. The air reeked of testosterone and the unmistakable smell of poppers. I'd never

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seen so many acres of male bodies encased in black leather, vinyl and latex. I could see why Alex liked his forays into Santa Barbara's underworld of leather and bondage. Here he was just one of the guys. And not even one of the really weird ones.

He led me through the crowd to stand by the bar. The bartender, a young Hispanic, gave Alex a burst of delighted smile and barely glanced at me. Alex ordered two beers and leaned over the bar to say something to the bartender. I couldn't hear what he said and trust me, I tried.

A massive, tattooed bear shoved past me to get to the bar. He pushed me into Alex who steadied me. Their eyes met over my head and the tension ratcheted up.

The bear huffed like his namesake and cleared the space around me. The Hispanic bartender hovered around us and I caught him eyeing Alex. My hackles went up. We were quite a pair, both getting bent out of shape when another man looked at our man. I burst out laughing, earning a quizzical look from Alex.

He straightened and nudged my elbow. I followed his gaze and saw a large, rouged drag queen in a knee-length slinky red dress and a feather boa around her neck entering the bar. The low cut gown showed a vast acreage of hair that matched what was on her bare legs below the hem of her dress. Alex leaned down to shout in my ear. "Think she's out of place?"

She steered her broad bulk through the dancers who parted like water before the bow of a ship. When she docked at the bar the bartender automatically brought her a ruby

cosmo. So she was a regular. She looked around and saw us. Or rather she saw Alex.

She teetered over on her six-inch heels and thrust her phony tits in his face. "Dance, mister?"

He shook his head. "Sorry." He pointed down. "Broken leg."

She snapped around and headed to the other end of the bar. I saw Alex breathe a sigh of relief. A few minutes later he touched my arm.

"I see some friends. I have to go say hello. I'll be right back."

I was watching him when two guys I recognized from other places came to stand on either side of me. I nodded a greeting but didn't speak.

The tallest of the two, a slender black man leaned over me and shouted to the other guy, an equally skinny Anglo. "Is he hot or is he hot?"

Both of them were staring hungrily at Alex. The black guy turned to me. "You two together? Is he hot? He looks like a powerhouse." He reached over and snagged the beer the bartender handed over. The Anglo also got a beer. He and the bartender traded words.

The two conferred again. Then the black guy leaned over and spoke in my ear. "Rafe told me they spent the night at his place and the guy was a fucking machine." He threw a slug of beer down his throat. I wanted to believe he was talking about someone else, but I knew it was Alex they meant. So the bartender was one of his fucks. No biggie. I knew he wasn't a one-man kind of guy. But the informative

asshole wouldn't give up. "Rafe bragged to everyone here that he walked like he was fucked by a bull for a week. Lucky guy. God, I'd love a piece of that."

I wanted to cool him off with a drink over his head, but could just imagine how that would go over. Instead I leaned over the bar and fumed.

Alex came back and got another beer. He didn't get me one. I said screw that and ordered my own. He raised one eyebrow but didn't say anything. More friends must have shown up because the next instance he was gone again. I nodded in time to the music, wanting to dance more than anything. The beat hammered through me; my body vibrated to it.

The skinny black guy touched my arm and held out a vial. Poppers. I started to shake my head then saw Alex on the other side of the room with an elfin blond draped all over him. I grabbed the popper and inhaled, my lungs expanding as the vaporous drug was sucked into them. I was instantly buzzed; my heart raced.

Alex was coming back. Before he could reach my side I pushed through the field of writhing bodies and grabbed his arm.

"Come on, dance."

Alex might be a great cop, I know he's an incredible lover, but he sucks big as a dancer.

But he was game, I'll give him that. He didn't exactly lumber, though he did step on my feet several times. It was nice to see there was something he didn't excel at. I on the

other hand, knew I had a hot set of feet—when they weren't being pinned to the tile floor by Alex's chunky boots.

When I winced for the fourth time he took my arm and pulled me off the dance floor back to the bar. Over the pounding techno-music he shouted, "I don't dance."

"I can tell," I shouted back.

This time I left to go to the bathroom. The black guy followed and I took a couple more popper hits before going back. I guess it was so crazy and electric that Alex didn't notice my buzzed state—or he attributed it to being out with him. Alex had no shortage of ego.

The buzz faded and I started getting a headache. I headed back to the bathroom where a new crowd had gathered. The energy level was high. Someone I didn't see groped my crotch. I twisted away from him. Someone else put their arm around my shoulder and before I could shake him off he showed me a small plastic package full of white powder.

"Want to share some blow?"

I should have run. I shouldn't have let him guide me over to the counter where he laid out a line. My headache still throbbed in the back of my skull. Maybe a small hit would clear that problem up. I leaned down and snorted. Instant bliss. I grinned and turned to thank my benefactor only to find him gone. Too bad. I wouldn't have minded a second taste.

Eventually I wandered back out to the bar area, to find Alex in deep conversation with a chain-festooned leather daddy. He didn't look around when I reached him, but he did

slide his arm around my waist and draw me tightly against him.

The evening wound down and I was wilting. Alex finally noticed and indicated we were leaving. He got no argument from me. We hit the cool air outside and my buzz returned with a rush of oxygen.

He steadied me when I swayed. "Think you had a bit too much there, boy. Come on, let's get you home."

I think I dozed in the truck only waking up enough for him to guide me into the house where he coaxed me into getting undressed. I was exhausted but amorous as hell. I kept grabbing his crotch and mumbling that I wanted him to fuck me. Gently he put me down on the bed and held me firmly when I would have stood up again.

"Wait," he said sternly.

Out of habit I obeyed. After several minutes—or hours, I had no time sense—he slid in beside me. I immediately draped myself over him dry humping his hip.

"Want to fuck?"

"Not tonight, hon," he said. "Go to sleep."

Again I obeyed, sinking down into the welcome embrace. My last conscious thought was, he called me hon. Oh shit.

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## Spider

**I got off the phone with a woman who wanted to file a missing person's report on her daughter, who had not been seen since Friday. I had tried telling her that this was homicide and she needed to direct her questions to missing persons. Then on the off chance that we might be dealing with a potential AMBER Alert I asked her how old her missing daughter was.**

"She's thirty-three. This is the third time this year she's done this. Really, I wish you'd find her and make her stay."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry you're having problems with your daughter. If you wish to file a missing persons you have to call this number." I rattled off the front desk number wishing I could tell her that thirty-three year olds were supposed to leave home. It was called growing up.

I groaned when Nancy dropped a mass of folders on my desk, nearly knocking off my vente coffee, the second of the day. Not that they were helping.

"Tox screens on both vics," Nancy only used that slang term when she had no respect for the dead. "The other one is for your boyfriend. Don made a big point out of making sure you saw that one. Is everyone in on your extracurricular activities?"

I grabbed the tox screen and scanned it rapidly. Massive quantities of Dichlorophenyl-Dimethylaminocyclohexan, then looked for the translation Don kindly provided. Ketamine.

"I don't think my mother knows. Should I call her?"



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"I'm sure all she's going to have to do soon is pick up a newspaper, or did you miss that too?"

She dug through the files of papers and photographs and pulled out a copy of the *Independent* conveniently open to the local section.

Nothing subtle about the headline:

Local police losing focus on double homicides, by Martin E. Boulton.

What do ravens and bloody trophies and horrific murders done in the name of vigilante justice have in common? A Poe novel? An episode of CSI Miami? No, this is the ever competent Santa Barbara Police bumbling their way through a case that has them baffled. They released their prime suspect last week and he was last seen in the company of the off duty homicide detective who originally laid the charges against him. Forget Poe, this is more like the Keystone Kops in all their glory. No new suspects have been put forward, meanwhile the city quakes in fear..."

I raised eyes to look over at Nancy. "Are you quaking? You don't look like you're quaking."

She patted her side where I could see the butt of her Beretta. "I've got a gun. No mother fucker is going to mess with me."

"Oh good, can you protect me, too?"

"How so?"

I lifted the paper off my desk and flung it at her. "Go and shoot that reporter for me."

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"Wish I could partner. Really wish I could. One less rat-fuck in the world. It would indeed be a better and happier place."

"Should I ask the Lieutenant if he's quaking?"

"If I were you, I'd stay as far away from him as you can."

"Better advice has never been spoken. We're in luck. Our favorite taxidermist has agreed to take time out of his busy schedule to look at our bird. Want to ride with me?"

"Someone has to keep you safe from reporters lying in wait."

I signed the raven out of evidence then Nancy and I drove over to Geoffrey Lowe's shop. It was the same dark interior full of mounted heads and all those beady eyes I now knew were glass. While I had waited to set up this appointment I had done some research. As we waited for Lowe to finish up a phone call I moved around studying the heads that festooned the walls. I stopped in front of the boar again. I wanted to reach up and touch the thing's snout, to see if it was as coarse as it looked. But I didn't think that would go over well with Lowe. Nancy came up behind me and I could feel her displeasure.

"Did you know they don't use anything but the antlers, and sometimes the hide, to make these things?" I said. "It's all forms and airbrush, clay and wax. Sometimes even the hair is faked. It's more art than animal."

"It's gross is what it is," she said. "Surrounded by dead animals, knowing they got shot by some whacked out red neck with a shotgun and a case of beer in his belly, who goes

home and brags about how many spikes the deer they butchered has on its head."

"Hmmm," I kept my voice non-committal. I wasn't about to argue with her. She had a point in a way. I also saw the hunter's side of it. It had to take a certain amount of skill to get close enough to one of these things and get a good shot out. I could believe that boar at least could do some serious damage on you if you missed your shot. But she didn't want to hear any of that.

Lowe hung up and came around the counter to greet us. He held out his hand and we shook. Then I brought out the evidence box and set it on the counter.

"There someplace we can do this? I don't want anyone coming in and seeing what we have."

"Got a studio in back. Bring it along."

We followed him through a door, then a black curtain to a cramped space about the size of a two-car garage. Several tables were scattered through the room. In one corner there were at least a dozen tan hard to recognize forms, deer skulls and antlers. There were lights everywhere. Spots, banks of incandescent and fluorescent illuminated every nook and cranny. A direct contrast to the show room outside. The air had a chemical smell. Nothing like the other house of the dead I was more familiar with. But then if my research was right, very few of what looked like animal corpses were real. All clever fakes.

Lowe cleared a table for us and swung a brilliant white light over the box. I gingerly pried the lid off, lifting the large black bird out and setting it down on the table top.

He pulled down a large magnifying glass and bent over to study the thing. With a pair of tweezers he lifted the wing up and separated some of the tail feathers.

"What are you looking for?" I asked. I could just imagine some sleazy defense attorney asking me how the information I was presenting to the court had been found. I had to be able to assure the jury and the judge that care had been taken to ensure the integrity of the search and there had been no haste in what we did.

When I saw him examining the eyes, I spoke, "What do you expect to find there. Those are glass, aren't they?"

"They're gonna be the best way to find out who did this bird."

"I don't follow."

"Lot of glass eye manufacturers around. Each one different. We don't all use the same type. I use Van Dykes. These..." He peered through the magnifying glass. "Look like Tohickon's."

I shook my head. Who would have thought there'd be that much demand for glass eyes?

He looked up from his magnifying glass. "Is this the way the cast came to you?"

"Cast?"

"The bird. Did it come like this?"

"Yes, in a shoe box. Why?"

"No effort was made to put the animal on any kind of display. That's the whole point of doing this."

"I don't think they meant for this particular bird to be put up in public."

"That makes no sense."

"Tell me about it."

"So if this is a Tohickon's eye, what does that tell you?"

Nancy asked.

"Only one guy in this area uses those. Randall's *The Art of the Game* in Oxnard."

Lowe couldn't tell us much more about Randall. Randall Craig. He'd been in the business longer than Lowe. "A hack," Lowe said.

"That right." My eyes met Nancy's. "Road trip I guess."

I collected the bird, thanked Lowe for his help, telling him if we needed anything else I'd be sure to come and talk to him again. And if he thought of anything, he shouldn't hesitate to call me. I handed him one of my business cards and he took it gingerly as though he thought it might explode. He nodded gravely. I knew the card would be filed in the circular filing cabinet the minute we were out the door. Oh well, I knew where to find him if I needed him.

Back outside we stood over the unmarked car I had signed out, basking in the brightness of the sun. It was warmer today. I lifted my face to the sun, eyes shut. The car door thunked shut. I joined her, fired the engine up. "Want to take this bad boy to Oxnard for a visit?"

"Sure. Breakfast first?"

Oxnard was a small agricultural oases of flat land nestled between Bone Mountain, South Mountain and Red Mountain. It was the strawberry capital of California. The *Art of the Game* was situated in a strip mall in the shadow of the 101. Climbing out of our car the hiss of the nearby freeway was a

low-level white noise, punctuated occasionally by a blast of truck horn or the rumble of a heavy big rig gearing up.

The inside of the shop was so eerily reminiscent of Lowe's place that I wondered if claustrophobic and Gothic were a franchise. The man who came out of the back room wasn't anything like his Santa Barbara counterpart. I remembered Lowe's parting words. Hack. What made a taxidermist a hack?

Pondering those words I cruised the showroom. No boar's head here. Plenty of deer and a buffalo head that looked a little moth-eaten to my unknowing eyes. Did moths actually eat dead animal heads? Still, the black head, which was about the size of a small pickup, was impressive.

"Can I help you folks?"

I showed him my badge. Nancy did the same. Having done the equivalent of SBPD's finest's ritual greeting we got down to business. "We're down to see you because of some work you may have performed recently. You got a few minutes?"

"S-sure. What's this about?"

I hefted the box containing the bird. "Like to show you something."

He led us over to his cash register, set atop a glass topped case that displayed tools of the trade. Who knew there were so many things you might need to stuff a dead animal. I slipped on a pair of gloves, popped the lid off the box and lifted out the raven.

Randall gave a short 'oh' and stepped back as though he expected the thing to go for his throat.

"You recognize this?"

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Before he could reach for the bird I handed him a pair of nitrile gloves. "To protect the evidence," was all I said.

He nodded as though he understood, pulled the gloves on and picked up the bird. Like Lowe he examined it in great detail and like his counterpart he studied the eyes most of all. After a while he slipped a pair of reading glasses on. Finally he handed the thing back to me. "Those are definitely Tohickon."

"Do you recognize the work? Did someone commission you to do this for him?"

He took his glasses off and tucked them away in his shirt pocket. "It does resemble one I worked on," he said, but cautiously, like he didn't want to commit himself. "What's this about, officer?"

"It's about a homicide," Nancy said. She took the boxed up bird from me and crowded closer to Randall. "Now, do you or don't you recognize the damned bird?"

"Okay, yes I do. What murder? Who was murdered? Here in town? I haven't heard of any murders."

"Santa Barbara. A Clarence Dutton, sixty-one. Was killed in his bed in Rancho Verde, a nursing home. He was savagely beaten."

"Oh my, that's terrible. Who would do such a thing?"

"That's what we want to know. This raven," she held up the box, "was sent to the family just prior to the attack that killed him. We need to know who commissioned you to mount this bird. Do you keep records? If you do, we want to see them."

"I do ... do you need a warrant for them?"

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I rolled my eyes. People watch way too much TV these days. "Are you a doctor?"

"No, of course not."

"Then there is no expectation of privacy on sales records. You have to report them to just about everyone anyway. You can give them to us, too."

"Well, I don't know."

"I will get a warrant if you want. And when I get it I will bring a whole team of cops down here with me to tear this place apart. Is that what you want?"

I hated using half-truths and even lies to convince people to do what they knew was right. But this case was frustrating me and even without the scathing indictment in the *Independent* this morning I wanted this piece of shit caught, good deed or not. Let him convince a jury of his peers that he did the world a favor.

"What's it going to be, Mr. Craig?"

"What time frame are you looking at?"

I pulled out my notebook and flipped back to my interview with Dutton's son. "About four weeks ago. Say six to be on the safe side. Oh hell, you can't have had too many jobs mounting ravens, so give them all to me from the last year."

I was right, there weren't many. There were two. Something shivered up my spine and Nancy and I traded looks. Two? Nancy took the receipts from him.

"Lucy Chavez, De la Guerra Street, Santa Barbara," she read.

"Both of them?"

"Both."



"So there's another bird out there."

"How much you want to guess it's sitting at Blunt's. This will get us a warrant for sure." For reasons known only to himself, the judge I had approached about the warrant to George Blunt's residence had denied it. Now he'd have to sign it. "Where is this?" I waved at the receipts.

"It's near Antioch University." She scribbled a receipt for the two sales slips and we slid them into evidence bags with both our signatures. Randall watched us.

"Do I get those back?"

"When we're done with them. Right now they're the property of the Santa Barbara Police."

We left the stuffy building, a new bounce in our steps. We might be on to something positive for the first time in days. I passed her the box and unlocked the car. Cranked it on we headed back to the Ventura Freeway and home.

"Let's log this back and get that warrant rewritten. I want to go see this Lucy Chavez as soon as we can, find out what her story is. But I want some ammo behind us. Two birds."

"One stone?" Nancy grinned at my sour look. "Call first? In case she's not home."

I smiled my evil little smile. "Nah, let's surprise her."

