

L. A. Mischief

by

P. A. Brown

A novella featuring David Laine and Christopher Bellamere

Including a bonus: two David and Chris short stories

Halloween Pickup

Kidnapped

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L. A. Heat

Dedication

To my family, who were there for me when I almost wasn't.

Acknowledgements

To my daughter, Victoria Bruce, who's really thinks I'm weird for writing this stuff, but accepts me anyway.

And to Neil Plakcy and Mark Jesko who have been there from the first iteration of Chris and David and always encouraged me to go further.

To Leslie Nicoll who gave new life to Chris and David and made this collection a reality.

And once more to *Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles*, the city of Angels, without which there would be no stories.

Chapter 1

Sunday, 9:20 am, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

CHRISTOPHER BELLAMERE ROLLED over and bumped up against a solid wall of muscle. His fingers fanned through the thick chest hair and encircled a turgid nipple. He smiled.

“David,” he breathed and rose up on one elbow to greet his lover.

Only the muddy brown eyes that started back at him didn’t have that familiar green tint.

Not David.

His mind went blank. God, what was his name? Where was he? Who had he gone home with this time—a thick fingered hand closed over his semi-hard cock and worked him roughly into full hardness.

Not David.

“Hey, sexy.” Wet lips hovered over his face, breathing sour alcohol laden breath into his mouth. Belatedly he realized he was at home in his own bed. So he’d broken rule number one, never bring a trick home. Had he broken his other rule? His head was pounding, whether from too much booze or fear he didn’t know. He scrambled over to the side of the bed and peered into the trash can. Chills crawled up his spine and lodged behind his throat. No condoms. Not-David dragged him back and threw him onto his stomach, raising his hips off the rumpled bed clothes.

What the hell had he done?

Memories were slamming back into him with train wreck speed. He had finished off a ten hour job at Pharmaden configuring a new SAN that had been plagued with malicious gremlins that had turned what should have been a four hour job into a ten hour nightmare.

When he had finally stumbled out of Pharmaden’s subbasement he had desperately needed a drink—or three. He had driven the Lexus SUV he could no longer afford back to Silver Lake and hit the first bar he had passed. Just his luck it was the Nosh Pit.

He really had only meant to have a single martini. But the first one had tasted so good he had to have a second. It was only fair; he’d really gone above and beyond on this job. He was entitled to blow off some steam.

Not-David pushed his face into the damp sweaty pillows and shoved his thick cock into Chris’s already sore ass. Chris yelled and tried to throw the nameless man off him. When that failed he bit his pillow and closed his eyes.

“You like that, don’t you? I knew you liked it rough the minute I saw you looking all pretty and drunk trolling for me and trying to look so innocent.”

Had he really been that drunk? Apparently. He remembered the look of disgust on Ramsey the bartender’s face when he had staggered out of the john with not-David in tow, both of them looking

disheveled and stinking of sex and poppers. Chris hadn't done poppers since before David—

Abruptly his mind shied away from those memories.

The guy plowed him hard, ignoring his cries of pain, finally emptying himself into Chris's gut. Chris immediately fled to the bathroom where he tried in vain to clean himself out. He peered uneasily into the toilet. At least there was no blood. The guy hadn't ripped him open.

He wrapped a silk robe around his shivering frame and forced himself back into the room. The not-David was sitting up in bed, smoking a joint.

"There's no smoking in here," he said stiffly.

Not-David let his muddy brown eyes crawl over Chris's thinly clad body. "That's not what you said last night."

"Yeah, well, I said a lot of things last night. Put it out, would you?"

By the time Ramsey had delivered his fifth drink and taken his car keys Chris was feeling no pain and that was just fine.

Not-David shrugged and Chris winced when he stubbed the joint out on the Wedgewood plate Des had given him for Christmas last year.

"I've got to get ready for work," he lied, looking around surreptitiously for the clothes he had discarded the night before. They were everywhere. Whatever else had happened, he had been in a damned hurry to get naked with this guy. His ass hurt, telling him exactly what he had done—several times, judging from the pain. He really had to stop drinking like that.

He studied the not-David from behind the screen of his eyelashes. He wasn't David, but damn him to hell, he *looked* like David. How unfair was that? No doubt that was why he had glommed onto the guy so fast. What the hell did that say about him? David was so last month. In fact, hadn't it been four weeks yesterday? That explained his trip down memory lane.

He tried not to think of the last time he had seen David. But the memories wouldn't stop. The train thundered on. The morning he had told his lover of six weeks, the man he had sworn he loved to death, that it wasn't going to work, and being crushed by the look of relief on David's craggy face.

Darrel. That was it. Darrel Something... Poke. Darrel Poke. Chris was sure there was a joke in there someplace.

Chris had no idea when he'd actually shown up at the Nosh Pit. Late, probably. Darrel didn't look like the usual Pit habitué. He'd probably run out of fuck prospects somewhere else and hit the Pit as a last resort. And Chris had been waiting. Hungry and eager to be taken for a ride.

He winced when he followed Darrel to the front door where he let the man out. No kiss. No flowers. What was romance coming to these days? Not even a smoldering look and a sly 'Later.' Just gone, jauntily strolling down Cove Avenue, toward the stairs that would take him to Glendale Boulevard where he would no doubt troll for a ride, or maybe another fuck.

Chris didn't care. He shut and locked the door and dragged his sore ass back upstairs where he stood

under a scalding shower long enough to empty the hot water tank. Finally he stepped out, shivering, onto the plush mat and toweled himself dry. He ached a little less and he didn't walk like a refugee from the rodeo circuit. Downstairs again he put the water on to boil and readied the Melitta coffee maker.

Memories of David continued to crowd his mind. He slammed the coffee mug and his flavored cream down on the kitchen table with a curse. Damn David. Damn himself for still remembering.

It had been David who had made their relationship an impossibility. David who had clung to the closet even as he spent nearly every night at Chris's place or Chris at his. They had fucked like rabbits in those first few weeks, unleashing a hunger neither of them had ever experienced.

But it hadn't been enough, had it? David had sharply told him not to call him at work and when Chris broke that cardinal rule, David had exploded. Chris had to respect his work was off limits. What he did as a cop was not Chris's business. He held nothing back about his own life, even his less than stellar past had been admitted to. David hadn't been impressed but he had endured the telling.

Or had he? Had the seeds already been sown for their breakup. Face it, David had been dragged kicking and screaming out of the closet. That he had outed himself by calling his partner to the crime scene at Chris's house was in the end, immaterial. David hated the ridicule he endured from his enlightened brethren in blue. He had never been able to forgive Chris for being everything he wanted in a man.

Then two nights ago his sister called, asking about Thanksgiving. "Thanksgiving?" Chris had said. "We haven't even had Halloween yet."

"I know," she replied, "but I'm cooking this year and want to make sure I'll be setting a place for David."

That's when he told her that he would be there alone. She had exploded. How had he managed to fuck up this relationship so fast?

"David was the best thing that's ever happened to you and you screwed it up? Where's your head at, little brother?"

"Up my ass," Chris had muttered before getting off the phone. He needed his sister's censure like he needed another asshole. Like he needed anyone telling him how bad he'd messed up.

His landline phone rang. He shambled over and lifted the receiver. "Yes?" he barked.

"Where the hell were you last night?" Des's normally soft voice was edged in anger and hysteria. Oh shit, Des was having another panic attack.

"Last night? What—" Then it hit him. He had been scheduled to meet with Des and his therapist at the abuse counselor's office. Des was having lingering problems with his horrific rape at the hands of the Carpet Killer only a few months ago. His lover Kyle had been killed by the man who had then gone on to brutally violate Des and damn near killed him in the process. Chris was supposed to be helping him get over it.

Instead he was out getting drunk and stoned and fucked by a total stranger. Oh this day couldn't get any worse.

He was wrong.