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## Jason

**I dropped the car off at eight and they assured me it would be done by four. Turned out I was too young for the rental so I was glad the car will be ready when I get back to dry land. I'd hate to have to call Alex for a ride. I'm sure I'd never hear the end of it.**

I found Phil on the dock, loading supplies into the galley. He made a side business of selling pop and junk food to our customers. Plus he usually carried a few picture books featuring shots of where we took them. Memories he called them. A con I called them. Tourists didn't realize they could get the same snacks and books onshore at the nearest shopping center for a lot less. But Phil never missed an opportunity to make a buck.

He was anything but generous when it came to paying me. Like I told Alex, I didn't have a whole lot of choice. In an ideal world I would go back to school and become something, but that wasn't in the cards. I rubbed my nose, which was crusted and raw from last night. That had been a crazy thing to do. What if Alex had caught on to what I was up to? He'd blow a gasket. This time it wouldn't be a night on the sofa, it would be a boot out the door and bye-bye, no more Jason. I couldn't let that happen.

Simple then, right? Don't indulge. How easy was that? Not very. I had felt good last night. On top of my world for a change instead of knee-deep in shit. Alex felt good too, but not like the rush the dope gave me. It was a lot easier to give

control over to the drugs. They didn't make the kind of demands Alex did. They didn't drive me crazy with longing then leave me sleeping alone on the couch. They were there when I wanted them; just like I could leave them anytime I wanted. And I wanted to experience it again.

Decision made I pulled out my cell and called Trip. We arranged to meet on the docks at four-thirty with some blow. I'd have a little taste and go home to Alex. If I wasn't always there at his beck and call maybe he'd appreciate me more.

Mind made up I trotted down the dock toward the *Weeping Lady* and helped Phil carry the last of the supplies onboard. Shortly after that our clients arrived and I had no time to think of anything. He took the wheel and guided us out of the marina.

I kept one eye on the barometer, the other on the approaching Santa Cruz Island, the largest of the Channel Island National park. I half listened to the radio chatter. Phil moved around down below. When we were safely away from any of the currents that could carry us onto the rocks. Overhead a trio of Brown Pelicans dive-bombed a school of fish to the accompaniment of 'ohs' and 'ahs' from the tourists on the forward deck. Soon after Phil clumped into the cockpit and jerked his thumb toward the bow. "She's all yours, boy. Keep the patter going and keep the drinks flowing. Bird watching is thirsty work." He laughed at his own joke. "Keep 'em happy, and—"

"Keep 'em hungry," I finished his usual refrain for him.

He nodded and got on the radio to call our position in to the Coast Guard.

I climbed up on deck and started my spiel. I had an appreciative audience. They proved knowledgeable too, which was a nice change from some of the bimbos Phil attracts. In a calculated move on Phil's part, he hires only young sexy men to work his boats. If they happen to know anything beyond how to strut in a tight pair of jeans then it's a bonus. I was a bonus he used when he got these 'birdy' tours as he called them.

But when I started talking I forgot all about that. I loved telling people about how crucial the preserve was. How it was an important and vital nesting area for seabirds of all kinds. "Like those Brown Pelicans," I said, gesturing leeward to where the three large birds were fighting with a Western gull over a morsel of fish. "They have two nesting sites on the islands, the only nesting population of them along the west coast. The mixture of northern and southern species isn't duplicated anywhere else."

They peppered me with questions.

"Will we be able to land today? The Captain said we might," asked a hatchet-faced woman with a massive bosom almost eclipsed by an equally massive pair of binoculars I recognized as Barska Zooms. I wanted to ask her what gave her the biggest backache, her tits or the Barskas, but that would have blown my tip out of the water.

"I'll ask him," I said, knowing very well Phil wasn't going anywhere near the island in this weather. Already the waves around the fiberglass hull grew more restless. Tremors through the soles of my feet reminded me of what lay all around us—unfathomable water.

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In the distance a low bank of dark clouds massed over the north shore of the island. Overhead a stream of gulls moved inland.

"Blow coming." I pointed at the savvy birds who, unlike most humans, knew enough to get out of harm's way. "If you'll excuse me I should go talk to the Captain." In the cockpit I found Phil sitting in his captain's chair, feet up on the instrument panel, picking his teeth with a toothpick.

"They getting scared of a bit of a wind?"

"Looks like more than a bit." At the same time as those words came out of my mouth, the boat rocked under me and thunder cracked in the distance.

Phil put his feet down and spun the wheel around. "Guess you called that one, boy. Go tell our guests to batten down. They might get more than they bargained for. I'll make real seamen out of all of you yet."

I started for the steps when Phil stopped me. "Paper's true what they say about you seeing that cop who busted you for killing poor old George?"

"Poor old George was a pedophile," I said and Phil raised his eyebrows. "Or didn't you read that part?"

"He tell you that?"

"Who, Alex?"

The eyebrow went higher. "So he is..." He rocked his hand from side to side. "He's a smooth bugger, ain't he? Bet he tells you all kinds of secret things."

"We don't discuss his work. It would be unethical."

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"Can't be too ethical of a man to bop someone he arrested for murder. He came to me you know, practically begged me to give you your job back."

Since I doubt Alex begged for anything in his life I didn't believe him. But I shrugged. "I never should have been charged in the first place. Alex says I was likely drugged too, just like George. I'm lucky to be alive and not..." I swallowed past the memory of Blunt's battered, bloody body. "...Like him."

Phil nodded sagely. He glanced out at the growing mass of clouds on the horizon. "Luck has a lot to do with everything. We better haul ass out of here. Go tell your birdy buddies to buckle up."

The storm rode our stern all the way in, but finally we discharged our grateful passengers, who, now that it was over, chattered like magpies at how exciting it had all been. I laughed with them, and told the bosomy woman with the Barskas to be sure and send me some of her pictures. I promised to post them on the Channel Charter's web site. She seemed thrilled. There's a little bit of Hollywood in all of us. In the end I got a nice fat tip which I stuffed in my back pocket and left the marina whistling as the storm riffled the hair on the back of my neck.

Since I was back early I called Trip up and suggested an earlier meet. Some of Phil's luck rubbed off and he was free. I met him twenty minutes later in the park across from the marina and we exchanged our goods—my money for his coke. I nodded my thanks as I stuffed the packet in my jacket pocket, then—went around to find out if my car was ready. It

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was. The deductible cleaned me out so I was glad I'd got my blow first. The tip didn't hurt, either.

On my way out of town the storm breeched land and a banshee wind howled around me while darkness as dense and as thick as nightfall fell. I swung off the road to the 101 and minutes later pulled into the Vault's lot. There were half a dozen cars there already. With any luck there were more people inside.

I was on a winning streak. At least a dozen men crowded the bar, tossing quips and crudities around the room. The music was less raucous than at night and the Young and the Restless played on one of the TVs. All the others continued playing the hardcore porn they normally carried.

I watched a hairy giant fuck a sweet little golden boy's ass without a whole lot of enthusiasm, feeling mellowed out by the one beer I could afford. Just as well, I didn't want to be picked up for DUI. I did my first hit in the bathroom fifteen minutes into my visit.

On my second trip a whole thirty minutes later I was followed. I came out of the stall to find him leaning up against the urinal, arms folded over a broad chest I couldn't help but admire. His taut pecs and abs swelled against his cotton lumberjack shirt and the bulge between his legs tweaked my interest. He flicked an illegal cigarette into the urinal and straightened.

"Haven't seen you in here much lately," his voice was pure liquid smoke. He had eyes so blue they looked like a tropical beach. He knew me. How the hell had I ever missed him?

"Been busy," I said.

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"I've seen you with your business. It true he's a cop?"

I shrugged, unsure I wanted to talk about Alex to this stranger. "Ask him yourself."

"Oh I will. And maybe I'll ask him what his little cutie was doing flying solo while he was no doubt slaving on the mean streets of Santa Barbara."

Suddenly the guy didn't look so sexy anymore. I stared at him through narrowed eyes. "What do you want?"

He grabbed the bulge between his legs. "Maybe I'd like a taste of badge bunny."

"Badge bunny? What's that? A line you read in Playboy?"

He scowled. "You fuck the man behind the badge. Or in your case you probably get fucked, don't you?" He reached into his jean pocket and pulled out a glassine packet. "Got some righteous blow. You interested?"

Desire tugged at me, but not the kind he was talking about. I'd come in here to finish up my own product, but if I could score some of his, I'd have enough left for one more hit before I went home. Easy enough to tell Alex the storm held me up. Or the car. He didn't need to know the car had been ready early.

Then I thought of Alex. Really thought of him. His rock steady gray eyes behind the deceptive glasses that gave him a Clark Kent nebbish look, the way his mouth quirked when he suppressed a smile, the small gasping sounds he made when he came. Sounds that were all for me.

I could start lying to him, it would be easy enough, but did I want to? For this guy? For any guy?



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The bathroom door banged open and a giggling foursome stormed the small room. They rushed to the urinals and took care of business. One of them caught sight of the stranger who had propositioned me.

"Oh Mary, if you're not taken I want you."

I straightened and bee-lined around the five men. "He's all yours, sugar. Enjoy." I slipped out into the bar and headed for the front door.

The rain was thundering down. I covered my head with my jacket, which didn't help. By the time I got the door to my car open and threw myself inside I was soaked and cold water dripped down my back under my sodden shirt. I threw the car into gear and drove off the lot. I would have loved to have floored it out of there, but that would have been insane given I could barely see through the sheets of water the window wipers couldn't clear fast enough. I prayed the rain would let up before I hit the freeway, but no such luck. The ride back to Goleta was excruciating. I not only had to contend with idiot drivers who didn't slow down, blasting me with their horns, and I'm sure their middle fingers more than once, but the big rigs, too. The massive transport trucks thundered past me, shaking my little Honda so violently we almost swerved onto the shoulder more than once. I was gripping the wheel so hard by the time I pulled off onto San Marcos Pass Road my hands were cramped. The rain finally let up by the time I turned onto Cathedral Oaks Road, allowing me to ease up on my death grip.

There was no Toyota in the driveway. Despite the hour, I was there before Alex.

My high was totally gone, and the usual foggy aftermath enervated me as I unlocked the front door and stepped into the foyer. The house still smelled of my cleaning efforts. There was another smell under it. It only took me a minute to identify it. It was Alex. He permeated his home and left me weak-kneed.

Was I seriously falling in love with this guy? How crazy was that? I couldn't do it. It would be the height of foolishness to think I could love him, and worse, expect him to love me back. That was not in the cards. *Don't kid yourself. He couldn't love you.*

In the bedroom I stripped off my soaking clothes and dumped them in the hamper. I'd take them into the laundry room after my shower. I luxuriated under the hot spray for longer than necessary and wrapped a robe around me when I came out. Instead of getting dressed right away, I wandered into the kitchen to check out what I could make for supper. We seriously needed to go shopping. The cupboard was getting very bare. I started a mental list of what I thought we would need and got the coffee pot set up and ready to go. No sense making it early. If Alex were held up in town he wouldn't want stale coffee when he finally got in.

I threw the laundry on to wash and settled onto the sofa channel surfing.

Waiting for Alex to come home.

God, I had it bad.

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## Spider

**Lucy Chavez was a chunky brown-haired Anglo who must have married into her name. She stared up at me from behind her security chain. Her lips were a slash of red across her pale, freckled face, and if she were five-two I'd eat a three-dollar bill.**

"Police?" she said in a low throaty voice that made me think of gin joints and cool music. Not that I've been to a real one. But in the movies, ah...

"Yes, ma'am," I said and introduced us a second time, full rank and PD.

"Show me some ID."

We both held up our badges. She stared at them for several seconds then said, "Hand it to me."

I complied. She shut the door, though I didn't hear the bolt being thrown. Finally the chain rattled and the door opened again, fully this time.

"You can never be too careful." She let us in, shut and closed the door and reset the chain. Before that ritual I saw her look up and down the threadbare third floor hallway she lived on. Man, this was one seriously paranoid lady.

She made me jumpy. We followed her into a pin-neat apartment with flowered curtains and more doilies everywhere than I've ever seen. I studied both surreptitiously, without making my scrutiny obvious. I'm quite sure she would lose it if she thought I was looking at her. She couldn't have been much older than I was, but she carried

herself like an old woman. She wore old sweats with slippers on her otherwise bare feet. She clutched the throat of her sweatshirt, as though fearful it would pop open and reveal something. Her skin bore the mottled whiteness of someone who rarely went outside, a complexion not at all suited to a sunny coastal community. If she ever went to a beach and exposed more skin, she'd be a lobster in minutes. I suspected she hadn't been on a beach in years. If ever.

Nancy and I sat together on the sofa, our hands folded in our laps, trying to look as non-threatening as possible. Chavez sat perched on the edge of her reclining chair, an afghan that had probably been over her knees until we knocked, lying on the floor beside her, forgotten. She watched us like a mouse might watch a cat who had just entered the room.

And we thought this woman knew something about the cold-blooded murder of two men?

"Mrs. Chavez?" I barely spoke above a whisper. "We'd like to ask you some questions, if we may."

"Of c-course. Have I done something wrong, officers?"

"No, nothing like that. I assure you this is just a routine visit," I lied. But if either Nancy or I took an aggressive stance with this on-edge woman, we'd lose her immediately. We still might. "Are you familiar with *The Art of the Game*? It's a taxidermy shop in Oxnard—"

"I know what it is, officer."

I was surprised and probably showed it. I looked around the apartment again. No mounted animal heads, no animal figurines of any kind. Shelf after shelf of crystal and porcelain

figurines, cute little winged cherubs and angels, women in billowing gowns and ballerinas all on tip-toe filled every inch of a dozen shelves, nooks and crannies. They even covered the coffee table in front of us. I was beginning to feel like hundreds of little glass eyes were watching my every move. I thought of the mounted raven and his glass eyes.

But not one animal figurine, glass or otherwise.

"You've been to the store?"

"Yes," she said with obvious distaste. "My students wanted to go see a place like that and we were down in Oxnard for a day of touring one of the local farms, so I acquiesced."

"Students, ma'am? You teach?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

When she didn't offer more Nancy pressed her, "And what school might that be, ma'am?"

"St. Adolphus School, on Casiano Drive."

A religion based school. It fit. I imagined she would be a good teacher. Probably one of those beloved by her good students and hated by her troublemakers.

"Is your husband at home, ma'am?"

Again the distaste. "I'm not married."

I shot a glance at her left hand and if she'd ever worn a ring there is was long gone. Her flesh was wrinkly and covered with more freckles. Never or not now?

"When you were in *The Art of the Game* did you meet the proprietor? A Mr. Randall Craig?"

"We met. He took us on a tour. The children were impressed and enthusiastic, though I think some of their enthusiasm was of an unsavory sort."

"What do you mean, ma'am?"

"All those dead things. It's unnatural."

"It is creepy," Nancy said, and this time I suspected her sympathy was real.

"Not creepy. Disgusting. Trying to pretend death hadn't happened. Trying to defy the Lord's will that way."

"People who defy the Lord are evil aren't they, Miss Chavez?"

"They're certainly sinners."

And what greater sin was there than the abuse of an innocent child? She was a teacher, I'm sure the whole notion of George Blunt or Clarence Dutton would be an abomination to her. But could I really envision this frail looking woman savagely attacking two men who had to have been twice her size, even if one of them was in bed, dying.

"How long were you in the store?"

"I suppose about an hour. Then we had lunch at a local restaurant."

"Have you ever purchased anything from Mr. Craig?"

"Good heavens, no. What would make you think that?" She clutched her sweatshirt tighter around her throat. "Have *you* been in his store?"

"Yes," I said, bemused.

"Did you see anything there that might actually interest me?"

I couldn't, but the fact remained that we had proof she had bought something.

"No memory of making a purchase twelve weeks ago?" I rattled off the date of the bill of sale.

A frown made her look even older. "No, I'm sure of it."

I produced the bagged bill of sale with her name and address on it. She took it from me gingerly, holding it up to read through the plastic.

"A raven?" She dropped the evidence bag onto the table among her porcelain figurines. "This makes no sense."

"Two in fact." But she was right. It didn't make sense. Except we had her name on the receipt.

She was adamant. "I did no such thing. This is absurd."

"Then how do you explain your name?"

"I don't." Confusion blended with fear. "I just know I never bought anything from that store. Especially a stuffed bird."

"Two stuffed birds."

"Impossible."

"Can you think of anyone you might know who would make a purchase like that in your name?"

"What? Ridiculous."

I couldn't shake her. She came across as a timid mouse, but a mouse with a core of steel. I bet all her students hated her.

We thanked her, gathered our evidence and stood up. I didn't offer to shake her hand. I knew the suggestion would only upset her more.

Back out in the street where I had parked the unmarked, we were silent until we climbed back into the car.

"That," Nancy said "is one unhinged woman."

I flipped the visor down and pulled out my sunglasses, slipping them on in place of my prescription glasses. The day had gotten bright.

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"Maybe," I agreed softly, then said, "I think she's showing classic signs of abuse." I threw the car in gear and rolled away from the curb. "Look at the way she dresses and protects herself as though she's expecting to be attacked."

"Because she already has been." It was statement, not question. "You think she was raped?"

"Worse. I think she was abused as a child."

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## Jason

**Alex called about seven. He was tied up at work and had no idea how late he would be. I should go ahead and make supper; he'd fix something himself when he got in.**

He told me not to wait up.