“I saw him,” Des whispered. “He came to my room last night and told me what he had done to K-Kyle. Then he said he was going to do so much worse to me. His voice... his voice... I’m so cold, Chris. I can’t seem to get warm anymore.”

Chris squeezed the phone in his hand. “You’re safe, hon. He’s gone. I—he’s gone.” He had been going to say ‘I killed him’ but he still had problems facing that knowledge himself. “He can’t hurt you anymore—”

“Don’t you think I know that? He’s dead. I know that. It doesn’t matter. You heard Dr. Weiser.”

“Are you breathing, Des? Focus on that poster we talked about. The one with Lauren and Humphrey.” At one of their sessions Dr. Weiss, his therapist had suggested that one way Des could help himself through a panic attack triggered by his PTSD was to pick out a favorite movie poster in his living room and examine it in minute detail. Focusing the mind like that could divert it from its destructive path.

“I’m sorry, Des—”

“You forgot?” Des’s voice rose. “How could you? You promised.”

“Something came up.”

“I don’t believe you. I needed you—”

Chris shut his eyes against the pain in his friend’s voice. “Des, hon.” He wanted to beg for Des’s forgiveness but he knew from talking to Weiser that would only escalate Des’s fear. Instead he said, “I’ll be right over.”

But Des was past being soothed. His breath was coming in short, shallow gasps and Chris didn’t need to see to know Des was clutching the phone with white knuckled ferocity and his skin would be clammy and cold.

“Breathe, hon,” Chris felt his own panic threatening him. He hated to see his best friend going through this. Hate what that monster that he had brought into their lives had done to Des. It was pure luck that he hadn’t met the same fate.

“Oh God, oh God, I can’t breathe.”

“Sit down, Des. Where are you? In the living room? Sit down on the love seat. Look at the wall. What do you see?” Chris was glad Des had gotten rid of the furniture that had been in the house when Kyle died. He had tried to convince Des to sell the Beverly Hills bungalow, but Des had refused to take that final step.

“I’m going to hang up now, Des,” Chris said slowly, hoping Des was hearing him. Understood. “I’m going to call you back on my BlackBerry.”

“All right,” Des said dispiritedly.

Chris bolted upstairs and threw on clean clothes, slipped on some Dockers and ran out the door. He clipped his Bluetooth earpiece on and dialed Des before he had even backed the Lexus out onto Cove.

Des was slow to answer and he was sweating by the time his friend picked up.

“Jesus, Des,” he cried. “Don’t do that. I’m on my way. I’ll be there in twenty. You hanging in there?”

“No, I’m not ‘hanging in there.’ Why did I bother calling you? Can you tell me that, Chris? I thought we were supposed to be friends. What was so important that you couldn’t make my appointment? Was it a guy? You spent the night getting fucked?”

Chris winced. No way he could tell Des the truth. Yes he’d screwed up royally, but all he could do now was try to fix things. Like anyone could fix Des right now. Only time and lots of love would do that. And Chris wasn’t sure he had enough of either to give.

Return to TOC

Chapter 2

Monday, 7:30 am, Northeast Community Police Station,

San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

THE SQUAD ROOM was a noisy cacophony of phone calls and low pitched voices. Somewhere a desk drawer slammed and a chair squeaked. David Eric Laine paid very little attention to anyone around him. He was intent on the voice on the other end of the phone, who was calling to report a missing and abducted eighteen year old woman.

“When did you last see Holly?” David asked with a show of patience he was far from feeling.

“Thursday night. We met for coffee at Starbucks, you know the one up on Los Feliz?”

“Yes, ma’am, I’m familiar.” David scribbled on the notebook he had opened in front of him when the call had first come through, thinking then it might be legit. He was having serious doubts about that now. Across from him his partner of seven years, Martinez Diego sat chewing on peanuts he was taking out of a bag of fresh roast he had brought in that morning. Martinez was on a recent health kick and had heard peanuts were the new blueberries. David was skeptical, but, hey if it worked for the guy... He had his own phone pinned under his shoulder. When he caught David looking at him he rolled his eyes and pantomimed lips moving. He had a talker too.

“Well, we met up there and Holly was all excited. She saw some news story on the TV about sightings.”

“Sightings, ma’am? I don’t follow.”

“Sightings. Lights, physical phenomena. She said they were all over Griffith Park. Probably came to look over the observatory up there. Maybe they think we’re spying on them.”

“Yes, ma’am. What happened then? Did you leave Starbucks together?”

“Yes,” the woman who had introduced herself as Meagan Dupress early in the conversation, seemed impatient. Like David should be getting it by now and wasn’t. “She was going to go home and I was off to work.”

“And where do you work, ma’am?”

“Kressler Auto, on South Brand. Car sales. We’re open till nine and I was doing the evening shift.”

“Yes, ma’am. What then?”

“Well I don’t think she went home. I think she went up to the park to find them.”

“Find who, ma’am?”

“The aliens. Don’t you get it, officer? The aliens took her. God knows what they’re doing to her as we speak. You have to put out an APB on her. They could be torturing her right now. Something unspeakable.”

“I, ah, seriously doubt that, ma’am. I’m sure aliens wouldn’t come all the way here to do that.”

“That’s what they want you to think. What about Roswell? Area 51?” she crowed triumphantly. “The government’s been covering that up for years. Didn’t you see Independence Day?”

David dropped his head into his hand and massaged his temple. He hadn’t noticed a full moon last night but what else could it be? Certainly not aliens. Ah, that’s right. It was Halloween. No wonder she was seeing little green men. They were probably trick or treating at the observatory.

“If you like ma’am, I can have a patrol car sweep that area—what did you call it? Area 51?”

“No, no, you don’t get it. Area 51 is in New Mexico. That secret government installation where they’re hiding the alien bodies!”

“Yes, of course. New Mexico. Then how can I help you, ma’am?”

“Find Holly. She’s in the park. I just know it.”

Along with the little green men? David thanked his caller and said he’d have a patrol car keep an eye out for Holly and her ‘abductors.’ Thankfully Meagan seemed satisfied with that.

He looked up again to find Martinez off his line looking despondent. “Feel like taking a drive?” he asked before Martinez could speak.

“Where?”

“Griffith Park.” He tried to keep a straight face but Martinez knew him too well.

“What?”

“We’re looking for one Holly Barnes, recently abducted by aliens. No doubt being anal-probed as we speak.”

“Alien—You’re serious?”

“I’m not, but her friend was. Government cover-up. Hidden space ships and lights in the sky.”

“Always wanted to find me one of those. The kids would love one under the tree at Christmas.”

Martinez's grin slipped. "So you doing anything important right now?"

"Yeah, calling the FBI about a possible UFO abduction, what do you think?"

"I think you need to get out more."

David didn't wince outwardly, but he did inside. He *had* been getting out more since his silent break up with Chris—silent at least in the eyes of his partner. He hadn't made a big deal of the fact that they were no longer seeing each other and Martinez would never ask.

Martinez would be comfortable with never hearing about David's aberration ever again.

But David had been going out. It shamed him no end, but he'd had a taste of what it was like to be open about his sexuality and he was loath to crawl back into the closet completely. So he went out.

And sampled.

Each morning after he berated himself for letting his libido control him, and most nights he could ignore the call, but then the pressure would build up and he would have to find an outlet for it. It had been three days since his last breakout and his body was giving him the unmistakable signals that it was time.

So far he'd fought it, but he knew, deep in his gut, that the fight was one-sided.

The only question was where he would pursue his pleasure.

He had avoided the places in Silver Lake and WeHo where he knew Chris hung out. He didn't think he could stand to see Chris using his considerable charms on some other man. He wasn't prepared to go back to the rare trip to Palm Springs but he had to find a place Chris wasn't likely to go. He settled on The Eagle, a leather bar in Silver Lake. He wasn't at the point of giggling himself up, but he loved the way it looked on a muscular man.

Even that shamed him.

He forced his overheated thoughts back to the moment. He focused on Martinez. "Got something in mind?"