I moped around the place, cleaning things that didn't need cleaning, doing all the laundry I could find in the place and it was still only nine o'clock, and no Alex. I parked myself in front of the TV, flipping through his collection of porn, settling on one with a uniformed cop who vaguely resembled Alex. I pulled my cock out and stroked it while the action played out on screen. I came in the Kleenex I'd brought in with me and disposed of it in the toilet. I briefly considered a shower, but the sofa was far more enticing. I plugged my iPod in, put it on shuffle, curled up with my bird book and zoned out to the sounds of the Killers and Cold Play and Linkin Park. I must have dozed off. I only awoke when my earbuds were wrenched out of my ears in the middle of Chester Bennington singing *Numb*. I blinked and focused on Alex who stood over me, his head cocked to one side.

I scrambled upright, wiping the drool off my chin and hoping he didn't notice. His lopsided grin said it was a fool's hope.

"You think you can stand without falling over?" he asked.

I surged to my feet, forgetting the iPod, which tumbled to the floor along with my bird book. He leaned down and scooped both of them up, putting them on the coffee table.

"I guess not."

"What time is it?"

"Twelve. Well ten after I guess. Sorry I'm late. Things got hectic. New homicide came in just as we were leaving."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Was it a bad one?"

"No good homicides, but yeah, it was straightforward. Most of them are." He sank down beside me and I noticed how rumpled he looked.

"What do you mean, straightforward?"

"Where the killer is obvious from the start. In this case the mutt didn't want his old lady leaving him so he defied a restraining order, and got her on her way home from work." He shook his head tiredly. "Nothing uglier than love gone bad."

"You hungry?"

"Nah, Nance and I caught a burger on our way off the scene. I'm good."

It occurred to me that I really knew nothing about what he did all day. I ever heard about cops from the news bites at six and eleven when I bothered to watch them. And then the cops always seemed to be in a bad light. What was a day-to-day like for them? Was it like most jobs, mundane routine spiced up by moments of excitement? Only, the excitement for them could involve guns, and people trying to kill them.

"Your partner, what's she like?"

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"Good at her job. Ambitious as hell. She intends to be Captain some day. I think she may make it."

"So you'd be working for her?"

"Assuming I'm still working there at all," he said darkly, and wouldn't elaborate.

"Do you want a beer, then?" I asked when it became clear he didn't want to talk about work.

He spread his arm on the back of the sofa behind my head, leaned back and closed his eyes. "Sure. I could do with one. Get yourself one, too."

Eventually he lay down and put his feet up on my lap. I began gently massaging his feet, finally pulling his dark socks off and working on each toe until he purred like a kitten and developed a definite bulge in his crotch.

His eyes flew open and he stared at me. "What do you do to me, Jason Aaron? Are you some kind of wizard?"

"No," I said, moving my hand up to where his cock pressed against his wool pants. "Not a witch or a warlock or a sorcerer. Just a very horny man." I opened his zipper and bent down to take him in my mouth. His hands cupped the back of my head.

"But only my horny man."

I couldn't talk. My mouth was full.

He left for work early the next day. It would be a long one he said, with the new homicide, even a slam dunk one, to write up, and some promising leads to follow on the Blunt case. He gave me permission to use his PC after giving me the password and left money to do some shopping. The first thing I did was search out beef recipes since I'd noticed a real

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penchant for red meat in Alex and wanted to indulge his appetites in and out of bed. Once I had a list of ingredients I hit the main streets of Goleta finding an Albertson's where I picked up the ingredients for Beef Stroganoff. I added a chocolate cake since I didn't think I was ready to tackle something like that, and a ready-made spinach salad. Maybe not gourmet, but sure to please—assuming I pulled it off. But the Stroganoff hadn't sounded all that complicated.

I also grabbed a six-pack of beer, wondering if Alex always drank this much all the time. I added a bottle of red Cabernet for the Stroganoff, being reassured by the recipe that it would make it rich indeed. A feast fit for kings, or czars.

Around three I got a call from Phil. He had another cruise going out in four days. Did I want it? Being light in the pocket I readily agreed.

"Come by the marina tomorrow for a few hours. You can run some maintenance tests and fix anything needs fixing."

I agreed and hung up. It was nice to know I would be bringing some money into the dynamics, though I still had to pay for that firetrap I rented. No way I was going to suggest to Alex that my stay become more permanent by moving in. Though when I thought about it, the idea didn't terrify me like it would have at one time.

But really, what would Alex think of such a crazy idea?

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## Spider

**Nancy was already at her desk, a half eaten muffin, which looked disgustingly healthy, and a half finished Starbucks, which didn't, in front of her. She was writing up a report and barely looked up when I sat down opposite her.**

Finally she looked up and frowned. "You don't seriously think that woman killed Blunt and Dutton do you?"

"I doubt it. But she may know who did. We need to get some surveillance on her."

"You know what Garcia's going to say about that."

"We present what we have. We have the receipt for the ravens, we know she wasn't being entirely truthful—we can even tell him the woman was abused as a child. Maybe make the case it was Blunt or Dutton who did it. He's getting pressure to solve on this. He may bend."

I looked toward the closed office door. I knew Lieutenant Garcia was in there already. And I knew since I had come up with the idea that it would be up to me to approach him. I finished up my report on what we had found so far. I included a summary of all the forensic data and my reasons why I thought we needed to watch a presumably upstanding citizen with the vague hope that she would lead us to something of interest.

As I suspected, he was less than thrilled by my proposal.

"Just what makes you think this woman knows something?"

"Her overall demeanor is hinky. Why is there a receipt for a purchase she claims she didn't make? Even if someone faked her identity to get the mounting done on the ravens, why *her*? I checked, she's not even listed in any phone books or any online white pages, so it's not likely anyone stumbled on her by accident. And if whoever killed Blunt and Dutton does know her, we can get a lead on them by trailing her."

"You'll never get a tap and trace on her." Garcia was drumming a tattoo on his stainless steel desk. His words gave me hope. No, we'd never get a court order to tap her phones and trace all her incoming or outgoing calls, but at least his words showed he was considering the rest.

When he took too long to speak again I thought he was going to boot me out of his office, but eventually he frowned and nodded. "Grab a couple of unis. Tell them what you want, and for God's sake, tell them to be discreet. This isn't some major player, so do not get all in her face at any time. They are to stay back and simply observe. That clear?"

"Crystal." Since it was more than I had hoped for, I was elated when I left his office. Without even going back to my desk I went shopping for unis. I lucked out. I grabbed two guys who were veteran patrol officers, and I was sure, would be the model of discretion. They agreed to park themselves outside her apartment starting this morning and let me know what happened. I thought one was enough for the apartment, I sent the other uni to her work place, St. Adolphus School in case she was already there for the day.

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I was sure we'd catch her at one place or the other. Lucy Chavez didn't strike me as the type who went out on social calls.

Back at my desk there was a note from Garcia about a 60-day report he was still waiting to see. I hated 60-dayers most of all since they represented cases that were slipping into the 'cold case' arena, with little promise of resolution. I always kept revisiting my unsolved, but as usual there were too many new cases and not enough time or resources to tackle the old ones. I went to work on the warrant to look for the raven at Blunt's.

Two hours hunched over my PC left me with a stiff neck and a nagging hunger in the pit of my stomach. I'd have sold my soul at that moment to have Jason's fingers work their magic on my pain. The hunger was easier to attend to.

"Lunch?" I asked Nancy.

"Not today. Rob's back from a convention, and he wants to catch up."

Nancy's husband of five years was a sales rep for some big software company. Made mucho bucks, but traveled a lot.

They had no kids though she made noises about it. Somehow I couldn't imagine tough-as-nails Nancy Pickard fat with a kid in her belly or dealing with rug rats, but what did I know about the maternal urge? I had always considered myself lucky that my ex never had any. Images of a little Alexander running around gave me chills.

I grabbed a fish sandwich from Jack in the Box. At three I got a call from Officer Tender, my uni at St. Adolphus. Lucy Chavez had left the school. She was driving a five year old

Kia. En route home she had stopped at another school, a pre-school and came out with a young girl the uni guessed was around four. They then proceeded to a grocery store and home.

A child? A daughter? Except Chavez had said she'd never been married and from her self-protective stance she struck me as the last person I would peg as sexually active. Which raised a chilling prospect.

I gave Tender his instructions. "Leave Sanchez to watch the apartment. I want you to go back to the pre-school and find out who she is. Discreetly. Tell them it's an ongoing investigation, then let them know the girl's not involved, so there's no cause for alarm. Try to minimize the risk they'll call the mother—assuming Chavez is the mother."

"Aye, sir."

"Let me know what you find out ASAP."

I hung up and grimaced at Nancy.

"I think our recluse has some secrets she forgot to mention." I told her about the girl.

"She has children?"

"Looks that way. Tender's going to get back to me once he talks to the school administration."

"Maybe we're wrong about the abuse occurring as a child. Maybe she was an adult and the child resulted. Religious woman, abortion wouldn't be an option."

"Traumatic rape. Forced pregnancy. Gotta traumatize anyone."

"You realize we have to go back and talk to her again."



"Let's make sure the kid is hers first and she's not just babysitting someone else's."

So we waited, doing busy work. Ten minutes past four Tender called back.

"The girl's mother is Lucy Chavez. She's three and a half and has attended the school for the last eight months. Her name is Michelle Chavez. The school has no record of a father beyond the surname. You'd have to access hospital records to get more on him."

With HIPAA that could be a nightmare. How much did we need them? What would it prove if we could name the father? That rape had occurred? I'd already checked and there was no record of a reported rape anywhere in Santa Barbara, Ventura or Los Angeles counties under Lucy Chavez's name four or five years ago.

"Let's go talk to mommy," she said.

We rolled. It promised to be another late night.

But before we could even sign a car out, Tender called back.

"Lucy Chavez has left the premises with the girl. I'm following her as we speak."

She drove for ten minutes then stopped in front of a house on the west side. A woman came to the door when Chavez emerged from the car with the child and a suitcase in tow. She entered the house and came back out by herself fifteen minutes later. At that time she got back into her vehicle with more luggage and drove to the airport where she presumably caught a flight.

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Tender's efforts to find out where were stymied by his having no warrant to get the information. They'd have to wait until she returned to Santa Barbara.

I ground my teeth in frustration and swore under my breath. So damn close. "Keep tabs on the house she dropped the girl off at. She'll no doubt go there first when she gets back."

"Yes, sir."

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## Jason

**I put the Stroganoff in the slow cooker at three. Stroganoff had one advantage. It could be kept warm or reheated easily, something I was finding was as important as the quality of the food. I'm a fast learner. I figured by the time Alex got tired of me I could get a job in a diner.**

I'd cleaned every surface that was cleanable, done all the laundry. Hell, I'd even rearranged the fridge and freezer and was considering doing the same to the cupboards. I was seriously bored. I needed to push Phil into giving me more hours or look for another job. I didn't feel brave enough to venture out again. I would have loved to take that drive to Solvang, to see that quaint town, but memories of the gay-bashers intruded. Alex's house had become my refuge and I'm not sure that was a good thing.

Maybe I needed to go home for a while. Think this over. I sure as hell couldn't think clearly here. Not if the smell of the man who lived here could turn me to jelly.

A desperate need for human company drove me out of the house at four-thirty. Maybe I couldn't go back into the mountains, but I could go to the Vault. Alex had already said he would be late again. I couldn't stand another evening like last night. I needed more. I needed—

Hell, I knew what I needed. I still had the coke I'd scored yesterday. I hadn't felt comfortable doing it in Alex's house.

I'd hidden it in my wallet and retrieved both, as well as my jacket. An hour, two at most and I would take the edge off.

It was still early and the Vault was quiet. Rafe the bartender, who had bragged about being fucked by my Alex, was behind the bar. I got a beer from him and went to sit at a far table, my back to him. From where I sat I could see one of the screens showing an endless porn loop. Black, brown, yellow-skinned bodies, all naked except for fetish gear, all hard and glistening from cum and lube filled the screen. I drank my beer without tasting it and watched, getting a low-level hard-on that chafed my jeans. I squirmed in the hard chair, trying to relieve the pressure. Someone appeared at my elbow. I looked up to find Rafe standing over me, staring at my crotch.

"I can make that better," he said.

"Go away."

"You're just pissed 'cause I screwed him before you did. You really think he didn't come in all the time and fuck anyone who'd spread their cheeks for him? I know he likes it rough, too. Everyone knows it. The cop who's into whips and chains—"

I grabbed his T-shirt and hauled him down in front of me, spilling the remnants of my beer all over the table and my legs. "One more word, asshole and I tear you a new one. See who wants to use that."

I released him with a shove. He staggered back, almost went down on his ass and would have come after me if a voice hadn't barked at him to cool it and get back to work.

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Sullenly he left, after glaring at me and staring down at my wet crotch. He smirked. "Told you I could take care of it."

"Asshole," I muttered.

Two minutes later the bartender who had called Rafe off came over carrying a beer. He wiped the table down and set the new beer down in front of me.

"He didn't mean to upset you," the guy said. He was dark, black hair, black eyes and a heavy covering of black hair on every square inch of visible skin. He had tattoos up and down his arms and more on his neck that descended down under the black T-shirt he wore. Marcus, one of the Vault's owners. I'd never met him before, though I had a nodding acquaintance with him.

"Thanks. He always that much of a jerk to his competition?"

"No." He gave a ghost of a smile. "I think this one was special. I guess he thought it could be more."

I wanted to say 'Tell the guy hands off,' but I think they both already got the message. It pissed me off that I felt so defensive—my jealousy had been totally unexpected. One more reason I needed to put space between Alex and me. I was losing it if I was willing to duke it out with Alex's sex partners.

I gulped beer, signaling for another one. When that was done I'd have to cool it or not be able to drive home. Home? Home in Goleta? Or home in my dump here in town?

I finished my second beer, wiped my sleeve over my mouth, and headed for the bathroom. After pissing I

sectioned out the remaining coke and snorted one line, then the other.

My spirits immediately lifted. I might not have floated back to my table, but it felt that way.

There was a new bartender on. I waved for another beer and he strolled over, hips swinging enticingly. He stood over me, his basket right at eye level. I didn't intend to do anything with it, but I had to touch. He was so close I could smell him. He didn't smell anywhere near as intoxicating as Alex.

Face it, he wasn't Alex. None of them were. I turned away and lifted the new beer to my mouth. A hand came down on my wrist, slamming it down on the table. Foam spilled over the mouth of the bottle, all over my hand. I tried to jerk away, thinking Rafe had come back for more.

I looked up, ready to give him a piece of my mind and found myself looking into Alex's cold, gray eyes.

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## Spider

**Reports. Endless fucking reports. I must have carpal tunnel with all the keyboarding I'd done lately. Hell isn't fire and brimstone, it's being buried alive in paperwork.**

Coffee and Red Bull were my last line of defense. I felt wired and hot. I was thoroughly strung out.

I ran searches on Lucy Chavez, Lucille Chavez, and L. Chavez. None yielded any results beyond her DMV records. No wants, no warrants, not even a parking ticket. She had never interacted with the legal system. She had always lived in Southern California, filed taxes starting twelve years ago, every year, regular as clockwork. I'd bet my pension she'd never been audited either.

She rented the apartment, had never owned more than her car and the clothes on her back. Her daughter Michelle was born in St. Ann's in Los Angeles three and a half years ago, had been enrolled in the pre-school last year. Chavez had been employed at St. Adolphus for six years and had remained there through her pregnancy, only leaving for six months to give birth in L.A. Had she stayed with family? I'd have to find out.

So damn pedestrian. So damn normal. Not the profile of a savage lust killer who could murder two men with the rage I had seen. She was a pint-sized wisp of a woman who probably wouldn't kill flies. I've seen sweet-faced killers

commit the most heinous killers, but they usually had a vibe. A tell.

Chavez was lying about something, but it wasn't killing anyone.

I went round and round in circles. How long would Chavez be gone? Couldn't move forward, couldn't go back without her. She held the key, or at least one key, I just had no idea what it was. The whole thing felt stalled by her absence. I was stuck with two dead bodies and a stuffed bird. Hitchcock would have loved it. It was not a fun place to be.

At least I had the warrant for Blunt's place. I had been going to wait for Nancy, but we needed to get rolling on this. We'd already waited too long. I took my own vehicle. Once I was done I could head for home from his place. Of course, if I found the bird I'd have to log it in to evidence, but that was a risk I was willing to take.

I took my time at his place, a surprisingly neat one-bedroom apartment in an older part of town that hovered between genteel slum and retro. There was a computer with an Internet connection on the dining room table and I knew I'd have to come back with a warrant for that later. We weren't really trying to find Blunt guilty of the crimes we knew he had committed, but the cop in me wouldn't let a piece of evidence go. I'd be back.

I found the bird in the back of his bedroom closet, in a shoebox almost identical to the one that had been delivered to Dutton. No address, it must have been dropped off, too.

The bird looked like a twin to Dutton's. Same glossy black feathers and glass eyes. I didn't need to have our taxidermist



examine it to know it was the bird he had the receipt for, but I would, just for evidentiary reasons. So Lucy, or whoever had done this in her name, had targeted both pedophiles. Why? We seriously needed to interview her again, but for that, I had to wait for Nancy. Maybe tomorrow.

Nancy was long gone when I stopped back in the station to log the bird into evidence, home to a husband who might be off again at a moment's notice. Everyone was gone except the night shift. All the radio cars were out, a lone detective sat at his desk reading a paperback, waiting for a call out.

I stood up. I had to get out of here. I glanced at my watch. It wasn't as late as I'd expected, but then I thought I'd be interviewing Chavez tonight. So, go home, or go for a drink?

The drink won by a short margin.

I saw the Honda in the parking lot the minute I swung off Bath Street into the half-filled Vault parking lot. I climbed out of my truck and approached the vehicle, peered inside. Chocolate bar and fast food wrappers littered the back seat. It was Jason's car all right. I felt the hood. Cool. It had been here a while.

I strode across the lot, into the dim bar without breaking stride, barely flashing my membership. Eyes swept the whole length and instantly spotted him, leaning toward a tall, dark man I thought I recognized but didn't take the time to identify. All I saw were Jason's eyes riveted on the guy's bulging jeans, all but crawling inside them. He turned away only to get a drink. I pinned his arm to the table and gave tall dark a look that made him retreat fast. I turned back in time to find Jason's eyes settling on me. His mouth came open and

his pupils widened. In fear? Guilt? Just what had he been doing here?

As if I didn't know.

I jerked him out of the chair. When he protested I hauled him against me. "You are coming with me. If you argue I will carry you out in cuffs. Got that?"

He squeaked something that I took for assent and hustled him outside, past a line of gaping men. Someone laughed. Outside I took a deep breath and almost gave it to him there. Then I stopped. I had a better idea. I was going to take him home and teach him once and for all that he was mine.

This wasn't going to happen again. I'd make damn sure of that.

We didn't speak all the way home. He sat straight, eyes facing forward, his breathing steadying as he fought to gain control. Control he was going to lose again very soon, even if he didn't know it yet.

At the house I shoved the front door open and entered, letting him trail in after me. I waited for him to take his shoes off and stack them in their place by the door. I pulled my boots off and hung my jacket up, taking my piece off and securing it in the wall safe I rarely used. I didn't want any accidents to happen tonight, and right now I could have killed him without blinking. Five seconds later I was glad I had put it away.

I turned around and found him staring at me. I could see in his eyes that he was stoned.

"What did you take?" I kept my voice deadly calm, letting him know the time for lying was past.

"I—" He was going to try anyway. I squeezed his arm so hard he winced. "Coke," he said in a small voice. "It was only one hit."

"You think that matters? You think it matters how much you take?"

He shook his head, his shaggy, too long bangs falling in his eyes. That was the first thing I was going to take care of.

"Who did you buy it from?"

When he pressed his lips together I leaned into his face. His nostrils flared.

"Who's your fucking dealer?"

He jumped. "Guy called Trip."

"I want his contact information." More hesitation. "Now, Jason."

He recited a cell phone number. After recording it I dragged him after me into the bathroom. Told him to strip then shoved him down on the toilet seat.

He twitched as though getting ready to bolt. "Move," I said, "and I'll cuff you."

I searched through my vanity for my largest pair of scissors. I wasn't gentle, but I succeeded in chopping off his hair without drawing blood. His eyes were wide with terror, but the truth is I never hurt him. I wanted to. I wanted to beat him so hard he'd never do anything so stupid again, but I didn't. My rage astounded me. It soared to heights I'd never experienced before. Reason and sanity fled as I savagely chopped the thick masses of hair off him. It was as though a red film lay over my eyes. My head throbbed. I wanted him to

beg me to stop. We'd never carried our play far enough to require a safe word. Had that been a mistake?

Once most of his hair lay around his bare feet on the tile floor, I pulled out my electric razor and finished the job. His newly hairless scalp was a pink dome that reflected the overhead light.

When I was done with his head I did the rest of him, cleaning off the stubble that had returned from the first time I did this. Finally he stood before me, looking like a golden marble statue. My David. Golden and pure.

Before we could go any further I told him to get down on his knees and clean up his mess.

He was shaking now. I dragged him after me into the bedroom and without turning on the lights, gagged and bound him to my wall. No hood tonight. I wanted him to see his punishment.

He grunted and strained against his bonds at the first lash. His dick was so stiff it rubbed against his belly, smearing it with fluid. I laid steady, even strokes along his back, buttocks and chest, taking care not to strike his face or genitals. Everything else was fair game. His skin glowed pink, then red and his nostrils were bellowing in and out as he sucked in breath. Sweat gleamed on his hairless body and he humped the air. Before he could come I stepped back, stroking his chest and crotch with the head of my lash. He made a sound behind his gag and thrust his hips into the air. His eyes bugged out and he couldn't take them off my hand and the whip it held. My fury still vibrated through me. Wiping out reason and sanity.

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He was shuddering now, making strangled whimpers in his throat. Begging for release.

I spun around and left the room, closing the door and leaving him in total darkness.

I watched *Rear Window* and *Twelve Angry Men*, and drank two beers. Only then did I return to the bedroom.

Jason hung limply in his bonds, his arm muscles standing out in sharp cords. I pushed my thumb and forefinger under his chin and forced him to look at me. His eyelids fluttered and my heart broke. I wanted to take him down to hold him in my arms and tell him he would never hurt again. Instead I pulled my swollen dick out and stroked myself into readiness. Without warning I rammed it up his ass. He went rigid with pain and climaxed, splashing thick cum all over himself and the floor.

I came seconds later. Afterward I slipped his bonds off and carried him to the bed where I slid him under the covers and rolled in with him, holding him tight, soothing his trembling muscles until he fell asleep.

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## Jason

**To say I woke up the next morning is a lie. I came to. Once again every orifice and joint in my body ached. I had nightmare flashbacks of darkness and pain that made no sense until I regained full consciousness. Then memory slammed into me with brute force clarity. What Alex had done. What he had not done. Frantically I sat up and searched the garbage beside the bed. There were no used condoms, no torn plastic wrappers. He'd fucked me without protection. He'd never done that before. Was that part of his punishment?**

What else had he done to me?

I staggered into the bathroom, bumping into walls and door frames and turned the light on, shielding my eyes from the explosion of light. I stared at the mirror, blinking several times before I realized it was me staring back. My hand went to my head and felt the smooth skin there. My God, what *had* he done? Further exploration revealed he had removed every strip of hair on my body except my eyebrows and eyelashes. Even my arms and my pits had been shaved. There was blood between my legs.

Memories kept washing over me. The Vault. Rafe. The sexy bartender and finally Alex. The fury on Alex's face was permanently etched in my mind. I thought for sure he was going to shoot me or boot stomp me. Instead he'd hung me up in his make-believe dungeon, and tormented me for hours. The savage pain of his final assault burned in my memory.

But then, hadn't he gently carried me to bed? I remember his strong arms around me and whispered words as I fell into a chasm of darkness and pain. *I'm sorry. I never meant to hurt you.*

So will the real Alexander Spider please stand up? Savage monster or caring lover? Without getting dressed I searched the house, but it was empty. Alex had gone into work and left me. I searched frantically for a note of anything that might explain when he was coming back. Nothing.

Reality kicked in. Left without a car, or any means to get out of here.

I had to go do some work for Phil. Now more than ever I needed the money.

Well, they say where there's a will there's a way. I took a hasty shower, the welts on my back and ass stinging from the hot water. I recalled all too clearly the whipping he had delivered inside and out. And I thought he had punished me before. I dressed and headed into the kitchen one more time. In the fridge I found the leftover Stroganoff that Alex had obviously put away. The crock pot it had cooked in sat on the counter, encrusted with dried on stew. If he thought I was going to clean it out he was going to be sadly disappointed. The man could fuck himself. I also pulled out the milk and filled a large bowl with cereal, which I wolfed down standing over the sink. I dumped the milky remnants in the sink without rinsing them. Then I went back in the fridge and pulled out a beer. I sat at the kitchen table and guzzled it down. Beer doesn't taste all that good after milk and cereal but I was game. So game I took another one when I finished

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the first. Then I had a nice buzz on and my muscle began to ache less and the pain in my ass hurt even less. So I had a third. Followed by a fourth. Now I was actually feeling pretty good. I didn't need Alex. I could get back to Santa Barbara myself. Wouldn't he be surprised when he came home tonight to find his compliant and thoroughly licked boy toy waiting his every kinky whim had gone ghost? I took a moment to imagine the look on his face when he realized I wasn't there. Would he be sorry? Angry? Indifferent? Did I care?

Dammit, yes, I did. I wanted him to care so desperately I read meaning into the smallest action on his part. He smiled at me and I translated it into an expression of love. He hurt me and brought me pleasure beyond imagining and I thought it was a sign he felt like I did, instead of being plain old-fashioned sado-masochistic lust.

Back into the fridge which now contained no beer, I found some peaches and several kiwis which I shoved in a bag with a handle. I added a couple of cans of Red Bull to my bag and left the kitchen. I took my hiking boots since I had no idea how far I would have to walk. The freeway was a long way south of here. Well, I was strong. I could do it. One more trip to the bedroom where I dug out a flannel shirt which I put on under my jacket. If I was out late it got cold at night. Though I don't know what I'd do if I wasn't home by dark.

I took my binoculars because I wasn't leaving them behind. Since I didn't want to be accused of keeping his key and maybe breaking in at a later date I locked up and slid the key under a large planter out front beside the step. Probably



an obvious place for a burglar to look, but that was Alex's problem, not mine.

There were no sidewalks the first part of my walk. But since the road wasn't busy I had no trouble walking in the roadway. Later, when it got busier there were sidewalks. It took me about forty minutes to reach the freeway, another ten to find an on-ramp where I stood watching the flow of traffic heading east toward Santa Barbara. A few vehicles passed me before I got up the courage to stick my thumb out. I was pleasantly surprised to get a ride within the first twenty minutes from a guy on his way to work. He gave me a sideways look and I realized he probably smelled the beer on me. It was a bit early for alcohol I guess. He then spent the next ten minutes telling me all the reasons I shouldn't hitch. I agreed with him then let the rest of his words roll in one ear and out the other. Unfortunately, or fortunately, he could only take me as far as Las Positas Way near the Earl Warren show grounds. I thanked him, climbed out of his Malibu, and took up my position again.

I never heard the car until it pulled up behind me. Gravel crunched and a single whoop startled me. I spun around and found myself facing a white CHP car, flashing red and blue lights chasing each other across the rear view window. A lanky, khaki-suited man climbed out of the vehicle and approached me, one hand casually on his thick belt, just above his weapon.

Oh shit, what now?

"Officer?" I made an effort to sound calm and polite.

"Want to tell me what you're doing out here, young man?"

"Nothing."

"This is not a safe place to be, sir. Highway's not meant for pedestrians."

I shrugged. "I have to get to Santa Barbara for work. I ... got stranded here." Great, try to explain that. Tell him one of his own kept me tied up most of the night and fucked me so hard I'm still having trouble walking.

He was staring at me and I realized aside from what was obviously a brand new head shave job, Alex had left me with red welts on my neck and throat. He frowned.

"Are you injured, sir?"

"No, I'm fine, really. I just need to get to Santa—"

"I'm going to have to ask you to come with me, sir." He stepped closer, growing more menacing. From there he must have smelled the beer. "Have you been drinking, sir?"

I knew better than to lie. I fudged instead. "I had one."

He didn't believe me. "Public intoxication and endangering others. Not a good place to be, son."

"And if you'll just let me go, I'll be out of your hair."

"I can't do that sir. I'm going to have to ask you to get into the car."

I held out my hands and he tensed. Then he saw my wrists and I knew I was in deep shit. My wrists were deep red and clearly showed signs of having been shackled recently. Before I had a chance to protest he had me up against the car door, frisked and handcuffed me.

He stuffed me into the back of his patrol car. The sound of the door shutting sent me tumbling into despair. I sat in the car, hands once more in restraints, hunched over to relieve

the inevitable ache that set in my shoulders and radiated out to all parts of my already abused body. Could they toss me in jail for public drunk and disorderly? How long could they keep me? No way I'd be able to scrape together even a pittance for bail. I was pooched. So much for the job I just got back.

The CHP cop took the next exit off the freeway and turned back west. The highway patrol station was in the shadow of the 101, across the highway from the Amtrak station. The officer took a measure of pity on me as he led me into the low-slung gray and white building into the booking area.

"Is there anyone you can call, son? Someone who might come and get you?"

My first thought was a swift no, then I thought of the one person who probably would come and get me. He'd be furious I was here, even more furious I ran, but he'd come get me out.

Wouldn't he?

I opened my mouth to answer the CHP cop and closed it again. He looked at me with what I thought were kind eyes and I opened my mouth again and blurted out, "Detective Alexander Spider of the Santa Barbara police."

The guy's eyebrows rose nearly an inch. Surprised I knew a cop or surprised I'd ask one for help. He left me in the hands of the booking officer and vanished through an electronically released door. I stared at the cracked linoleum floor under my feet. What now?

The cop behind the counter wrote something down on the paper in front of him. He didn't look at me. I was less significant than a cockroach might have been.

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The door my cop had gone through buzzed and opened again. He was back. He didn't say a word, just released the cuffs from my wrists and put them back on his belt.

"Detective Spider will be here shortly."

I can hardly wait.

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## Spider

**When I woke up this morning my first thought was to shake Jason awake to have it out again. But one look at his bruised and fragile looking body trying to burrow back under the blankets without being fully conscious made me realize I'd already done enough. Maybe even too much. Could we really recover from this? I felt like he had betrayed me, though in fact I don't think he did anything with that guy, and while I hated the drug thing, it wasn't the end of the world. I just knew I couldn't stand it if he allowed another man to touch him like I did. But if this went on would I lose him? I sensed he was close to bolting. Maybe last night had been a wakeup call for both of us, because I knew beyond a doubt that I did not want him to go anywhere. I still don't know what that meant and I kept kicking myself for being thirty kinds of fool for feeling this way about anyone, but the simple, unblemished truth was I needed Jason. Maybe a lot more than he needed me.**

All morning I fielded calls. Some legitimate, some crackpot. There had been a full moon last night. Maybe that was why Jason had acted out. There was something intangible about a full moon that every cop knew spelled trouble. Logic might dictate it wasn't scientific fact, but we all knew terminal weirdness came out of the cracks during a full moon.

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I kept looking at the phone, thinking I should call him. But I didn't want to wake him if he was still asleep, and a phone call might dig up unpleasant memories best left in the dark. I had totally gone overboard last night. I had been angry, sure, angry that he had done that behind my back, angry that I had caught him looking at that bartender with such hunger in his eyes. He was only supposed to look at me that way, not some fat-dicked player in a tight pair of jeans.

But *had* I gone too far this time? I had seen his back when I climbed out of bed. The welts were nasty looking and covered half of his back, extending all the way across his ass. I'd been too eager to make him feel the lash. To drive it home to him that he could not do those things. Not now, not ever. I wouldn't stand for it.

Well maybe I had succeeded beyond my intentions. Had my rage really gotten that far out of hand? And did that make me dangerous? I never thought of myself as an abusive man. God knows in my job I see the tragic results of that all the time. Families torn apart by someone's rage. Jealousy could be an ugly thing and I was feeling the bite of it more than I ever had before.

Nancy arrived looking flushed and glowing. At least someone had a good night. She nodded at me curtly and asked for a progress report. I told her about finding the raven at Blunt's.

"So that's confirmed then," she said. "Anything on Lucy's front?"

"Not much yet. Still have a unit watching the house. Apparently the woman and Lucy's daughter have gone out a

few times. Mostly to the drug store or market. No sign of Chavez meeting them anywhere. All we can do is sit on it."

"I hate waiting more than anything else."

"At least be thankful we're not pulling the surveillance gig." Hours sitting in a car trying not to fall asleep at a critical time. I'd done my share of stakeouts. They were never pretty.

She nodded. "I hear you." Then she switched tactics. "They ever figure out what was used on Dutton?"

"Blunt instrument. You know them, they won't commit. But there was a fire extinguisher missing. So that's looking good. Be nice if they could recover it."

She made a noncommittal sound. If wishes were horses, beggars would fly. Some teacher in the Academy in a momentary flight of fancy said that once.

"Lunch?" she asked me, even though it was only eleven-fifteen.

"Sure, an hour?"

But before that my phone rang. It was Tender, back on duty watching Chavez's daughter's place. He wasted no time on preamble. A man after my own heart.

"Something's happening. The little girl keeps peering through the window. She's even opened the front door a couple of times. The woman inside keeps pulling her back. I think I saw the bag the girl brought with her sitting in the foyer."

"She's coming home." I felt the familiar pump of adrenaline that always hit me when something was going down. My body prepping me to be ready. To be safe.

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"Stay there until she shows up. Follow her. If she goes home I want to know right away. I'll come out then to talk to her. Try not to get made. This woman spooks way too easily."

"Gotcha, Detective."

Now it was more sit and wait. Worst case scenario, Chavez wasn't coming back but was sending for Michelle to join her. An expensive trip, since I doubt the airline would let a child that young fly alone. No, she had to be coming home. Unless she really was fugitive then that opened a whole new can of worms.

"Lunch is on hold," I said to Nancy. "Let's sign out a car and go catch us a little birdie. I want to be ready when she reaches her apartment."

We once again fell to waiting. Cop work always struck me as being nine-tenths waiting for something to happen and one-tenth trying to save your ass when it did. But there was always something to fill the time. Reports to be written, phone calls to answer, and oh, yeah, reports to be written.