"Just got a call out for a drive-by on Drew Street. Interested?"

"Let's check it out."

Drew Street in Glassell Park was a notorious gang hangout primarily run by the Avenue gang, a subset of the Crips. A gang injunction had been laid against them and a major bust had led to numerous arrests of high-ranking gang leaders. But like a bad smell, the gang regrouped and was back in business.

Ironically, they were only a couple of hundred yards from the Northeast Police Station as a ghetto falcon flew.

This drive-by had netted two bodies, one of them a six year old. The kids were always the worst. They stood on the front steps of the structure called the Twin Towers after the Los Angeles County Jail in downtown L.A. because so many of the residents were ex-cons, staring down at the tiny body curled up under a rusted out lawn chair. The second victim, an older teen, lay on the lawn, her short skirt and T

hiked up over bare legs. A single gunshot wound marred the nearly flawless skin of her forehead.

David crouched to get a closer look. Near the graffiti-covered street several shell casings from a nine millimeter weapon had been recovered.

“Who was she?”

“Avenue gangbanger, Maria Real. That’s her daughter, age six. No one seems to know who the father is.” Martinez looked bleak. “Pretty much the same news all over.”

David glanced out at the street, studying a pair of tennis shoes that had been tossed over the power line in front of the apartment. The silent signal that the dealers were in and open for business. His gaze swept back over the yard then out to the street where the shooters had probably driven. Had the woman been their target? Or just collateral damage?

“Any one see anything?”

“You’re joking, right?”

David sighed. Right. No one ever saw anything on Drew Street.

Larry Vance the SID crime scene technician stepped out of his van, lugging his 3D Leica camera. A second tech was flagging the shell casings and any other evidence the site might yield. He didn’t expect much.

In the real world there would be no fingerprints on the shell casings. No tire marks would be matched to some unique vehicle that only one particular gangbanger drove. And of course, no witnesses would develop a conscience and risk their lives to clean up Glassell.

They spent hours canvassing the neighborhood then called in a couple of patrols in to take the canvass through the Twin Towers. You never knew. Sometimes you got lucky. And it never hurt to tell the bad guys you were on to them. One thing about Glassell, there was no interest from the local news hawks. Glassell didn’t register on the radar of the average Cali reader.

They grabbed lunch out of a *mariscos* truck in Eagle Rock and headed back to the station to write up their reports. The autopsy would be scheduled later. They hadn’t decided which of them would attend.

They spent the afternoon going over various cases, including writing up a sixty-day report on another Drew Street homicide that still hadn’t yielded any suspects, and at this late date wasn’t likely to. David had a bad feeling about this latest one. Drew Street homicides had a dismal habit of entering a black clueless hole.

That evening David was scheduled to speak at the monthly Community-Police Advisory Board. It wasn’t his first choice of a night’s entertainment, but the Lieutenant wanted him there. David figured it had as much to do with his being gay as his media savvy. He spent the last hour at his desk going over his notes.

Dinner was leftovers and a Bud. The CAPA meeting went without any major public blow-ups. The Drew Street shooting was mentioned, but David wasn’t surprised when no one seemed willing to apportion any blame to the young teen mother who had chosen the life and taken her daughter with her. Just one more dead banger, probably killed by one of her own people.

Thirty minutes after the meeting was ended, he entered the Eagle. He could hear the heavy beat of rock music through his feet. He slipped off his Ray Bans and nodded at the bouncer. Inside the TV screens were full of hard core porn and the dark paneled walls were covered with posters advertising upcoming shows. He stared at a heavily muscled blond wearing a leather and chrome harness and a skimpy jock that barely concealed his massive cock and balls while he waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. The guy looked back with interest.

David stepped up to the bar and got his Bud and retreated to the patio where the music was softer. He studied the sparse crowd. The air was full of sexual tension and smelled of testosterone and poppers. He watched three men playing tonsil hockey grope each others' rigid cocks. He got hard as he let himself play with the fantasy: what would a threesome be like? It wasn't long before he felt the presence beside him and a hand went between his legs, cupping his hard-on.

Moist lips traced the outline of his jaw and nibbled on his ear lobe.

"Was hoping you'd come in tonight."

He turned and looked down into Blair's dark eyes. "I wasn't going to."

"My loss."

David pulled muscular black man into his embrace. "No," he said huskily. "Mine."

The heavily muscled blond walked out onto the patio and David's eyes slid over him again, raw lust on his features. Blair picked up on the look and desire as he pressed his hot lips against David's throat. "Interested in a three-way?" he whispered.

"Maybe," David answered, his voice husky.

Just before his lips closed over David's Blair murmured, "Let me ask around."

Tuesday, 2:30 am, Piedmont Avenue, Glendale

David stared down at Blair on his knees in front of him, his cock down his throat, his long fingers around his hips, kneading the flesh of his ass. Behind him the tall blond had his cock pressed against David's ass. Wearing only his leather chaps, Blair was all muscles and sleek hardness. His talented mouth was wrapped around David's cock and David was hoarsely urging him on. His balls crawled up against the base of his cock and he almost lost it. David abruptly pulled him away. When Blair looked up, his wet mouth open, his eyes glazed, David drew him to his feet and silently propelled him around to lean over the arm of his easy chair facing the dark TV. Blair obeyed without a word and spread himself for David. He skimmed a condom on, already leaking pre-come, and slathered it with lube. Then he shoved it up Blair, who yelled and rammed his ass backward to take him in deeper. At the same time their silent partner, Toby, fell to his knees and began rimming David. David cried out and grabbed Blair's hips to steady himself.

"Hold on," David growled as he began to plow into Blair, until they were all panting and gasping for air. His orgasm mounted again and this time he gave it free rein. He grabbed Blair's thick cock in his hand and using his pre-come as lube, began pulling hard on him, matching the rhythm of his thrusts. He slammed into his orgasm, his legs going rigid as he filled the condom reservoir with come and felt the pulse of Blair's orgasm splash over his fist and Blair's stomach. Behind him Toby was pumping his own

cock toward orgasm. Before it came, David spun around and dropped to his knees, taking Toby into his mouth. Toby grabbed David's head and rammed his cock down his throat. He howled when he orgasmed, his whole body going taut as he poured salty come down David's throat.

Only the chair arm kept them from tumbling to the carpeted floor. This time David helped Blair shed his chaps and led them into his bedroom, where they stretched out on his queen bed, touching along their whole length, knees, hips, shoulders. Blair and Toby played with the thick mat of dark hair on David's chest, moving down to circle both balls with tender fingers. Black, brown and white. A walking porn movie.

"I'm glad you came down to the Eagle last night," Blair murmured against David's throat as they all drifted in and out of sleep. They dozed for a while, though David had no idea how long. He awoke to find Blair watching him.

"Guess I fell asleep."

"Yeah." Blair stroked his rapidly hardening cock. "What are you doing tonight?" he asked.

"Don't know yet—" David's cell shrilled in the silent room. He lunged for it, pulling it out of the chinos he had shed earlier, before they had moved the game to the living room where Blair and Toby could model their gear.

"Laine here," he barked into the phone.

It was Martinez. "Got a DB at Forest Lawn."

David frowned. "Lots of them there."

"Yeah, well this one ain't in a coffin and he's missing a few body parts. We've got a dog team coming out to try to find them."

"What kind of body parts?" David asked suspiciously. It wasn't like Martinez to be coy.

"Head. Hands. *Pingo* —"

"Pin—" It took David two seconds to remember that meant cock. "Jesus."

"Yeah."

"I'll be right there."

Grabbing fresh underwear, and regretting that he had no time to shower, he stooped and kissed Blair lightly on his stubbly chin. At his signal Toby grabbed his own clothes and got dressed; Blair stayed on the bed. "Gotta run," David said. "Lock up?"

"Sure. See you tonight?"

David shook his head. Unless this one turned out to be a slam dunk, he could easily be working it for the next day or more. "Don't know. Don't count on it."