Finally Tender called back. "She's pulling in the driveway. The little girl's in the car and the caretaker has the suitcase. They're not wasting any time on niceties here. I wish my in-laws would be in and out in that short a time." A moment of silence then he came back. "So far all indications are she's on her way home."

"Let me know if that changes." I looked over at Nancy who was already on her feet. "Let's roll."

We arrived at the Chavez residence shortly after she did. Tender pulled in behind our unmarked. We all waited in our



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cars until she had parked and gone inside, towing the little blond girl and two rolling suitcases.

Once the lobby door swung shut I climbed out onto the sidewalk. Nancy followed and Tender left his car.

"Want me to hang around?" Tender asked.

I shook my head. "I don't think it's necessary. You?" I directed that to Nancy.

She shook her head. Tender left and we approached the front door. Rather than buzz Chavez herself and alert her we were there, we looked up the apartment manager and had him let us in.

On the third floor we paused outside her door and spent a minute listening for sounds of activity on the other side. Nothing. We knew she was in there, but there was no music, no TV, no sounds at all.

I rapped the door sharply.

Same reaction as the first time, although this time she had to have recognized us. She still insisted we show her ID. This time when we got inside we weren't invited to sit. Michelle ran over to her mother and hid her face in her skirt, refusing to look at either of us. Chavez was brusque.

"What do you want, officers?"

So I was brusque right back.

"I need you to be honest with us, Ms. Chavez. What is going on?"

"I told you. Nothing."

"Please don't, Ms. Chavez. Don't spin me that. We both know something is not right."

"Nothing is going on," her voice rose in budding hysteria. "I want you to leave me alone."

"We all know that's not true," Nancy spoke gently. So gently she could lull even me into somnolence. But this time there would be no rattlesnake take down when she had the mutt she was interrogating relaxed. If all my instincts were right, this woman was a victim, maybe more so than Blunt and Dutton.

"Do you know a Clarence Dutton?"

"No."

"George Blunt?"

It was subtle but she definitely flinched to Blunt's name. Nancy saw it, too.

"When did you know him, Ms. Chavez? Was it as a child?"

This time there was mistaking her reaction. She went paper white and clutched at her pullover turtleneck sweater. I thought she was going to faint.

Nancy took her arm and guided her to the sofa, bypassing the recliner. She sat down with her. She didn't touch her again. Lucy Chavez had issues with being touched.

"How old were you?"

"I want you to leave," her voice was low and savage. "Get out."

We couldn't force her to talk. Not unless we came up with something a whole lot more compelling than we had. We might be able to get the ADA to issue a subpoena to force her to testify, but without cooperation it was wasted time.

We had to convince her it was in her best interest to talk to us. Good luck with that. Still, we tried.

She wasn't listening. "Go, or I'll call your superior. I'll call the mayor if you force me to."

So we left, hoping if she had time to think things over she'd decide to help us.

We ended up having our lunch after all, though I would have preferred to be interviewing Chavez. We were just settling the bill when my cell rang. Caller ID was a number I didn't recognize.

The voice on the other end of the phone was brusque. "Detective Spider? This is deputy sheriff Bittman from the Goleta CHP station. We have a Mr. Jason Zachary down here and he gave your contact information."

I stared down at my cell like it had grown teeth. The CHP? What was Jason mixed up in now? I had just left him in bed a few hours ago. How could the guy get into trouble so fast? I knew Bittman was making a courtesy call, one cop to another. Probably once Jason had used my name he'd decided to fly under the radar and call me directly. It might even mean Jason hadn't been charged with anything yet.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"He was hitchhiking on the 101. Claimed he was heading for Santa Barbara for work." Bittman's voice dropped. "He'd been drinking, Detective."

I clutched the phone in my fist, a little surprised I didn't crush the small thing. "Has he been charged, officer?"

"Not at this time."

I glanced at my watch, then at Nancy who was watching me closely. "I can be there in twenty minutes."

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"As you like, Detective." He hung up and I met Nancy's all too knowing gaze.

"Going someplace?"

"An hour tops. Tell Garcia if he asks I'm rounding up some information. You don't have to tell him on what case."

"Alex—"

"Don't, Nance. I have to do this."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

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## Jason

**Apparently, I wasn't under arrest, I just wasn't supposed to leave. I waited for Alex. Bittman told me he was on his way and I was to stay put until he got there. I paced the small space outside the booking area, too jittery and on edge to stay still. Ants crawled along my bruised nerve endings and I had a terrifying memory of the tweaker in jail who had met an unknown fate at the hands of those goons. I remembered his screams and frantic need to rid himself of bugs. Between the drugs, the beating and the booze, I knew I was a mess on the same path as that poor loser.**

Regret strangled me. I was jumping out of my skin by the time the outer door opened and Alex entered with a blast of cool damp air. It was raining again. It didn't matter what dark waters had flowed under my bridges or what place he had put me in, my body clenched in desire at first sight.

We stared at each other across the negligible space and I could see the hunger in him that mirrored my own. He vibrated with some inner tension I don't think anyone but me was aware of. The cop behind the booking cage threw him a friendly greeting which he returned, his eyes never leaving mine. He crossed over to where I stood frozen in the middle of the room.

He didn't touch me. He didn't need to. His tension matched mine. He stood over me. I never realized before how big he

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was. I stared at his broad chest, counting the colored threads in his striped shirt. I refused to raise my head to look at him now that he was this close. He stepped back and raised his hand. Like a deer startled by a wild dog, I flinched.

"Let's go," he whispered.

Once more I obeyed.

His tension only grew as he led me out to his truck, unlocked it and let me climb in and belt up. Neither of us paid any attention to the cold drizzle coming down. He went around to the driver's side, slid in and shut the door. Immediately his scent filled the small cab. Oh God, why did I think I could ever escape this man? If he had reached over at that moment and touched me I would have done anything he asked.

"Why?" he spoke so softly I almost didn't hear. "Why did you run away?"

"I had to." My voice broke.

"Why?"

"Because I need you too much."

That silenced him. Which was good since I was too confused to explain what I meant.

He fired up the engine and pulled out of the lot. He drove toward his place up in the foothills. Panic set in. He must have seen something because he ran us into a parking lot and slammed on the brakes. He turned to face me, his arm braced beside my head, his smell invading my mind again.

"What is it, Jason?"

I took a deep breath. I had to rally my will power. It was now or never. God, I didn't want to do this. I squeezed my

hands into fists in my lap when all I wanted to do was crawl into him and lose myself in there.

Which was the problem, wasn't it? I was in danger of losing myself. I moaned and shut my eyes, blocking out the sight of him, but not his scent. Not his presence.

"Jason?"

"I can't do this. I can't let you destroy me."

"I never wanted to do that."

"But you are doing it." I stared into my lap. "Every fiber of my being wants to be yours."

"You are mine." Alex put his hand over mine. "Didn't I tell you I'd never hurt you?"

"But you did, didn't you?" I wrenched my hand away from his touch and ripped my shirt open, displaying the thick red welts covering my chest. "Are you going to deny you did this?" I jerked the shirt back over my hairless body. Then I touched my scalp. "And this. Why? I didn't do anything. I haven't touched another man since our first time. I didn't want another man. But that wasn't good enough for you, was it? You fucked me without protection? How could you?"

"I never—"

"But you did," I was shouting now. "What will you do next time? Are you going to keep fucking me like that until we're both infected? Maybe you'll fuck a few other people too, so we can all chase the bug together. Is that how you want to die?"

Alex slammed his fist against the steering wheel. "No. I wouldn't. I—" He shook his head and I wondered what he had refused to say. "Don't do this, Jason."

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"I have to go to work."

"When will you be off?"

"I don't know." I took a shuddering breath. "But I won't be coming—" I was going to say 'home,' instead I said, "to your place. I have to go home. It's time."

"I don't want you to."

Neither did I, but I couldn't tell him that. "I have to."

He let me off in the parking lot of the Vault to retrieve my car. He waited until I headed out toward the marina. Checking to make sure I wasn't going to go into the bar? The next time I looked in the rear view his Toyota was gone.

I checked in with Phil and he put me to work. He made a passing comment on my new look, but either didn't see the marks or he didn't feel like mentioning them.

I worked hard, just like I had at Alex's. The physical exertion made my muscles ache anew, but I ignored the pain. But the time I crawled up on deck again, I was filthy and exhausted. All I wanted to do was climb into Alex's bed and let him make me forget the last nightmarish day. I didn't want to be alone in my own.

I was doing the right thing. I had the right to save my sanity—something I didn't have around Alex.

Phil met me topside. I wiped my hands on a rag and stuffed it in my back pocket.

"What time tomorrow?"

"Seven-thirty."

"Where are we going?"

"Dropping four students on Anacapa for the day—weather permitting." We both looked up at the sky, which now showed



a few stars breaking through the cloud cover. "We'll anchor off the coast and wait for them. Donny will be along. They want to do some kayaking." The *Weeping Lady* carried a pair of two-man sea kayaks along with a pair of Zodiacs for emergencies.

It would be a long day. That was good. Less time to think about what I lost today. "I'm going home then."

My apartment seemed smaller and shoddier than ever. Stale air washed over me when I opened the door. It smelled of dust and mildew. The Murphy bed remained unmade.

I didn't care. I didn't bother taking a shower. I would have one in the morning. I was asleep almost the minute my head hit my pillow.

The next morning I was up so early the birds hadn't even stumbled out of bed. I showered and made some instant coffee. It was even more disgusting than usual, but then I'd gotten spoiled over the last few days drinking good fresh roast. I veered away from those thoughts. Leave them in the black place I had relegated them to. All they were going to do was haunt me.

There was still a lot to do on the *Weeping Lady* before our student clients arrived. The weather held out. The sky east and west was cloud free and the last weather report I had heard was for a calm marine-perfect day. Our students might be in for a good day.

I liked taking students out. It was a reminder there was more to life than the shallow existence I had fallen into. That there might have been another path I could have taken. I

wasn't going there, but it was nice to talk to someone who had.

Besides, it beat talking to 'old salty dog' Phil who had a mind like a sink trap and rarely had anything good to say about anyone.

I spent the morning going through the checklist to ensure the boat was seaworthy. At the last minute I loaded up the box lunches we had ordered for the students. Donny checked in and stowed his gear. He was a gangly twenty-five year old who had held his ABS papers a year longer than me and had worked for Phil for two years. We checked over the pair of kayaks loaded on the foredeck and the two gray and black Zodiacs in the stern. Once we agreed everything was good to go we signaled Phil and cast off the mooring lines while he powered up *Weeping Lady* and motored us out into open water.

Donny and I worked to unfurl the sails and stored the boom clutch. Once the jib and mainsail were catching the wind we picked up speed, sending a spray from our bow. Overhead a host of seabirds followed us.

Once in open water I took the wheel and Phil went below. Our passenger's clustered on the salon deck, standing below the rack of deer antlers Phil had fixed over the transom as a joke. At least it wasn't a singing bass.

Radio chatter played in the background. I listened to it with half an ear. Phil reappeared on deck and waved me off the wheel.

"They're all yours. Keep 'em happy and keep—"

"Keep 'em hungry," I finished for him. His usual refrain.

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So I went astern and leaned against the taffrail and talked about the islands we were visiting today. The Anacapas were my favorite of the Channel Islands. They were by far the smallest and had never had much of a population, being considered inaccessible and having no free standing water or shelter. A lighthouse and small settlement had been built there and Coast Guard families still kept them. But the manned lighthouse had been phased out and now resided mostly in memory. The third-party Fresnell lens was still there, on display in the island museum. That was Donny's expertise and he could talk for hours about the history of the islands. My love was the hordes of birds and other wildlife that made this place home.

We were in luck. As we approached the eastern shore and were almost in sight of the lighthouse, a pod of dolphins broke the surface and played in our bow wake for several seconds before vanishing back into the depths. That enchanted everyone. Even Phil smiled.

We circled north to the Cathedral Cove and Donny talked to them about the dozens of sea caves and arches the area was riddled with. They could visit them once they put their kayaks in the water. Then we swung back south to the eastern shore.

We reefed the sails and docked in the safe harbor there, in sight of the few buildings that were maintained by the Coast Guard. The small, red-roofed structures huddled below the cylindrical lighthouse. Donny and I lugged the few pieces of gear the landing party was allowed to bring ashore then Phil and I retreated back to the *Weeping Lady*. I would have liked

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to have stayed behind, but Donny was the better guide for this trip, plus at the last minute Phil wanted me to look at the Raytheon radar and he didn't trust Donny's mechanical skills half as much as mine. Donny didn't like being dumped with the tourists, but he knew Phil as well as I did, and when Phil said do something it could get ugly if you argued. Donny and his students had their GPSs and the ship-to-shore radio, so it wasn't like we'd be out of touch.

Phil motored us back out to the channel, anchoring us off shore and told me to go below and check the radar system. He sat up top, feet up on the gunwale, morosely staring out at the rollers making their way toward the distant shore.

He turned to stare at me under his beetling brows. "Get on with it, then. We only got a few hours before that lot is back on board. I want to be ready to leave when they are."

I nodded and hurried into the pilot house.

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## Spider

**It was all going wrong. How the hell did that happen so fast? Jason was happy, he'd been as enamored of the game as I was. Had found ways to set up our play. When had that changed? When had he become afraid of me?**

Jason feared losing his identity in mine. Losing his soul. I wasn't some devil incarnate. I only wanted what was best for him. What was best for both of us.

Had I misread his signals? How could I have been so wrong?

In growing frustration I sped back to the station and made my way to my locker where I changed out of my wet clothes and pulled on the spare suit I kept there, mostly for visits to the morgue, which leave a stink on your clothes that nothing short of a heavy wash could remove.

Something on my face warned Nancy not to ask questions. She gestured at my cluttered desk. "Tox reports came back on Dutton. No sign of anything but what he was already taking."

"Killer didn't think he needed to immobilize a guy who was already bedridden and helpless. Brave soul."

"Takes a big set to be that cold." Nancy picked up her phone. "Garcia came by. He wants to bump the federal warrant up the ladder."

"So we won't be getting that any time soon. Our esteemed leader is the one who should grow a set."

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"Let's dig a little deeper into the Chavez woman. I want to know what she had for breakfast two weeks ago. More important than that, I want the name of her daughter's father. Let me write up a warrant for those hospital records. See if I can't convince a judge to let us take a look."

I put my nose to the grindstone, my pedal to the metal, buried myself in work so I wouldn't have to answer any of Nancy's hundred and one questions, or to allow myself to think about Jason. Because whenever I did, it was worse than the last time I thought of him.

I couldn't believe he wasn't going to be waiting for me when I got home tonight. Or maybe any other night. So, had I screwed up so monumentally, or had he? And how much did it really matter?

I finished the warrant for the hospital search and gave it to Nancy to read. She was good at the nuances of legalese needed for a search like I wanted. You had to spell everything out so minutely. Nancy told me once she had considered a career in law. Before she switched to criminal justice she had done a year of pre-law. It helped her in times like this.

Once we were satisfied with the warrant I grabbed my jacket and headed over to the justice building where I would find the judge of the day and hope he would sign it. Then it would be road trip time and a drive into L.A. for the day. I wasn't looking forward to it. I hated L.A. and only went there when I had to. Though if I had to be in town for more than a day, I always enjoyed touring the seedier clubs to see what staid Santa Barbara didn't offer.

Not this time. Not without Jason.

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Dinner was a small pot of coffee and a toasted bagel. I couldn't stomach any more than that. I worked well into the night, only going home when a grainy headache turned my thought processes into sludge and I started making stupid mistakes on the computer—once you've had to rewrite the same line five times because you can't spell 'integrity' is a sure sign it's time to call it a day.

Back home I refused to dwell on how empty the place felt. Jason had left a mess in the kitchen, another sign of his anger, I guess, but I left it for another day. I crawled into bed and tried to capture a few hours sleep, without much luck.

I was on the road early the next morning, hoping to miss the worse of the freeway traffic. Good luck with that. I wondered if Los Angeles traffic was ever light. I could envision it at three in the morning, still clogged with streaming vehicles, all going nowhere in a place that epitomized nothing. Did I mention I don't like L.A.? But St. Anne's was easy to find. Just off the 101, I didn't even have to change freeways. SBPD hadn't quite entered the twenty-first century with its antiquated car pool so I had to rely on a printout from MapQuest to guide me instead of a GPS. The sprawling white stucco edifice set on an emerald green lawn was awash in sunshine when I finally secured parking in the lot across the street. I was looking for a Donna Pierce—Sister Donna Pierce, I reminded myself—in the administration wing. I found her within ten minutes then had to cool my heels while she finished up a meeting.

She met me in the corridor outside a suite of offices. Hospitals all smell alike to me. I've been lucky in life, I've

been in a few over the years, usually to interview strangers impacted by violence, never to face my own loss. But they all smelled like piss, strong cleaner and something that no chemical could remove from the air. I was glad when a tall, leggy woman in a severe navy blue suit and sensible two-inch heels walked briskly through the doors, and held out her hand.

"You've come all the way from Santa Barbara I understand," she said. "Pretty town. I attended a retreat there once, a few years ago."

"Detective Alexander Spider, Sister."

"Just call me Donna. Now, you had some sort of legal document for me?"

I held out the blue-backed warrant, signed by Judge Havram just yesterday. She scanned through the verbose legalese, reading passages aloud in a low voice then raised her eyes to meet mine.

"You need to see the birth records for a patient from several years ago."

"Yes. Three and a half years. I believe the date of birth is down there."

She frowned and nodded briskly. "Very well. If you'll follow me I can take you to our records office. I'm sure Sister Clarice can assist you."

Sister Clarice could and did. She pulled the records for Lucy Chavez and her short stay in the maternity ward, including the address of the person she had stayed with while in the city. I made a separate note of that name; I would run a background on them and with any luck meet with them



before I headed home. There was no father's name mentioned. Another dead end, unless the person she had stayed with knew something.

I ate in the cafeteria, and sat alone picking at a plate full of food I really didn't want. After a while I gave up, dumped the food in the garbage and headed out to my car. I called Nancy up and asked her to do a records search of Colette Dane, the woman Lucy Chavez had stayed with following the birth of her daughter. She promised to get back to me ASAP. She was true to her word.

"Now this is interesting," she said.

"What is?" I wasn't running on a whole lot of patience right now, but the last thing I wanted to do was alienate my partner. So I counted to ten and said, "What's interesting?"

"Colette Dane called the LAPD to report a rape right around the time of Lucy's stay with her. But I don't see anything else in the records. No follow up. What do you think that means?"

"No idea. Who was the officer of record?"

"Detective Rick Rodrigo, Rampart."

So, my first stop of the day: the Rampart Division. The modern, new look of the infamous Rampart Division didn't look like a police station under siege. It was a sleek white and buff structure, so common in what passed for Southern California architecture. I found the visitor's parking and stepped out of the unmarked I had signed out this morning. I had called ahead and knew Rodrigo was in today, but I didn't try to make an appointment. If he didn't want to talk to me, he could say so in person. I didn't have time to play phone

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tag. Making sure my badge was clearly visible—you try walking into a police station armed without one—I stepped into the reception area.

A Sergeant who looked like she'd weathered a few decades looked up at my approach. She saw the badge and my Beretta and leaned forward, peering down at me from her raised platform behind the bulletproof acrylic shield she worked behind. "Help you...?"

"Detective Alexander Spider, SBPD. I'm here to talk to Rick Rodrigo." Just to be sure she'd seen it I flipped my badge up so she could see it clearly.

She looked down at something on her desk. Then picked up a phone.

I cooled my heels in the lobby, watching the mass of Angelenos parade in and out. Los Angeles is, if nothing else, a hodgepodge of every ethnic group in the world. And I swear some representative of each of them was here today. I heard a dozen languages, all spoken at break-neck speed. I could understand even very little of the Spanish, though I considered myself pretty fluent in it.

Finally a round-bellied Hispanic man who looked nearly as old as the desk Sergeant came through a set of sealed doors and approached me. He looked wary, as though he didn't often receive visits he welcomed.

"Detective Rodrigo."

"Alex Spider, SBPD."

"Sure, I got that. How can I help you?"

"Can we talk someplace more private?" I wasn't about to stand in this overcrowded room and try to make my questions understood over this mob.

He frowned but nodded. After I was signed in and received a visitor's badge, he led me through into the station proper to a door marked Interview #5, which had an 'unoccupied' sign on it. He pushed the door open and led me inside.

"What can I help you with?" He clearly didn't want to ask the question.

"You took a report from a woman called Colette Dane, three and a half years ago at Kent Street in Echo Park." I read off the information Nancy had given me. "She claimed her cousin Lucy Chavez had been raped."

"Sure, I may have. Three years is a long time. I'd have to look it up."

"I'll save you the trouble. Here's the report number," I slid it across the table at him. "My question is why was no follow up done? A woman reports rape, there should be some follow up. Medical report, a rape kit—"

Rodrigo stared down at the paper in front of him. I could see his gears turning. "I think I remember this." He straightened and tapped his finger on the paper. "Right. It was her cousin who was allegedly raped."

"So why no follow up?"

Rodrigo met my eyes and held them. "Because the rape, if it occurred, happened twelve years prior to the claim."

"Twelve years—so the daughter she had just given birth to wasn't the result of rape."

"Not unless the devil was involved in that baby being born. Sweet girl as I remember. Reminded me of my own little one at that age. They grow up so fast, don't they?"

"Yes, I'm sure they do. Did she ever mention who the father was?"

"Some con man who sweet talked her I gathered. I don't think the lady was very street smart, if you get my drift. Let some clown talk her pants off and the next thing, she's got one in the oven. How many times you hear that story? She never did give the guy's name. The cousin was thoroughly disgusted. She wanted the Chavez girl to tell her father, that he'd do something about it even if the cops wouldn't. I had to warn them both that they'd get into big trouble if they did that."

"She left it off the birth certificate, too. But no rape."

"No rape. But the cousin said one did happen. Years before. Trouble was, the statute of limitations had run out on that one long time ago. They only let you file on childhood rape for a few years after you reach the age of consent yourself."

"I know." One of the tragic flaws of a system that still didn't take rape all that seriously."She say who the 'alleged' rapist was?"

Rodrigo searched his memory, staring down at the paper listing the meager details he had put in a report that essentially went unexplored over three years ago. Finally his face cleared. "Yeah," he said, looking relieved that his memory still worked. "George."

I went perfectly still and waited for him to finish.

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"George Blunt."

"Who was the girl's father who was going to make things right for her?" A dam of ice broke in my chest, freezing my heart. I'd known. Somehow I'd known all along what Rodrigo was going to say next.

"Oh that one. Get this, his name was Phil Collins, like the singer. Thought that was kind of funny. Guess that's why I remembered him. It's a hell of a thing when you have to tell a lady that there's nothing you can do for her. That the guy who did that is untouchable."

"Yes," I said hollowly. "Hell of a thing."

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## Jason

**The day held, crisp clear and chilly, but so bright I had to put shades on when I came back on deck after an hour fine tuning the radar unit. I was satisfied it was functioning properly and joined Phil on deck.**

Phil wasn't at the wheel. I wandered over to where he had a sea chart laid out. I was familiar with them. Phil did most of the piloting but I still liked being familiar with the waters I worked on.

Phil emerged from the head and nodded at me. He went into the tiny galley, coming out moments later with two drinks in plastic cups. He handed me one. The strong smell of Scotch wafted to me.

"Top shelf shit. Laphroaig. Straight from the royal distilleries of Scotland," Phil said, raising his cup. "Got it off a man owed me money. Thought we could have a snoot while our tourist buddies are out there playing Crusoe."

I raised the drink to my lips. I wasn't used to hard liquor. I was surprised at how smooth it went down.

It was tempting to guzzle it. I could find oblivion in a bottle of high-end Scotch. It had a certain decadent appeal.

But that couldn't happen right now. I was responsible for getting those people back to the boat and shore safely.

I'd have to seek forgetfulness later. Maybe a trip to the Vault. I'm sure I could find someone more than willing to help me forget. It wouldn't be the same as Alex. I doubted it ever

would be again. But enough blow could make anyone palatable.

I set the drink down beside the open chart and leaned down to peer at it again. I traced a line that showed a nearby current that, if you followed it, would take you out into the mid-Pacific and eventually the Gulf of Alaska, maybe even the Bering Sea if you were really intrepid or lost.

"Taking a trip?" I looked over my shoulder and felt the deck sway. I grabbed the back of the Captain's chair to steady myself. "Whoa, now where'd that come from? It was as calm as a mill pond earlier."

I took another sip of Scotch and it tasted just as fine the second time.

Phil came up to stand beside me. "Not me," he said.

I tried to focus my eyes on him, but he was standing too close. So I leaned back to put him in view and everything blurred and the room spun. I had to sit down.

I missed the chair, knocking the chart and drink onto the deck. Alcohol sprayed over me as I hit the deck on my ass. I blinked stupidly up at the blurred figure standing in front of me. It seemed to be receding.

"Sorry you had to get into this. But that's twice you showed up when you shouldn't have. What were you thinking bringing that faggot to the *Cutting Edge*? Did you think I didn't know you were bringing tricks back here? I finally get that sick kiddie-rapist to meet me and you show up. You were going to ruin everything. I couldn't allow that. Not when I was so close to making him pay."

There *had* been someone else there. But Alex said he couldn't find anyone. Through the haze of what I now realized were drugs, probably the same ones he had used on me the first time, I felt terror. What had he done to Roger? Said he was new in town, from Bakersfield, making a pit stop before he hit Castro.

"What did you do to him?"

"Who—oh, your trick? Nothin'. He was practically pissing his pants when I come through the galley. He's probably still running with his tail between his legs. Leaving you behind. Good friend, huh? That would have worked out for me if your cop friend hadn't saved your ass the first time, you'd have taken the fall like you were supposed to and no one would be looking for me or your little blond buddy."

I heard his words but they didn't make any sense. Was he saying he killed Roger? Or did he just run? I shook my head trying to clear it, but it only made my dizziness worse. I realized Phil was leaning over me and his lips were moving.

"He should have let it alone. What did anyone care if that old depraved fool died? He deserved it."

His words finally penetrated my fogged in mind. "You ... you mean Blunt?" It was getting harder and harder to speak. My thoughts wouldn't focus and my vision was fading in and out behind splashes of light.

"Bastard raped my little girl. Destroyed her as good as if he killed her. The cops wouldn't stop him—that was bad enough. Then he shows up at my granddaughter's school. Wants to volunteer there! They almost let him—didn't know



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the bastard changed his name. He would have done her like he did my little girl."

His voice was fading. I tried to sit up. The look he gave me was full of pity.

"Sorry you got unlucky. It won't be so bad. I'll put you to sea. It'll get cold enough tonight you'll go to sleep and won't know a thing. By the time they find you I'll be long gone. Guess those touristas are on their own. I'm sure someone will find them sooner or later. Donny can take care of them until then."

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## Spider

I almost ran out in mid-laugh. Then sanity returned long enough to yell over my shoulder to Rodrigo, "Call Nancy Richards at SBPD. Tell her it's Collins. He's got a boat and he's out there." My voice broke. I didn't have time to wonder what Rodrigo must think. "He's out there with another victim. Jay—Jason. He's got Jason Zachary with him and he's going to kill him. She needs to get harbor patrol out there. Call the Coast Guard."

Rodrigo was a solid professional. He had his cell out and was punching in numbers as I flew out the door.

I hit the 101 going eighty. Slapped my cherry on and booted it north. It wasn't yet noon. Traffic was a bitch. I wove in and out of slower moving cars, one eye on the road, the other on the clock as the minutes crept by and the miles between Jason and I stretched to infinity.

I should have known. The boat should have been the giveaway. How does a man who has no connection to the marina suddenly end up dead on a boat in the middle of the night? Had we been so blinded by our need to lay it on Jason that we never looked past him?

And where did Jason fit in? He worked for Phil. Had Phil used him to cover his crime? Or had it all been a terrible accident?

I plugged my Bluetooth into my ear and speed dialed Nancy.

I could tell when she answered that she was in her car.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Clearing downtown. I'm still at least an hour away." It should have taken me an hour and a half but at my speed I'd do it in record time.

"Well don't kill yourself getting here. You won't be much good to him in the morgue."

I raced around a Ford pickup, tires screaming, diving in front of a big rig that blasted his horn at me. I was gone before the echo of sound faded.

"Where's the Coast Guard?"

"They've been called," Nancy said. "They're looking up their records as we speak. Captain said he'd get back to me ASAP. Collins would have had to file a float plan. He should be pretty easy to find."

"And if he deviates from his filed course? This guy isn't going to tell them what he's planning to do."

"How do you even know Jason's out there with him?"

"Because he said he had a job with Phil today. He thought it was great that Phil was bringing him along again." I didn't tell her that Jason was also happy for the excuse to stay out of my reach. Those waters were mine to tread and drown in if Phil succeeded in what he was planning.

How the hell could I have been so blind to my feelings? Had I beaten him so savagely because I wanted to drive him away? Or because I couldn't admit I cared? Oh, stop being such an asshole. You love the guy. Admit it to yourself, at least. You're too much of a coward to admit it to him.

"If he's smart," I said, thinking furiously. "He'll stage this one as some kind of accident. Hell, how many people go

missing each year off boats or out at sea? The bodies go missing and little things like the presence of Special-K aren't there to point fingers."

"Why is he doing this?" Nancy asked. "That's the part I can't figure out. Why did he kill Blunt and Dutton and now he's after Jason? What's the connection?"

"That's what I didn't see for the longest time. But at the crux is the fact that Collin's daughter was abused by Blunt as a child. Remember how messed up she was? We knew she'd been abused, but we thought her child was the result of rape. That it happened when she was an adult. I don't know what triggered him now, and not earlier, but I'll bet there was some kind of stressor that put him over the edge. I'm still trying to figure out Dutton, but I like Collins for it. I still think their service in Korea is related."

"Let's find him and ask him."

I like to think I'd stop long enough to ask the guy. But right now I'd blow him away like a bug without a second thought. My cold rage knew no bounds and frankly, it scared me a little.

"Wait a second, I'm getting a radio call..." Nancy was gone for several heart-grabbing minutes then she was back on air. "That was the Coast Guard. They're on their way to the last reported position of the *Weeping Lady*. They should be in line of sight in a few minutes."

"Tell them to approach with caution," I said, feeling a heaviness in my chest. I remembered the way Blunt and Dutton had looked and the savagery that had gone into their deaths. "We don't know if he's armed or not."

"They'll be careful, Alex."

I disconnected and goosed the gas pedal, the engine screamed in protest and red-lined. I didn't care if I damaged the thing. I had to get there now. I played road tag with one car after another as I would overtake them and by strength of sirens and lights, force them off to the other lane to let me by. Even the big rig drivers didn't argue with me for long. But still, time and miles crawled. The freeway shrank to a single lane in both directions and it got harder to get round the cars blocking my way.

Suddenly it occurred to me. Maybe I was a factor in what set Phil off this time. He had to know Jason and I were involved—hell, half the city apparently knew. I'd gone to Phil to talk him into letting Jason keep his job. Jason might have made some comment about my investigation. And I was instrumental in clearing Jason of the charges in the first place. If Phil had been hoping to lay the blame on Jason and thus avoid detection, then his plan had failed miserably. Maybe the subpoena for the military records of the two men would give us the link we needed. Maybe Phil simply didn't want to take any more chances.

And just maybe my doggedness and refusal to let this thing go was going to kill the man I loved. There, I thought it. I said the words, at least in my head.

I loved Jason.

I didn't want him to die. That was as simple as it was devastating.

I came screaming down the Conejo Mountains through Camarillo. I was on the flat plains above Oxnard where I had

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first learned about Lucy Chavez and her connection to the murders. I no longer thought she had sent the bird; it had come from Phil, sent in her name. As the initial revenge for what those men or men like them, had done to his daughter. It must have eaten at him all those years that no one had done anything to stop Blunt or Dutton or the others. Too many of them were never brought to justice, slipping through cracks and getting off to continue wreaking their destruction on other innocents. How many others would Collins have killed if a confluence of events hadn't pointed us toward him and put Jason in jeopardy?

I didn't blame him for wanting those monsters dead. But Jason was as innocent as those kids. He shouldn't be collateral damage.

The Pacific Coast Highway and the ocean appeared on my left. Glimpses of it caught through the screen of trees showed a placid surface, full of colorful sail and power boats bobbing on the surface. In the distance a tanker glided toward the ports in Long Beach or San Diego, reminding me that this was one of the busiest shipping lanes in the U.S. Surely a boat the size of the *Weeping Lady* wouldn't be able to slip through.

I passed by Ventura and the Rincon and Red Mountains swelled on my right. Soon I'd be dropping down into Carpenteria. I passed oil donkeys, the ubiquitous drills that endlessly pumped oil, and round tankers that stored the crude squatting on the brown plain. Then I was through the flat wasteland of the tiny industrial city that hugged the coast. Next stop Santa Barbara. One bonus: traffic out this way was light. I was able to fly by most slower vehicles with inches to

spare when I darted back in front of them. I'm sure I left a lot of shaking people in my wake. I got Nancy back on the phone.

"What's going on?"

"They're still searching."

"Why haven't they found them?"

"They're doing the best they can, Alex. It's a big ocean and it looks like Collins isn't where he claimed he was going."

"He's running." I gripped the wheel so tight I wondered I didn't bend it. "Tell them to look harder. They have to be out there."

Neither one of us said what had to be on both our minds. We might find them, but would Jason still be alive? I had to believe he was. I couldn't think of the alternative.

Another twenty minutes of torment and my phone trilled. I activated the headset. "Talk to me."

Nancy's voice was so long in coming that I thought the connection had died. Then the words came, "They found the boat. The *Weeping Lady*. I'm sorry, Alex, Jason isn't on it."

"Do they have Collins? Is he in custody?"

"Yes, he is. They're bringing him in as we speak."

"Make him tell you what he did with him. *Make him.*"

"They asked. He won't talk. But there were four people in the party, plus another employee, a Donald Reinhold. They were scheduled to spend the day at Anacapa Island. They've dispatched a cutter to check it out."

I thought hard and fast. It gave me a glimmer of hope that I immediately quashed. "No, he wouldn't do that. If he left Jason alive then he could testify. The ones he stranded, they

won't know what was going on. He could claim an accident. Who's going to doubt him?"