Blair nodded. Not happy, but then he'd learned fast the kind of hours a cop kept. He was an EMT, so

he understood. David thought of Chris and how he had never adapted. Had never made the adjustments so necessary in any kind of relationship with a cop.

No, don't start thinking about Chris. It's done. It should never have started in the first place. Chris was a mistake, and David wasn't going to make another one like it.

He jerked on his pants, then checked his weapons, a Glock .45 and a backup .38 he wore on his ankle. He shrugged on a jacket and headed to the bedroom door. Behind him he heard Toby collecting his gear and tugging on the jeans he had worn to the Eagle under his leather chaps. David turned and watched him dress, wishing he didn't have to run. Already regretting his impetuosity the night before. Was he losing his mind? How else to explain the insane risk taking. He was a cop, for God's sake. He knew all too well what happened to guys who took risks like that. Then his gaze drifted toward Blair.

"Grab a shower if you want. There's a coffee maker in the kitchen."

"That's okay, I'll grab a Starbucks on my way home. Call me."

David nodded, his mind already tracking ahead. Building a mental image of what Martinez had described to him. Knowing already it was going to be a messy one. He glanced again at Toby. "I can drop you someplace."

"Sure."

He let them out, locking up behind them. He let Toby out on Chevy Chase Drive and didn't watch as he walked away. Then he sped south toward Forest Lawn.

Return to TOC

Chapter 3

Tuesday, 6:20 am, Palm Drive, Beverly Hills

DES'S USUALLY SPOTLESS Beverly Hills bungalow looked like a cyclone had rolled through it. Dirty clothes littered the living room floor, something Chris didn't think he'd ever seen in all the years he'd known Des. There were even dirty dishes in the normally immaculate kitchen. Chris hadn't been brave enough to visit the master bedroom and en suite bath yet.

He pulled out Des's Rolodex. As much as he had harped on his friend, Des had never entered the twenty-first century. The only computer he allowed in the house was the one his accountant used to keep his books.

Flipping through the cards, he had little trouble finding Des's cleaning company. Beverly Hills Angels, providing a heavenly clean, or so said the business card he had attached to his tab. He called them, got an answering machine and left a message. He wondered when Des had canceled the service and what had he been thinking when he had done so. Maybe Des was a lot worse off than Chris suspected.

When he had finally reached Des's place last night, he had found Des huddled on the love seat, staring unseeing at the wall full of movie posters he had been collecting for as long as Chris had known him. His gaze was locked on the Bogart and Bacall poster for *The Big Sleep*, one of Des's favorite movies. Chris knew he wasn't actually seeing the image. Instead he suspected images of a killer haunted his waking mind.

Chris had gently touched Des's shoulder, who jumped and screamed at the light touch. Chris's heart slammed into his throat.

"Des! It's me."

He spotted an empty bottle of prescription pills and with trepidation picked it up. Alprazolam—Xanax—prescribed by Dr. Forsyth. He met Des's glazed eyes. "Who's this?"

"What?"

"This isn't your doctor. Who's Dr. Forsyth?"

Des waved his hand languidly. "Just this guy."

Chris slammed the bottle down on the Tema coffee table. Des flinched. "What the hell does that mean? Weiser is your doctor—where'd you find this guy?"

"Clive told me about him."

"Clive?" The little queen who worked in Des's boutique on Robertson. The guy made Des seem emotionally stable. Not the smartest person to be getting medical advice from. "He uses this..." he was going to say quack, instead he said, "guy?"

"So did Kyle," Des said bleakly.

Oh great. The endorsement of a flaky dead man. "Does Weiser know you're seeing this other... doctor?"

"Of course... yes," Des grew flustered. "I don't know. I think I told him."

Chris headed into the kitchen where he knew Des kept his meds and began pawing through the drawer, finding half a dozen bottles, only half of which had been written by Dr. Weiser. He held up the Ativan Weiser had prescribed, after telling both Des and Chris it was for short term use only until Des's therapy began to help. He had also prescribed propranolol, a beta-blocker to go along with the CBT, or cognitive behavioral therapy he hoped would help Des work his way through the trauma of the attack and rape. But he had been firm, explaining that Des wasn't going to become whole again by dosing himself with chemicals. Apparently Des didn't agree.

Chris carried the meds back to Des who was still staring at the Bacall poster.

He got between Des and the poster. "What are you on, Des?"

"Nothing."

"How many did you take?" Chris held up the empty vial of Xanax. He added the half empty vial of Ativan and waved it under Des's nose. This close he could smell something else. He reared back. "Jesus, Des, have you been drinking, too? You know you can't drink and take these things."

"Why not?" Des said. "You do."

That stopped Chris cold.

“You think I didn’t see you come crawling out of the Pit stinking of poppers and booze and God knows what else? Maybe you started fucking your toys in public bathrooms again. What’s next, park rest stops? Cruising Griffith Park? I thought you were better than that. I thought—” Abruptly he turned away. “You stopped for David. You were good with him.” He jerked away from Chris’s touch. “David was the best thing that ever happened to you and you threw him away. How could you do that?”

“I never...”

“Yes! You did!” Des slammed his fists into his thighs. “I watched you. I lost everything when Kyle died. My baby... but you, you threw yours away.”

“It wasn’t like that. Hell, we tried. But it was hard. He’s not like me—”

“No, he’s not. He was good. He wasn’t one of your pieces of mindless eye-candy. He’s was the only real man you ever met. And he loved you. But you could never see that, could you?”

“He was a cop,” Chris hissed. “A danger junkie. Every morning he went out the door and I never knew if he was coming back. Do you know how that feels?”

“He was not a danger junkie. He was always careful. He always tried to protect you from his world. What’s wrong with that? He knew how ugly it could get.” Tears sprang up in Des’s dark eyes. “I know,” he whispered. “I found out just how ugly it could be. He didn’t want you to ever have to face what I did.”

“Except I did, didn’t I?” Chris was shouting now. He didn’t know why Des was attacking him like this. Des had always been the gentlest of souls. What had gotten into him? It had to be the drugs. “I did face it. He tried to kill me too. He would have raped me—”

“David saved you from that, didn’t he?”

“And you hate me for that, don’t you?”

“Oh God, Chris.” Tears rolled down Des’s face. “I don’t hate you. I love you. Can’t you get that through your thick head?”

“Hey,” Chris said weakly.

“Sometimes you are such an idiot. Don’t you know David was the best thing that ever happened to you? He made you somebody.”

“What was I before? Chopped liver?” But Chris’s attempt at humor failed miserably. Des wasn’t laughing. He sniffed and wiped his nose, smearing snot all over the sleeve of his Adam Senn. Chris crouched down and took Des’s cold hands in his. He tried to rub some warmth into them. He remembered talking to Weiser about what Des would be going through as he recovered from his loss. “You wish you had died instead of Kyle.” That was the big one: survivor guilt. It was all too common.

“That’s crazy—”

“Is it? Kyle died—” He ignored Des’s wince, “and you lived. That’s the hard reality. Face it. It’s not

fair. Get over it. Life's not fair."

"Jesus, I know that."

"Yeah, I'm sure you do." Chris tapped his head. "In here." Then his chest. "But not here. You loved him. I know that. He left you. That's a hard betrayal."

"He didn't leave me. He died!"

"Same thing, isn't it? Maybe it wasn't his choice, but the bottom line is he left you alone to face this." Chris gripped Des's hands so hard both their knuckles turned white. "But you're not alone. I'm here. I've always been here, Des. You have to know that."

"I—"

Chris stood up and pulled Des up with him. He could feel Des's shoulders shake and smelled his fear under the stink of booze. He wrapped his arms around his best friend. Des resisted his embrace for about ten seconds then he grabbed Chris like he was a drowning man. Sobs wracked his slender frame and his fists closed spasmodically on Chris's shirt.

Chris patted his back, feeling his hot tears on his neck.

"It's going to be okay. We'll get through this, hon. Trust me."

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Chapter 4

Tuesday, 7:10 am, Forest Lawn Memorial Gardens,

Glendale Avenue, Los Angeles

THE SUN WAS just coming up over the headstones, heavy mist flowed between ghostly sycamores, eucalyptus trees, and stately Cyprus. Martinez looked around the cemetery and shuddered. For the first time since David had known him his partner crossed himself, proving you could take the man out of the church but not the church out of the man.

"Don't like cemeteries?"

"Don't like knowing all those worm feasts are under my feet." Martinez grimaced. "It doesn't bother you?"

David shrugged. In truth he didn't think about it. David looked around the manicured lawns and carefully cultivated flower beds. "Nat King Cole is interred here. So's Sam Cook." David doubted if Martinez even knew who that was.

"And Lucille Ball. And Spencer Tracy. Who doesn't know that?"

"Johnny Burnette."

“Who?”

“Singer. Don’t worry about it.”

Martinez grunted. They spotted the pair of unis who had been dispatched after the 911 call. Earlier that morning distraught teens had gone into the memorial garden on a Halloween lark and found a real world horror.

Up a gentle incline, they passed one of the dozens of faux Greek mausoleums gracing the ornate grounds. The coroner was already there. The photographer struggled up the slope, his heavy camera in tow. Overhead a red-tailed hawk climbed with the rising air and circled, looking for something small and tasty. In a nearby sycamore a flock of starlings complained.

The body had been laid out on a grassy patch between two nondescript grave markers, directly south of an ornate cross with the name Roderick N. Parker, b. Jun 15, 1966, d. Oct 31, 1994. David noted the date on the cross.

“Last night.” He was deliberately ignoring the body at this point. Until Lopez was done he wanted to concentrate on the surroundings. They might give some context to the reason the body was there, and not under a freeway overpass on the Grapevine. “Significant?”

“Halloween always brings out the kooks,” Martinez muttered. “Some kind of ritual?”

David frowned. He finally let his eyes skate over the mutilated form on the nearly bloodless grass. He didn’t need the ME to tell him death hadn’t occurred here. Not enough blood. Ritual? Please don’t let that rumor start.

Every few years stories of devil worship and ritual sacrifice would surface and a kind of minimal hysteria would erupt, take over the voracious media only to fade away when the glamour and shock had faded. The dead stayed dead and no cloven-hoofed demons were ever summoned forth to wreak havoc on a jaded populace.

He shot a quick glance around and wasn’t surprised to see the press had already started to arrive. A van from channel 5 unloaded a crew and he could hear the reporter’s commands to the cameraman who slung his equipment around to capture the activity.

David signaled one of the unis, a gray-haired two striper. “Let’s get a screen in place, Sergeant. Preserve our scene as much as we can.”

“Yes, sir.”

There was a flurry of activity as a second outer perimeter of crime scene tape was strung up to ensure the integrity of the scene. David got up to speed on what the unis had found on their arrival. Not much. Three distraught teens who were now sitting in the back of the patrol car awaiting the detectives’ attention, a mutilated corpse and no visible weapons. No insect activity either. All signs pointed to the corpse being recently deceased and dumped.

They’d have to wait for the ME to give a more accurate time of death. Once they had that they could start looking at the how and the where. It might even get them a who and a why.

“Let’s go talk to our witnesses.”

David and Martinez retraced their steps and approached the black and white shop where three scared, white-faced teens huddled together in the back seat. David signaled the trio to follow them. The portable command center had arrived and they led the trio into the RV, shutting the door from the prying eyes and ears of the press.

After noting the time, their rank and the names and ages of their three witnesses David went first. What were they doing in the cemetery? What time did they enter the gardens? Did they see anything they would say was suspicious? Who spotted the body first? All routine. David had few doubts the teens weren't involved. They were guilty of nothing more than trespassing and being unlucky.

The trespassing issue was in the hands of the Forest Lawn managers. The unlucky part was something they would have to deal with on their own.

Once both he and Martinez were satisfied no one was lying, he let them all go with a warning not to come back. David didn't think that would be a problem. At least until the terror wore off and the bragging rights kicked in.

He watched the teens hurry across the lawn, only to be met by reporters outside the crime scene. They were all about to get their fifteen minutes.

Seeing the ME stand he broke away from Martinez and headed over to the body. Lopez looked up at his approach.

"What's up?"

"Dead male, approximately twenty to thirty, white, no overt body trauma..." She caught the look David gave her, "All right, if you discount the missing body parts. Sorry, no idea yet why he's dead. All his visible wounds are postmortem. Fully clothed. Oddly enough, his shoes are missing. He's also not wearing socks. But very little body fluid on his clothes. Maybe he was redressed after he was dismembered."

That took a cold deliberation. David scrubbed stiff fingers through his hair. "No ID?"

"No teeth to X-ray, no fingerprints. Good luck with that. We can run DNA and that may tell you something if he's in the system, otherwise... I can tell you he was a natural blond. Whoever took his twig left his berries behind."

David grimaced. Martinez came up behind him. "Anything good?"

"He's definitely one of ours," David muttered. At Martinez's look he said, "He's dead." He shot Lopez another look. "He was murdered, right?"

"Can't really say for sure. But how likely is it that he died of a natural cause and someone cut him up and decorated Forest Lawn with him?"

"What's the significance of the date of death on the tombstone?"

"Prank? The killer knew this guy?" Martinez glared at the tombstone as though it held the secrets. "Or the victim knew him." The only name they had was the dead man who was where he was supposed to be—in the ground. He watched a pair of cadaver dogs quarter the manicured lawn, sniffing in flower

beds and around neatly trimmed bushes and tree trunks. So far nothing.

Had the appendages been taken to hide the identity of the dead man, or as some kind of macabre trophy?

David tapped his cell and met Martinez's gaze. "We'll have to take a look at all missing persons in the last little while that match the description."

"Headless white men?"

"See any sign of any horses in the area?" They both looked up when Lopez interjected. "Legend of Sleepy Hollow?"

David groaned and threw a nervous look at the nearest reporters who were doing their best to see what was going on behind their privacy screen. "Please don't say that too loudly."

Lopez grinned. "Gotcha."

"Flaming pumpkins and haunted trees," David said.

"Happy fucking Halloween," Martinez muttered.

After four hours of fruitless searching, the dog handlers called the cadaver dogs off. The evidence technicians and photographers had also finished and packed up. Lopez released the body and the coroner's wagon trundled out to Glendale Avenue and south toward the Coroner's office on Mission Road.

The news crew and their vans left soon after. Not soon enough.

On their way back to the station Martinez flipped on the news and caught the tail end of a report on the mutilated body at Forest Lawn. "Amid the peaceful and very private crypts holding the earthly remains of Gable and Lombard where over a quarter of a million people are buried, a brand new corpse was interred there. The headless body of a Caucasian male was found early this morning less than two hundred yards from the Graceland section most notable for being the resting place of Robert Young of Father Knows Best fame. Three teenagers discovered the mutilated corpse. Miguel Alano described the dead body."

A new, much younger voice sounding tremulous told how they had found what they at first thought was a Halloween gag. Once they realized it was all too real they called 911.

"Police have not released the identity pending notification of family."

Martinez snorted. "Like that's the only thing holding us back."

"Police also refuse to speculate on whether the body is part of a bizarre Halloween ritual."

"And you'd love it if it was, wouldn't you, *Pendej*?"

"How much you want to bet there's a run on guard dogs and handguns?" David said. He'd seen it often enough. After every freaky crime Angelenos rushed out to arm themselves to the teeth with guns and badly trained dogs. It was always followed by a rash of dog attacks and accidental weapons discharges,

some regrettably fatal. Domestic violence went up, but David never knew if it was the tension or the presence of more guns that triggered it. He just knew it was as inevitable as the tides.