Nancy was silent for moment. Finally she spoke again. "I'll tell them that. But if he's not on the boat, where is he? If he was dumped into the ocean ... I'm sorry, Alex."

More silence that stretched like ground glass over my already frayed nerves. Nancy was back. "The Coast Guard says there is a missing Zodiac. They've already been to Anacapa and they found the abandoned passengers. No Zodiac there."

"So he must have abandoned it at sea with Jason in it. Maybe to establish an alibi. He didn't kill him, he fled on his own in the Zodiac. Leaves him off the hook."

"The Coast Guard is bringing in a chopper. It can see more of the surface area than the boats can. The Zodiac comes equipped with an emergency broadcast system on it—"

"But it would have to be activated, wouldn't it? It's not going to go off on its own." I was minutes away from the marina. "How long before the bird gets there?"

"Ten minutes."

"I'll be there by then. Tell them I'm coming with them."

"I'm not sure they'll like that, Alex."

"I don't give a fuck what they like. I'm going up in that bird."

The brilliant orange Coast Guard helicopter was down on the hard-packed sand above the high tide mark. A crowd had gathered on the beach. The pilot had stayed inside, the rotors still powered up, rotating slowly.



I'd never been in a helicopter before. I clambered in awkwardly and sat behind the copilot. The grim-faced pilot handed me a pair of headphones. I had always thought the headgear they wore was for communication. I quickly found when I didn't put them on right away and the pilot fired up the rotors that no, it wasn't to talk, but to protect my ears from the aural assault. The chopper vibrated and seemed to strain to leave the ground, then it surged free of the sand, skimming over the tops of swaying masts, so close, I was sure we were going to take out a few. Open water appeared below us and we raced over the waves. We were heading to where the *Weeping Lady* had been found. Apparently Phil had planned a run north. He refused to say where he had been going, but I didn't doubt for an instance he could have vanished there and made his way just about anywhere.

The Coast Guard had boarded and secured the boat and sent a launch team to Anacapa to retrieve the confused students.

We hovered briefly over the boat while the pilot talked to the Coast Guard response boat. After several agonizing minutes he nodded briefly and signaled we were flying north.

I scanned the surface of the water as we raced over it. I despaired when I realized just how big the search area was. How could we hope to spot a lone man in, at best, a small craft in hundreds of square miles of water?

But giving up and despairing wasn't an option. The sun dipped down, sinking west. If we didn't find Jason by nightfall we never would, and this would change from a rescue mission to a body recovery. Already the temperature out there was

falling. It might not reach freezing, but it would be more than cold enough to bring an unprotected body into a dangerous state of hypothermia.

I spotted it first. At first glance it was nothing more than a smear against a dark sea. But when we got closer I thought it was a solid object. I tapped the copilot and pointed toward it. He pulled up his binoculars and swept the area. His thumb went up and my heart soared. The chopper swung toward it, dipping lower until we all had visual confirmation. The copilot was on the radio calling our sighting in.

It was a small inflatable black and gray dinghy that looked hopelessly tiny in the swells. I could make out a figure lying on his back in the rear of the thing. The wind from the rotors whipped the water into a frenzy of white froth, and Jason's shirt billowed in the artificial wind, but I could see no sign that he was even breathing. I was breathing for him, sucking in great drafts of air and willing him to move, to react to us. To show me he was alive. Anything.

The helicopter hovered lower. The pilot shouted something and the copilot answered. It took me a minute to realize they meant to wait for someone to come out in a boat to effect a rescue. I shook my head violently.

"No," I shouted. "We have to get him out *now*."

"We can't. Someone would have to go down on a line and bring him up. You're not trained to do that." The pilot jerked his head at the other man. "He can't do it."

"I'll do it."

"Detective. I can't allow that. We wouldn't be able to bring you back up. You're not trained—"

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"Hook me up and send me down. You're not waiting for a fucking boat to come out and rescue him. He'll be dead by then."

They both argued, but I was adamant. I'd take the risks. If I failed then at least I had tried. Then it became a moot point when Jason started thrashing around in the small rubber craft. Water already cascaded over the low sides, and his violent actions brought more in.

"He'll dump that thing over," I shouted to the other two.

The pilot shook his head and shouted back, "Won't capsize. Not unless the seas get a lot stronger."

"It doesn't mean he won't fall out," I muttered. Then I grabbed the copilot's shoulder. "I'm going down. We'll wait for the boat together."

Reluctantly the copilot pulled out gear, a thick rubbery suit that I pulled on over my clothes and a harness that strapped on my upper body and went around my thighs to keep it from slipping off. He handed me a simpler harness and explained what to do with it, "Get this strap under his armpits. Once it's in place hang on to him no matter what. He may panic, but do not release him. If he goes in the water, we won't be able to affect a rescue. Are you sure you want to do this? We can have the response boat here in ten minutes."

"I'm sure."

So they lowered me off the side. I struggled to see where I was going, to keep my eyes open against the wind from the rotors. The impact of the water was a jolt. That water was cold. My heart seized in my chest, and I struggled to keep breathing.

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I hauled myself into the dinghy and felt along Jason's throat for a pulse, but my fingers were so numb I couldn't feel anything. His skin was waxy and pale and his eyes were closed. Then I thought I saw them flutter. I took him in my arms, trying to transmit some of my own fading warmth to his shivering body.

His fist caught me unawares. It glanced off my left eye and slammed into my nose with a solid thunk. I reeled backwards with a startled '*umph*' and grabbed his arm before he could do it again. His entire body went rigid, nearly jack-knifing both of us out of the shallow dinghy.

"Jason," I shouted, not knowing if he heard me or not. "Stop it. Hold still."

I fought to get the strap around him. I got it secured and raised my thumbs up to the hovering chopper. I think the copilot flashed one back.

Now all I could do was wait.

Maybe it was only ten minutes. Maybe it was less. It felt like hours before the orange and white Coast Guard response boat hove into view. It cut its engines and glided to a stop beside us. They made quick work of getting us on board, wrapping both of us in thermal blankets. We huddled together on the rolling deck as the cutter roared and raced back toward shore.

I was shaking almost as much as Jason, but I wouldn't let him go, even when my stomach decided to remind me I wasn't a boat person. Only the fact that I hadn't had much of anything to eat over the last couple of days kept me from decorating the deck with the contents of my stomach.

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I scrunched as close to him as I could. His eyelids fluttered open again and for the first time he focused on me.

"A-Alex?"

I picked up his cool hand, holding it tightly. Wishing some of my warmth into him. Hoping he was strong enough.

"You're going to be okay."

"Thought I was dreaming..." Before I could respond his eyes slid shut and he lapsed back into unconsciousness.

An ambulance waited dockside. They bundled Jason into one and wouldn't let me in, instead directing me to a second ambulance. Then they raced off, lights flashing and sirens cutting through the crowds that remained around the marina. I spotted Nancy but before she could force her way to my side the EMTs had bundled me into the back of the second ambulance and were following the first one. I was told to lie back and shut up, that I could talk soon enough after a doctor saw me.

I fell into an uneasy silence, lay back and watched lights flash across the ambulance windows. Nancy followed me, barely paused when she saw my by now swollen and blackening eye. She stood around while I was discharged from Emergency. I tried to see Jason. No one would let me know where he was. No one would even tell me how he was doing.

Finally Nancy dragged me out to her car and delivered me back to the marina to pick up my own wheels. I would have gone straight back to the hospital but she hung around and made sure I got on the freeway to Goleta.

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Jason had been quiet every one of the four days I visited him prior to today. Ever since he had come around from his exposure to both the cold and the ketamine Phil pumped him full of—again—he had rarely spoken. He would look at me when I entered the room and follow me with his eyes, but unless I asked him a direct question, he wouldn't talk to me. He hadn't said much to Nancy either, when she interviewed him about Phil and what he had told him. She did say he revealed that there was another man, the one whom Jason had been taking to the boat when Phil caught them. Jason said Phil told him the kid ran away. Nancy seemed convinced Phil had killed him, and the only reason he hadn't done the same to Jason was that he meant to use Jason to throw suspicion away from him. I was inclined to believe Jason. We'd had the harbor dredged every day since just in case, but to no avail. It's possible the currents and tides had been right that night, and Roger's body could have washed out to sea. When I thought of how close Jason had come to sharing that imagined fate, I shivered. Nancy and I had canvassed the Vault and other area clubs looking to find anyone who might remember a boy recently in from Bakersfield but though we had a couple of 'maybes,' Roger remained a ghost. We had sent word to Bakersfield to look over their missing person's files, but I didn't hold out much hope. Another faceless runaway whose own parents didn't care enough to report him missing. San Francisco was put in the loop too, but without a better physical description or full name, no one could do much of anything. Phil's probably right, he's in the wind.

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I took some vacation time and spent all my spare time at the hospital until I became a fixture and the hospital staff took to greeting me by name and asking after Jason. Nancy came by once, but she could tell something wasn't right, and when I refused to talk she stayed away. Big things were going on down at the station. I heard rumors that Lieutenant Garcia was retiring. I guess I should have cared. I didn't. I rarely talked to anyone these days, except Jason

At least I talked, even if he didn't. I guess I never really shut up. "We finally got those federal subpoenas for Blunt and Dutton. Turned out they served together in Korea. There were rumors flying around that they operated some kind of procurement ring for young Korean kids. I guess Dutton liked the boys, and of course Blunt was partial to little girls. They were drummed out of the service because of it, but neither of them was ever charged with pedophilia."

He listened, I knew he did, but he didn't respond. I kept talking.

"Get this, they got them for smuggling. Phil served over there too, in the Navy. We don't know if he ever met either of them there, but he may well have heard about them. They were quite the scandal until the military hushed it up. But when Blunt abused his daughter Lucy, that was the last straw. The law let him slip away and he vanished. When he resurfaced last year, Phil didn't know until he applied to coach a Little League team at his granddaughter's school. Blunt didn't have a record. He'd never been convicted of anything. Background checks never turned up anything. And of course

using a phony name when he first approached the school about coaching kept him under the radar."

I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck, wishing he'd say something. Anything.

"So he was on the verge of being given the job when Phil saw him. He knew right away he was the monster who had abused his little girl. But he wasn't satisfied to make him lose the volunteer job. He decided he had to stop Blunt all together. He decided to kill him. I'm not sure I blame him. But the rest..." I shook my head. "He went too far. Tried to frame you, then tried to kill you so no one would know what he had done."

I took his hand in mine. "I'm sorry about your friend, Jason. I wish I could tell you we'd find him, but I don't know if we can. We have the PD in Bakersfield checking on his ID. If we get more, we'll give it to the San Francisco cops..."

He didn't answer me. After a while I left, promising to return.

The next day I made a trip down to L.A. I hated visiting the place, but what I wanted I couldn't find in Santa Barbara, and it was too special to order online. I needed to see what I was getting, to find the right one.

The Leather Crib was the largest bondage and fetish store in L.A. I was immediately assaulted by the rich odor of animal hide and cleaner. I spent far too much time studying assorted gear, fingering an exquisite braided cat-o-nine tails, wondering if Jason was ready to go to the next level. I tried to imagine it; Jason suspended by my cuffs, his back glowing pink, his cries for release growing more desperate with each



carefully controlled stroke of the lash. My reverie was broken by a 'roid-bulked leatherman in full gear who seemed bemused by my trance.

"Looking for something?"

I looked him up and down. I took note of the tats across his arms and throat. He postured like a Dom, but from the vibes I was getting the guy would have been on his knees in thirty seconds licking my boots. I didn't feel like telling him I wasn't interested.

"I'll let you know," I said.

He nodded and turned away. I worked my way through rack after rack of leather, latex and vinyl. Then I spotted the collars. Leather and suede with metal studs, rings and chains. I picked one up, fingering the brass rings on one thick leather piece, a second one had a diamond inlaid heart—a bit much I thought. Then I scooped up a third one that caught my eye. It had slender chain links that ended in nipple clamps. The gold chains slid through my fingers and I touched the large ring they were attached to—large enough for a leash if I chose to do that. The prospect left me excited. When I took the collar to the check out and pulled out my Visa, the sub eyed me, lingering a long time on my crotch. I brushed my hand over my dick, letting him see the swelling then dropped the collar and credit card on the counter in front of him, jerking his attention back to the job at hand. He was smiling when he rang up my charge, but I ignored him now. Another time I might have taken him up on his silent offer, but right now all I could think of was tomorrow when Jason was being

discharged, and I would be there to bring him home. We were going to start over. And this time we'd both get it right.

I entered the ward the next morning and approached his bed. He was staring out the nearest window, though from where I stood he couldn't see much more than the wall of the next building. No blue sky, no trees. Not even a pigeon strayed across his field of vision. I handed him the *Audubon Book of Birds* I had finally tracked down. I'd ordered it online and had it express shipped to me earlier that week. He didn't take it, so I set it down on his bedside table beside the last meal he had left mostly uneaten.

His eyes were hollow and held nothing when they met mine. I took his hand.

"Hey, Jason. I'm here to take you home. You ready to go?"

He didn't speak. He just stared at me as if I had spoken in a foreign language. I rubbed his cool hand with my thumb hoping to evoke some reaction from him.

"The doctor says you're well enough." I reached in my pocket and fingered the finely tooled leather collar I had purchased in L.A. The one that would seal our relationship. "You just need to rest—and you can do that at my place. I've taken some vacation time, so I can be there—"

"No." He withdrew his hand and tucked it under the thin sheet that covered his chest. He lowered his head, the light from the buzzing fluorescents overhead reflected off the bald dome of his head. His lips moved but no words came out. There were still faint scars on his chest that I could see through the gap in his pajama top.

"It's okay. I'll take care of you. I'll protect you—"

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"You couldn't protect me from him, could you? All your talk and in the end it was nothing. I walked right into his arms and you didn't do anything to help me." His voice was low and savage and I flinched at the coldness it held. "You talk a lot but you don't mean any of it."

"Jason, please—"

He finally met my gaze. "I don't think I've ever heard you say please once since I met you. You don't say thank you either, even when I bent over backward trying to make myself perfect for you. It was never good enough. I was never good enough."

"That's not true. You were good enough." I closed my fist over the collar. "You were perfect."

He touched his chest, and I could tell he was remembering the pain. "Then what was this about? What did I do to deserve this?"

"Nothing," I whispered, not caring if the other people in the room heard me. Not caring who knew what anymore. "That was the biggest mistake of my life. I should have been cherishing you, instead of ... that. But I was so afraid I was going to lose you. I lost control. I shouldn't have done that. It was wrong. I know that now."

"But you did 'that' didn't you? And when did you ever cherish me?"

"Always." My shoulders slumped as I released my gift and raised both hands toward him. "You were the most precious thing of all. I—"

"I'm going home," he finally said. "To my sister's. She's said I can come stay with her. We're going to try to mend our

family. Dad won't be there—oh, that's right I think I told you he was dead. Well guess what? I lied. He's alive and well and living in Petaluma and hasn't talked to me in six years. But my sister will talk to me. I'm sure it won't be nice things she has to say, but at least she won't beat me."

"I will never hit you again."

"I don't believe you. How long before you lose control again? How long before you think I'm fucking around on you again?" He plucked at the sheets restlessly. "I never did, you know."

"I know," I said, wishing I could take away the pain I had brought to both of us.

"I must be sick. I need it too much. I need *you* too much. You're worse than any drug I ever tried. I have to quit you just like I have to quit all the junk."

"Jason—"

"Please go away, Alex. I don't want to talk to you anymore." He turned over on his side and wouldn't look at me again.

I stared at his back for a long time. Outside in the corridor a dinner cart rolled along. Someone came in, nodded a greeting at me and collected his uneaten lunch. He never turned over. I don't know if he was awake or asleep.

After a while, I left.

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## Jason

**When the knock came I looked up from my books, almost obscuring the big *Audubon: The Birds of America* book that always held center place on my table. Crossing the narrow space to my tiny West Hollywood apartment door I wondered who would be calling on me this time of night. Harvey, my sponsor? We hadn't talked in a couple of days, so maybe he was checking up on me. Harvey trusted me, but trust and ex-addicts are seldom a good combination.**

I grabbed a shirt off the sofa and pulled it on as I threw the door open.

Alex stood on the other side, hand raised to knock again. He frowned at me.

"Jesus, Jason, don't you know better than to open a door without knowing who's on the other side?"

I leaned against the doorjamb, weak-kneed, the hands that had been doing up buttons stilled. Hungrily I studied him. He looked unchanged. No, I take that back. He had changed. He looked better than he ever had. Hot, sexy and solid as a granite wall. I don't know how many times I had dreamed of him. Had wanted him to come. Now here he was, and it still seemed like a dream.

"You came all the way down here to tell me off about my security problems?"

Alex rubbed the back of his close-cropped head. He glanced at my head, where my own hair had grown back,

though I still kept it short. It was easier now that my days were full of real things to do. "No," he said softly. "I ... can I come in?"

I stepped aside to let him pass. Hastily I finished buttoning my shirt. The last thing I wanted was to be half naked around Alex.

"Drink?" I asked, determined to be distant but polite. "Coffee? Ice tea? Sorry, no booze. But I've got a decent coffee maker now."

He gave me a sharp, probing look. I offered him a brisk nod in return, acknowledging I had it because of him.

"Coffee, please," he said.