After grabbing lunch at a local deli they began to pull missing persons files, narrowing them down by sex, race and age filed within the last six months. Martinez would have gone further back, but David argued they had no reason to believe the victim was a runaway—his age made that unlikely.

David started the murder book for John Doe 2650, which held little more than the location of the deceased and a few paltry descriptions of his clothes and his condition on discovery. More would come with the autopsy.

As he wrote he glanced across at Martinez, shelling and eating peanuts one nut at a time. His desk was a litter of peanut shells and skins. “The whole missing penis thing suggests a sexual angle.”

“Guy misusing his equipment?” David mused. “Or not using it right? Gay basher? Jealous lover?”

“How do you tell a headless man’s gay?”

It sounded like the opening to a bad joke. David bit. “I don’t know, how do you?”

“Check his toenails for a manicure.”

“You obviously never heard of metrosexuals.” David thought of his own very unmanicured nails. Chris, on the other hand would fit into that stereotype completely, and be proud of it. “That’s the best you can do?”

Martinez shrugged. “Hey, it’s an idea.”

“I’m sure Lopez will make a note of any physical abnormalities. She’ll look for any other distinguishing marks, too.”

David’s desk phone rang. He scooped it up and listened for a couple of minutes, taking notes. Finally he met Martinez’s gaze.

“Couple of unis on patrol spotted a suspicious vehicle abandoned behind the tracks near Tyburn Street. Noticed something leaking out of the vehicle’s trunk. Found several black garbage bags in the in place of the spare tire, a pair of bloody Nikes, plus a Stryker saw and a large serrated blade.”

Martinez perked up at that last two items. Strykers were a powerful oscillating bone cutting saw used during autopsies to open skulls. Not very good for cutting into flesh which would explain the blade. Start with one, finish with the other. He’d have to see if Lopez could match the cut marks on the bones for either instrument.

“Don’t tell me,” Martinez said. “The garbage bags held a number of body parts? Our missing head, hands and, er, other things?”

“How’d you guess?”

“Who’s got them now?”

“On their way to the ME. Maybe Lopez will take a look before the autopsy and tell us if we’ve got a

match.”

“Make identifying him a whole lot easier.” David nodded and glanced at his notes. “Car, a Chrysler Neon, registered to a Frederick Bitterman. Reported stolen two days ago from Oak Park.”

“We’ll follow up with him,” Martinez said. “Maybe he’s got some freaky relatives or exes.”

A records check of DMV gave the address in Oak Park, Pala Mesa Drive. David grabbed his suit jacket and followed by Martinez, went to sign out a car.

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Chapter 5

Tuesday, 4:10 pm, Palm Drive, Beverly Hills

BY THREE-THIRTY Des had finally flagged and at Chris’s insistence had showered and allowed himself to be put to bed. Back out in the living room Chris sank into the love seat Des had vacated and dropped his head into his hands. His fingers rubbed at the headache that had bloomed behind his eyes hours ago.

Des hadn’t wanted to go to bed. He had clung to Chris and it was all Chris could do not to break down with his friend. But he knew that would be the worst thing he could do. He had to be the strong one. Des didn’t have anyone else right now. A lot of Des’s old friends had shared Chris’s aversion to Kyle, Des’s spoiled nihilistic wanna be dancer/lover and had stopped coming to visit. With Kyle’s brutal death guilt trips had abounded. Everyone felt bad for Des, but no one would step up to the plate and offer Des anything but ‘so sorrys.’ None of which did Des any good. If it wasn’t for his store, Samborra’s in Beverly Hills, Des would never have left the house. Chris couldn’t even talk him into going out for Osso Bucco at Dolce.

The cleaning service called back, informing Chris that Des had canceled them nearly two weeks before. Chris told them to start up again and made sure they understood that if Des tried to cancel again, they were to call Chris first. He’d be sure they got paid, though he could ill afford it. Des needed a clean, organized home. Anything else would only drive him deeper into depression.

Only when he was sure that Des was sleeping off his drug and alcohol bender did Chris rest. He slumped in the love seat, stretching his jean clad legs out on the Tema table and leaning his head back on the seat cushion. He considered turning the TV on but was way too enervated to try and find the remote.

He had called Dr. Weiser earlier, leaving a message as the doctor was in a session. As the day slipped away, he began to think he wouldn’t hear from him, but when the phone rang shortly after four, it was Weiser.

He snapped to attention, all thoughts of headache and exhaustion gone. “Dr. Weiser. Thank you for calling back.”

“Is something wrong, Chris?”

“Des... Des is taking...” He flipped the pill bottle out and read the label. “Alprazolam. Did you know that?”

“No, I wasn’t aware. Did he tell you where he was getting them?”

“The label on the bottle says Dr. Forsyth. Do you know him?”

“No, but I’ll look into it.”

“Thanks. In the meantime, what am I going to do about Des? He’s not getting better. In fact, after today, I have to say I think he’s getting worse.”

“Tell me about today.”

Chris’s headache came back with a vengeance. He squeezed the bridge of his nose and took a deep shuddering breath.

“I screwed up, doctor.”

“How is that, Chris?” Weiser’s voice was gentle. Just like a good therapist should be. No judgment passed here. Just kind wisdom. So why did it make Chris feel even more guilty?

Because he didn’t just screw up, he fucked up, and may just have fucked Des up while he was at it.

“We were supposed to get together last night... you know, we were going to meet with you. I didn’t come...”

“Do you want to talk about why you missed our appointment, Chris? Obviously it was important to both of you.”

Obviously, nothing Chris wanted to snarl. If he’d taken it that seriously would he have abandoned Des, just like Kyle did? “And I let him down.”

“How do you feel you did that, Chris?”

“Chris clutched the phone. He hated shrinks, hated the way they talked. Everything was a question without an answer. No wonder Des figured he’d be better off with drugs. Talk therapy was just *so slow*. “I feel bad,” he answered. “Of course I do. And I’m worried about Des and all these drugs he’s taking.”

“What about you, Chris? Do you feel you need drugs? Or do you rely on sex to get you through your messes?”

“Sex—what has Des been telling you? Do you two talk about me?”

“You’re Des’s best friend. Sometimes he claims you’re his only friend. He wants to talk about you. He worries about you, you know.”

“Well he shouldn’t. I can take care of myself.”

“Not according to Des. He once spent an entire hour talking about you and David—that’s his name, isn’t it? David, the LAPD officer—”

“Homicide Detective,” Chris corrected automatically. Then he bristled. He was pissed to find out Des

had been talking about him and David behind his back. He knew Des hadn't been happy when he and David had split, but this was too damned sneaky.

"You're angry," Weiser said.

No shit. "Yes. Can you blame me?"

"No I don't blame you. Neither would Desmond. But he does care for you. A great deal. And he's reaching out for support. Maybe he's afraid you'll leave him too."

Since that was too damn close to his own thought Chris blew up. "I'm not going to leave him. Des knows that. You should too."

"But does he really know it? After all, you can't deny you weren't there for him last night. Is he right, Chris? Were you with a man you had just picked up in a bar? Do you do that often? Surely you're not unaware of how dangerous such activity is—" Weiser stopped. Gently he asked, "Why did you call me, Chris?"

"I didn't. You called me—"

"Eventually, yes. But only in response to your call to me. So, why did you call, Chris?"

"I knew Des was hurting. I felt guilty—"

"It could be easily said that you were guilty. Guilty of pursuing short term pleasure at your friend's expense—"

"It wasn't like that," Chris said, even as he knew it was.

Weiser was silent, as if he knew Chris had already reached that conclusion. Then: "I'm not your therapist, Chris. If you like, I can suggest someone who might be able to help you—"

"I don't need help."

"That's entirely your choice. I am, however Des's therapist and it's my firm goal to help him through this time. Even you must admit he does need help. Can you give him that?"

Chris pinched his nose hard enough to bring tears. "I can't promise but... I'll try."

"Will you, Chris? Will you be there for him the next time he needs you?"

"I'll be there."

"I hope so. Des is in a very fragile state right now."

I fucking know that! Chris wanted to scream into the phone. But he knew that would only escalate this whole thing to a level he wasn't ready for.

"I know, doctor. I appreciate what you're saying. I want Des to be well, too."

"Then I think I can trust you to help me."

“Any way I can.”

“Good, good.”

Chris got off the phone and began to pace Des’s still sloppy living room. With no sense of order he began to pick up things, smoothing out the satin pillows that added a splash of color to the otherwise vanilla plain but very expensive furniture. He picked up copies of Architectural Digest, Gourmet and People and arranged them on the Tema coffee table, putting the AD and Gourmet on top, though the People got a lot more attention. He found a stack of unopened mail on the side table in the front foyer and carried it into the tiny alcove that Des called his office, dropping it in his inbox. The desk was nearly spotless. Des did no work at home. His accountant sometimes came over to go over his business accounts, but he straightened up anyway.

Then he tackled the kitchen. That took nearly an hour, finally slipping out the door a little after seven. He fully intended to go home. But when he hit Sunset he found he was shaking. Instead of heading to Silver Lake, he glided into a parking spot less than half a block from the Nosh Pit. It must be fate.

Paul was pure fate—and he didn’t look anything like David. The first popper up his nose sent a delicious rush of giddiness through his tired body. He felt flushed with energy and fell into Paul’s embrace, eagerly sampling what the lanky, well-built web designer had to offer. They jittered around the floor, brushing hard cocks against each other, groping and pawing their way toward the bathroom where Chris grabbed the vial of poppers out of the breast pocket of Paul’s golf shirt and took another hit. Then he slid to the floor, not caring what might be under his knees and pulled Paul’s luscious fat six inches out and sucked it back.

Paul wound his fingers through his short spiky hair and ground his cock down Chris’s throat. “Oh yeah, suck me, bitch.”

Chris kneaded his ass, working his mouth around the pulsing tube of rigid flesh, tasting hot musky pre-come. Paul groaned a warning, but made no attempt to pull out, spurting salty come down Chris’s throat. He jerked away and spat into the toilet, climbing to his feet. Before he could straighten, Paul had zipped himself up and unhooked the door, leaving Chris to follow him back out to the bar.

He elbowed his way to the mahogany bar where Ramsey was slinging drinks. He eyed Chris, taking in his swollen lips and reddened eyes.

“Another hot night, stud?”

Chris buried his face in the Ciroc martini Ramsey set in front of him. “Don’t you have glasses to wash? Lemons to cut? Napkins to fold?”

Ramsey looked around his bar at the cute little Tongan he had waiting tables. “Nah, I’m good.”

“Well so am I.”

Ramsey shrugged and left him to his own vices.

Behind him loud house music rattled the tables and chairs that ringed the tight dance floor which was already full of gyrating bodies. He had no idea where Paul was. He really wasn’t looking. He wasn’t about to make the same mistake tonight that he had made the other night when he took not David home.

He spotted the lithe twenty-something the minute he stepped onto the dance floor with the florid, boozy blond who was draped all over him. Chris watched the mismatched pair and knew before their dance had ended he was going to insinuate himself between the couple. He wanted to know firsthand if the lithe beauty was as fuckable as he looked. He wanted more tonight than just a blow job delivered on his knees.

Only one way to find that out.

He downed his martini and bounced to his feet. Behind him he thought he heard Ramsey's snort of disgust, but he ignored him. He was on the hunt now.

Smoothing the lines of his butter yellow Izod shirt into his brand new Diesel Safado jeans he slid between the couple and blocked his target from moving away. "Hey beautiful." He touched the dancer's shoulder, feeling a jolt of electricity. "What are you drinking, tiger?"

Lithe gracefully moved his hips so they brushed Chris's. The world narrowed down to the two of them. The rest of the room vanished and the dance began.

Lithe—who intro'd himself as Star—was a stage dancer who belonged to a theater troupe that toured the country sporadically. They had just returned from a six week run off-Broadway. Or as Star said with a sly smile, "Off-off-off Broadway. We were practically out of town."

"Incredible. Always wanted to meet a dancer." Not that Chris gave a damn what the guy did on stage. He only wanted to know what he could do in bed. Could he give Chris what he needed?

He slipped his hand between Star's legs, cupping the thick bulge there. Wanted more than just to cop a feel. "Can I buy you that drink?"

Ramsey rolled his eyes when Chris ordered another martini and a Cosmo for Star. They settled in at the bar, their hips pressing together, Chris's arm around Star's waist, his hand tucked firmly in his jean pocket.

Star nuzzled his earlobe, sending shivers pulsing along Chris's nerve endings lodging directly into his cock which swelled and pressed against Star's hand.

"Want to take this someplace more private?" Star whispered in his ear. Before he could answer he slid the tube of amyl nitrate under Chris's nose for another hit.

Another rush filled Chris with giddy desire. He pushed Star against the bar and rode his thigh up between his legs, pressing against his groin. Star groaned.

"My place or yours?" Star asked.

"Yours, tiger."

"So, what are we waiting for?"

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Chapter 6

Wednesday, 7:00 am, Northeast Community Police Station,

San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

DAVID FLIPPED THROUGH the murder book of the Forest Lawn John Doe. When Martinez got in they were going to head out to Pala Mesa Drive to interview Fred Bitterman about his allegedly stolen Neon.

Oak Park was a typical SoCal bedroom community. Pala Mesa Drive was a cul de sac of cookie cutter faux Mediterranean style ranch houses, each on large lots, with neatly manicured lawns. The Bitterman house was at the rear of the curved circle of road. At the front of each house was a two-car garage. The Bitterman's garage door was painted salmon pink and was shut.

There was a new silver Nissan Altima parked in the driveway.

The man who answered the door was a fiftyish Anglo with a wisp of salt and pepper hair in a fringe around his sunburned head. He looked from David to Martinez and raised one eyebrow. He had a dish towel in one hand and a trace of foamy suds on his left arm. Behind him a small dog stood on the arm of a chair barking wildly at the intruders.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Bitterman? Fred Bitterman?"

"Yes, that's me. How can I help you?"

"You reported your vehicle was stolen three days ago from a parking lot in La Canada. Is this accurate?" David made a pretense of studying his notebook, all the while watching Bitterman's reaction.

Bitterman wiped his wet hands on his towel and looked puzzled. "Yes, I was out that day doing business. My wife was out of town. I'd just dropped our daughter off at school and gone to do some banking."

"Where do you bank, sir?"

"Citibank, La Canada—"

"Long way to go to bank," Martinez said. "Me, I hate driving more than a couple of blocks to my bank."

"Yeah, well we just moved in. Haven't had much chance to relocate things." Bitterman shifted from one foot to the next. He turned and snapped his fingers at the dog who ignored him and kept barking, a high-pitched sound that grated on David's nerves. He had resisted the urge to go back to the Eagle, and had spent a restless night and woke up feeling grumpy. He wondered why he felt the need to be so damned honorable. What was he proving? That he really wasn't gay? That he could change it by ignoring the impulses?

If he gave into the impulses, he might be a lot less sour this morning, that was for sure.

“Any idea who took your car?”

“No, none. Listen, I already told the other cops this.”

“So tell us now,” Martinez said. “Repetition’s always good.”

Comprehension dawned on Bitterman’s face. “You found my car? Is that what this is about?”

“Your vehicle was located yesterday.”

“Where?”

“Tyburn Street.”

Bitterman seemed to think about that a minute. But before he could speak, the dog’s barking grew more frantic. Bitterman spun around and screamed, “Shut up, you stupid dog!”

David took a step back and unconsciously put his hand on the top of his holstered Glock .45. Martinez did the same. Their eyes met. David stepped forward again and put his hand on Bitterman’s arm.

“Sir. Leave the dog, sir. He’s not bothering us.”