I went into the kitchen to get the pot on. When I came back he was standing over the table I had vacated, staring down at my textbooks and the notes from class I had been studying. He lingered on the Audubon book he had given me, fingers tracing the outline of the wild turkey on the cover. His gaze came up and met mine. "You're going to school?"

"Started a couple of weeks ago. Getting my GED so I can get in as an undergraduate. Biology. UCLA I hope. Maybe out of state."

"I'm impressed." Was it my imagination or had a shadow of pain crossed his face when I said I might go out of state. Would that really bother him? I sometimes thought the more distance between us, the better for both of us.

"I think the coffee's ready. Make yourself comfortable," I said softly and fled into the kitchen. When I came back out with two mugs he was sitting on the sofa, one of a couple of pieces of furniture I had picked up from Out of the Closet

thrift stores. He'd taken off his jacket and I stared at the shoulder holster, a reminder of who and what he was. A devil masquerading as one of the good guys. I handed him his coffee and took a seat across from him. A safe distance, I figured, knowing I was lying to myself. No distance was safe enough as long as we were in the same room.

Lastly he stripped off his leather holster, checked the gun and pulled the magazine out. All the while I stared at his muscles moving effortlessly. Even from where I was I could smell the leather, which brought back too many memories.

I swallowed past a sudden obstruction in my throat.

"So," he said. "How have you been?"

"I'm clean," I blurted.

His eyes narrowed and he studied me, assessing me. Maybe he liked what he saw; he relaxed, offering me a half smile. "How long?"

"Six months. Nine days. Twenty-two hours. But hey, who's counting." I took a hasty sip of scalding coffee. "Day off?"

He shook his head. "I left."

"What?" I thought maybe I had heard him wrong. Whatever I had expected him to say it wasn't that. "You left? Left what?"

"The department. Well, right now it's only temporary. I took a leave of absence so I can think about whether I want to stay or not."

"Why? I don't understand. You quit the force?" I was appalled and guilt stabbed at me. Was I to blame for that decision? "Why, Alex? How?"

"It's not hard," he said dryly. "Funny thing, Lieutenant Garcia has been calling me about cutting my leave short. He's retiring soon, you know. No one knows yet who's going to replace him."

"He must realize how good a cop you are, now that you're gone."

"What do you think, Jason?" He leaned forward, intently staring into my eyes. "Do you think I'm a good cop?"

He wanted my opinion? Did what I think really mean something to him? It never had before. The thought scared me. My mouth hung open. He reached over the coffee table and closed it with a single finger on my chin. He lightly scraped my skin with his fingernail. The heat from his touch scorched a path straight to my groin. I told myself it was only because booze and drugs weren't the only thing I had given up six months ago. I'd been celibate since the night I let Alex walk out of my hospital room. That had been the first of many hard choices I'd had to make before I could start on the road back. I left the hospital soon after, first to my sister's and then on to rehab. The months that had followed had been the hardest I'd ever lived. My sister hadn't been able to change my orientation, but she'd learn to accept that it was who I was and we no longer fought over it. Even my father had sent a card on my last birthday. I knew my sister was responsible for that. Maybe I did have a family after all.

I felt an unwanted heaviness between my legs and a hitch in my chest. I desperately prayed he wouldn't see either. I wasn't ready to give him that level of control again. Liar. I desperately wanted him to take it; to remove the decision



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from me. I had only ever felt alive when he was in charge. Obeying him had given me the greatest joy of my life. Even when I had fought him the hardest, defied him at every turn, I had craved his control. But having learned to live without him, I was content now, wasn't I? Oh, who was I kidding? I didn't need to see him in front of me, larger than life, to feel the electric charge through my hyper-alert body and know the answer to that. I was alive again. Could I really send him away like I had last time? Could I afford not to? Could I live with what he took away from me?

"You still haven't told me why you wanted to quit in the first place," I whispered, afraid of the answer. Praying I wasn't the reason.

"It seemed like it might be time," he said. "Now, I'm not so sure. How have you been, really?"

"F-fine."

"You look good." His fingers traced a lazy path down my chin, brushing my collarbone with the lightest of touches. I jumped.

"Alex."

"I missed you, Jason," he whispered. "Did you miss me?"

I couldn't speak. I could barely breath. Before I could catch it again, he stood up and pulled me up with him.

I sucked in air and tried to pull away from him, my traitorous body clamoring for his touch.

"What ... what do you want, Alex?"

He took my hand and pressed it against the bulge between his legs. He closed his eyes at my touch. The familiar heat poured off him. I licked my lips. Desire sizzled across every

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nerve ending. I vibrated with it. I had forgotten how sweet the torture of wanting him was.

"You. I want you."

And I wanted him so bad, my lust must be coming off me in waves. But that way terrified me. The last time I had taken it I had come too close to losing everything. I had crawled out of the gutter, sobered up and detoxed with the help of some new friends and had just started a new life. I wasn't going to fall back into the old one. Not even for the best man and the greatest sex I'd ever experienced.

"I don't think I can do this."

He sat back down and pulled me into his lap, his hand on my hip, his thumb lazily circling over my shivering flesh. He studied my face. Looking for what?

"I'm not in that life anymore," I said. "I need to trust the man who owns me. He has to believe me when I tell him I never touched anyone else—"

"I do believe you. I think I always knew you hadn't, but you got me so mad, I lost it. Please trust me." He put his finger over my lips, his gray eyes flashing behind his glasses. "You should know, I didn't just take leave from the PD. I quit everything else. I haven't been to the Vault in weeks. I was going to get rid of my toys but I couldn't let them go. They remind me too much of you. But I haven't used them on anyone else. I don't want anyone but you."

"Next you'll be telling me you gave up bondage altogether."

Same lop-sided grin. But he seemed easier with it now. Then I realized something: he seemed happier than I had

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ever seen him. "Not a chance," he said. "Some things I can't give up. You're one of them. I've been waiting for you."

"Why did you take so long to come back?"

"I was scared. What if you said, get lost again?" He stroked my cheek. I shivered under his touch, leaning into him. "Can't you trust me a little when I say it's you I want?"

I wanted to believe him. But could I? An out of control Spider was a dangerous thing. If he let that happen again it would kill me—and I don't mean in a real sense. An enraged Spider might do many things, but kill someone wasn't one of them. But I still knew he could hurt me in ways I might never be able to recover from.

"Let me prove it to you," he said.

He pulled me closer until I was straddling him. His body felt strong, his arms enclosed me in a haven of strength I had never stopped needing. His cock pressed against my belly. His breath was warm on my face. I surrendered to my need for him, and turned blindly toward his mouth, groaning when his tongue invaded mine. He was gentle at first, but that didn't last. Like a river that had burst its banks he threatened to swallow me. His hands skimmed down my back, folding around my ass and pulling me tighter. I felt the pulse of his cock through my suddenly too tight jeans. I pushed my hands up under his shirt, sliding over his hot skin. Memories flooded me. He shuddered and broke away. He stared up at me with glazed eyes, his mouth opened as he struggled for breath. When he skimmed my shirt off me, I saw his eyes skate over my hairless chest. I had let the hair on my head grow back, but I still shaved everything else every week. In memory? Or

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waiting for the day he came back? Had I just been on hold, waiting for this day? He moaned and bent to take my pierced nipple in his supple mouth, tugging it sharply with his teeth. One hand skidded down my smooth belly, sending electric shards of desire surging through me.

"So beautiful," he said.

"Bed," I managed to groan. "Over there."

I had a futon on the floor, never getting around to buying a real bed. It hadn't mattered until now. It still didn't. Spider didn't need a bed to make me feel like a king.

He half carried, half dragged me over and lay me down, kneeling beside me on the rumpled sheets. He moved over me, braced on either side of my head on arms that trembled. His pelvis pressed between the saddle of my thighs. He shackled my wrists with his hands, forcing them over my head, lowering his face and grazing on my open mouth.

"Tell me what you need, Jason. I'll give you anything." His mouth swallowed mine. "Please," he whispered. He released my hands and cradled my face, his thumbs caressing my lips.

I tried to speak, to tell him I wanted his cock up my ass, I wanted him pounding into me. I wanted the pain that so quickly turned to unbearable pleasure. I couldn't speak. Instead I fumbled with his zipper and reached for him, holding the hot velvet of his cock in my hands, stroking him. I gasped when he shoved my jeans down over my ankles.

"Fuck me," I said.

"Where...?" His voice was little more than a desperate groan. His need was contagious; my nerve endings sang with it.

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I kept a small bedside table where I stored whatever book I was currently reading. It had a single drawer where I kept a small supply of lube and condoms. They might sit there for weeks, in truth had never been used, but I wasn't going to be caught unprepared. I had been tested after my rehab and been pronounced virus free. I never intended to play that deadly game again. I pulled out the lube and a foil wrapped packet and handed it to him.

He took them with shaking hands. In the end I had to open the wrapper while he smeared my ass with warm gel and pushed two fingers inside me. He probed me gently, stroking the spongy tissue inside me. I nearly bit my tongue at the assault on my senses. When he slid his sheathed cock between my ass cheeks I raised my legs over his back, bracing against his rigid shoulders, opening myself up to him. He grew gentle again, inserting the fat head into my ass, making the first tentative foray past the tight ring of muscle guarding my hole. The first stroke of his cock over my prostate sent my senses into overdrive. I thrust up under him, silently demanding he fill me. Instead he teased me. Withdrawing until only the bulbous head was inside, then slipping most of the way in, only to pull out again. Only when I reached between my legs and cupped his swollen balls in my hand did he lose it. He moaned my name and pushed into me, burying himself up my ass. Again and again he thrust into me, his breath coming in shattered grunts, hot against my sweating skin, muttering guttural obscenities and whispered endearments in my ear, using words I'd never heard from him before.

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He rose above me, his face a mask of lust. Reaching between us, he wrapped his fist around my cock and began pumping me in rhythm to his thrusts. His touch was so sure, so knowing. But still he was gentle. Too gentle. I needed more. I needed my Alex back. I pushed him over and rolled with him, still impaled on his cock. He stared up at me, glazed eyes half lidded. I grabbed both his hands and planted them on my chest, pinching and pulling the rings that pierced my nipples, rocking against him. When he caught on, he squeezed my fat swollen nipples between his fingers and thrust up under me roughly.

"Yes," I muttered, leaning down to bite his throat. Only he could do this to me. Pain lanced straight from my nipples to my groin and I sucked in a groan. I threw my head back and shouted, "Harder. Harder!"

This time he obeyed me and we pounded toward release. My balls crawled up as my orgasm slammed into me. I roared his name as hot streamers of cum poured out of me, splashing over his fist and stomach. Inside me, his cock throbbed and pulsed as he emptied himself into the condom. With a shudder he pulled me down into his arms, his face pressed against my neck. I curled my hands around his head, feeling the sharp rasp of shaved hair under my fingers. In contrast, the skin below his ears was soft as silk.

We cuddled, something we had rarely done before or after sex prior to this. I traced the line of his cheek, jaw, throat, re-familiarizing myself with his personal geography. A pleasurable lassitude filled me. A coming home. His pulse beat under my fingertips. I felt the flutter of his eyelashes

against my throat. Their dampness startled me. Was he crying? Not my Alex. I pulled back and stared down at him. Diamond lights of moisture were scattered over his reddish lashes. He blinked them away, but I saw no shame there. Only a guileless need.

"Oh, baby," he murmured. "Did you miss me?"

I started laughing then, my whole body shaking and trembling in silent mirth. Within seconds he had joined me. Only when we were gasping for lack of air did we subside, lying side by side now, our sticky bellies pressed together, arms and legs entwined. He smoothed the damp hair off my forehead and stared into my eyes.

"You forgot something."

I struggled up onto one elbow. "What? At your place?"

"No." He leaned across me and pulled something out of his jean's pocket. "The hospital."

Before I could say anything else his fingers encircled my throat. When he sat up my hand went up and felt the supple leather collar he had put around my neck. My fingers traced the metal ring that rested above my Adam's apple. When his hand covered mine our eyes met. Before I knew what he was doing he clamped steel over my nipples, sending familiar shards of pain straight to my groin. Oh God, I wanted him again. Hard and rough, with no holding back this time. I wanted him to take me home to his sling and his leather hood and cuffs and show me how much he really needed me. Only he could give me that.

"Now," he whispered. "You belong to me. I love you, Jason Aaron Zachary," he said.

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I saw the truth of his words in his eyes. Once they had seemed so cold, like an ocean storm must look over the bow of a doomed ship, but now all I could see was the warmth of his love and adoration. I knew my eyes reflected the same thing.

I said the words anyway, because they were such a delight to say aloud.

"I love you, too."

Alex nuzzled my throat above the collar that symbolized everything I had ever hoped for. "Thank you," he said.

I played with the fine hair on his chest, leaned over and kissed his shoulder that smelled of warm sweat and cum and soap. He flipped me over and rose above me on stiff arms. He was aroused again.

"What for? For loving you?"

"For all the times I never said it when I should have. For everything."

I smiled up at him. He tightened his grip on my arm, and I surrendered to him completely.

"You're welcome."

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## About the Author

Pat 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: [www.pabrown.ca/](http://www.pabrown.ca/)

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## **the trevor project**

The Trevor Project operates the only nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Every day, The Trevor Project saves lives through its free and confidential helpline, its website and its educational services. If you or a friend are feeling lost or alone call The Trevor Helpline. If you or a friend are feeling lost, alone, confused or in crisis, please call The Trevor Helpline. You'll be able to speak confidentially with a trained counselor 24/7.

The Trevor Helpline: 866-488-7386

On the Web: [www.thetrevorproject.org/](http://www.thetrevorproject.org/)

## **the gay men's domestic violence project**

Founded in 1994, The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project is a grassroots, non-profit organization founded by a gay male survivor of domestic violence and developed through the strength, contributions and participation of the community. The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project supports victims and survivors through education, advocacy and direct services. Understanding that the serious public health issue of domestic violence is not gender specific, we serve men in relationships with men, regardless of how they identify, and stand ready to assist them in navigating through abusive relationships.

GMDVP Helpline: 800.832.1901

On the Web: [gmdvp.org/](http://gmdvp.org/)

## **the gay & lesbian alliance against defamation/glaad en español**

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (glaad) is dedicated to promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

On the Web: [www.glaad.org/](http://www.glaad.org/)

glaad en español: [www.glaad.org/espanol/bienvenido.php](http://www.glaad.org/espanol/bienvenido.php)

## **servicemembers legal defense network**

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, legal services, watchdog and policy organization dedicated to ending discrimination against and harassment of military personnel affected by "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (dadt). The sldn provides free, confidential legal services to all those impacted by dadt and related discrimination. Since 1993, its inhouse legal team has responded to more than 9,000 requests for assistance. In Congress, it leads the fight to repeal dadt and replace it with a law that ensures equal treatment for every servicemember, regardless of sexual orientation. In the courts, it works to challenge the constitutionality of dadt.

sldn Call: (202) 328-3244

PO Box 65301 or (202) 328-FAIR

Washington DC 20035-5301 e-mail: [sldn@sldn.org](mailto:sldn@sldn.org)

On the Web: [sldn.org/](http://sldn.org/)

## **the glbt national help center**

The glbt National Help Center is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization that is dedicated to meeting the needs of the

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gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community and those questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity. It is an outgrowth of the Gay & Lesbian National Hotline, which began in 1996 and now is a primary program of The glbt National Help Center. It offers several different programs including two national hotlines that help members of the glbt community talk about the important issues that they are facing in their lives. It helps end the isolation that many people feel, by providing a safe environment on the phone or via the internet to discuss issues that people can't talk about anywhere else. The glbt National Help Center also helps other organizations build the infrastructure they need to provide strong support to our community at the local level.

National Hotline: 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)

National Youth Talkline 1-800-246-PRIDE (1-800-246-7743)

On the Web: [www.glnh.org/](http://www.glnh.org/)

e-mail: [info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org](mailto:info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org)

If you're a GLBT and questioning student heading off to university, should know that there are resources on campus for you. Here's just a sample:

US Local GLBT college campus organizations

[dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html](http://dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html)

GLBT Scholarship Resources [tinyurl.com/6fx9v6](http://tinyurl.com/6fx9v6)

Syracuse University [lgbt.syr.edu/](http://lgbt.syr.edu/)

Texas A&M [glt.tamu.edu/](http://glt.tamu.edu/)

Tulane University [www.oma.tulane.edu/LGBT/Default.htm](http://www.oma.tulane.edu/LGBT/Default.htm)

University of Alaska [www.uaf.edu/agla/](http://www.uaf.edu/agla/)

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University of California, Davis [lgbtrc.ucdavis.edu/](http://lgbtrc.ucdavis.edu/)

University of California, San Francisco [lgbt.ucsf.edu/](http://lgbt.ucsf.edu/)

University of Colorado [www.colorado.edu/glbtrc/](http://www.colorado.edu/glbtrc/)

University of Florida [www.dso.ufl.edu/multicultural/lgbt/](http://www.dso.ufl.edu/multicultural/lgbt/)

University of Hawai'i, Manoa

[manoa.hawaii.edu/lgbt/](http://manoa.hawaii.edu/lgbt/)

University of Utah [www.sa.utah.edu/lgbt/](http://www.sa.utah.edu/lgbt/)

University of Virginia

[www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbt/](http://www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbt/)

Vanderbilt University [www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/)