“Stupid animal,” Bitterman muttered. “He’s my wife’s. She spoils it something rotten. Lets it get away with murder.”

“Yes, sir. Some people are like that.”

“Tyburn Street? Where’s that?”

“Glendale.”

“Near the Forest Lawn Memorial Gardens,” Martinez added.

Bitterman blinked. “Forest Lawn?”

“Ever been there?” Martinez asked with a studied casualness that David doubted Bitterman caught.

“No, don’t think so. That’s where all the celebrities are buried, right?”

David nodded. “You’re sure you’ve never visited? Most Angelinos go at least once, even if it’s only when relatives come into town. Visiting a star’s grave site is almost as big a deal as seeing their houses and the stars on Hollywood Boulevard.”

“My wife and I don’t have relatives from out of state.”

David’s eye brows went up. Two natives? Or two people with no family?

“You’re lucky,” Martinez cut in. “My wife and I are buried in family and they all want us to take them to Disneyland, the studios, go down to the Chinese theater like they think they’re going to see John Travolta or something.”

“Or worse,” David said, joining in the easy going banter, “is when they think we know Travolta or Johnny Depp and want an intro.”

“I guess,” Bitterman said. His gaze drifted back to the dog, then slid over the closed garage door. David’s radar clicked on.

“So, your wife,” he said. “You expect her home soon?”

“No,” Bitterman said quickly. “Not for hours yet. She went in to work.”

“Thought you said she was out of town.”

“Right, she is. She won’t be back till next week sometime. She wasn’t even here when the car was stolen. She travels a lot.”

“That must have been upsetting,” David said.

“What? My wife out of town? No, no, we’re used to it...”

“No, sir. I meant telling your wife about the car,” David said. “You have told her, right? I know I’d want to know something like that. Kind of a nasty surprise to come home to.”

“No, I haven’t spoken to my wife since she left...”

Abruptly David straightened. He smoothed the hair of his mustache and met Bitterman’s alarmed look. “I could really use a drink of water, sir. It’s very dry out here.”

Bitterman all but tripped over himself being accommodating. “Yes, of course. Come inside. It is hot here. We’re higher up, but the sun’s rays are more powerful. Or so I’ve been told.”

The dog vanished the instant David and Martinez entered the house. But they could still hear its frenzied barking somewhere in the house. David followed the sound. Toward the garage. An inside door leading out to the garage?

He gave Martinez a discreet eye signal. His partner picked it up immediately. Martinez drifted right, toward where the excited dog was getting close to hysterical.

“Beautiful home,” David commented, pretending to study the banal California décor that was as generic and flavorless as the outside of the house. They entered the kitchen, a bland pastiche of modern dullness. A tiled island held a wooden knife rack and the double sinks were filled with soapy water full of pots and pans. An open dishwasher was half loaded. The lingering smell of coffee cut through another smell. A familiar, more primitive smell. “Your wife do the decorating?”

“Yes, she did. She’s got lovely taste, my wife.”

By this time the dog was totally ballistic. And there was no mistaking the sound of its claws feverishly digging into something. A door maybe.

“You’re dog seems pretty upset by something,” David said, moving right, toward his partner, who was almost out of the kitchen.

Now it was Bitterman who grew anxious at the continued barking. His face was pale and clammy and David thought he saw a pulse beating in the guy's throat. He didn't need a doctor to tell him Bitterman was in some serious stress.

"Is something wrong, sir—?"

Bitterman's movements were rattlesnake fast. He grabbed the largest knife, a wicked looking ten inch blade and lunged at David, who sideswiped the blade. He felt the passage of the sharp edge through his jacket as he went for his Glock.

Bitterman lunged again, this time catching David's hip with the heel of his hand and sending a jolt of raw pain along his spine. He dropped into a shooter's stance as Bitterman swung a third time, missing. Thrown off balance, he never recovered. Martinez flew across David's field of vision, tackling Bitterman who tried to stab him, but lost his grip on the weapon, which tumbled to the black and white tiled floor.

Before he could recover, Martinez had his cuffs Bitterman's wrists and proned him on the floor, pressing his face into the tile. "Assume the position, asshole."

Bitterman went limp and lay gasping for breath.

"Let me up," he cried, struggling weakly against the bonds. "I haven't done anything."

David straightened and holstered his gun. His side felt hot and he could feel something wet rolling down his stomach. Fire coursed through him. He put his hand on his side and stared at the blood staining his fingers.

"Jesus," Martinez snapped. "You're bleeding."

David frowned, shook his head and kept staring at the blood. "Just a flesh wound. Guess you better call it in, buddy..." He suddenly felt dizzy. "I don't think I can."

Fortunately there was a kitchen chair in the breakfast nook and he stumbled into it. Martinez stood over Bitterman, snarling into his phone for a bus and a forensic team. He met David's gaze.

"They want to know what they're going to find when they get here."

"Tell them I don't know. Maybe his wife's body. Maybe a crime scene."

"Should have killed the damned dog when I had the chance," Bitterman said as the dog in question kept howling at the garage door, where no doubt his beloved mistress was interred. Would she have joined the John Doe at Forest Lawn? They'd probably never know.

"Who was he, Fred? Who was the guy you stuffed in the trunk of your car?"

Bitterman snarled a non-answer then yelped when Martinez accidentally stepped on his shoulder. "Sorry about that. Clumsy me. Let's go take a look at what's got your wife's doggy in such a state."

David pressed his hand into his side and followed. Half way there he faltered, feeling a wave of dizziness sweep over him. He had to lean against the door frame leading out of the kitchen. Instantly Martinez was at his side.

“*Dios*, Davey. You got no business getting up. You *loco*, man?”

David blinked at him. “I have to know.”

Martinez shook his head, but knew better than to argue. With his help David made it to the door that led out to the garage. The dog stopped barking and looked at them expectantly.

“She in there, guy?” David asked the dog who cocked its head at the two cops. Martinez popped the door open. Immediately they could smell it again. The faint underlying stink of blood and excrement.

She was wrapped in a tattered sleeping bag just inside the garage door. The outline of the body was clearly visible under the dark blue material. A workbench covered in tools sat along one wall. David quickly spotted what he suspected was blood, plus a roll of large black garbage bags like the dismembered corpse had been stored in.

Martinez didn’t touch anything. He grabbed the dog when it darted passed them and tried to paw at the wrapped body. That was all the ID they needed for the time being.

Retreating back to the kitchen, Martinez again approached Bitterman.

“Why’d you do it, Fred? What did she do that pissed you off so much?”

David made a leap. The obvious sexual nature of the original crime had nagged at him from the beginning. “They were lovers.”

Both Martinez and Bitterman looked at him. “The missing penis. Remember, Martinez? We thought it was significant.”

“You cut his dick off?” Martinez asked, looking at Bitterman. “Man, that’s cold.”

“Bastard deserved it. He was going to tell Meredith. I told him that would ruin everything, but he didn’t care.” Bitterman’s voice was thick with self-pity. “He was going to ruin everything!”

“He think you were going to leave your wife for him?” David asked gently.

“Yes. How could he believe that?”

“Maybe he really loved you.”

“He was a hustler. I picked him up in West Hollywood two months ago. Why would he think I could love him?” Bitterman seemed genuinely puzzled.

“Some folks are thick,” Martinez muttered. “They see what they wanna see.”

Bitterman curled up on the floor around his restraints. “He was going to ruin everything. I had to stop him, didn’t I?”

“Did your wife come home early?” David couldn’t let it go. “Did she catch you with the body?”

Bitterman squeezed his eyes shut. “He ruined everything,” he whispered.

They could hear the wail of a siren approaching. Within minutes an ambulance pulled in behind the Nissan and three EMTs thundered into the house. They bustled around David and got a blood pressure cuff around his arm and cut away the rest of his shirt. They flushed the wound with saline and scrambled him onto a gurney which they rolled out to the ambulance. On the way out they passed a squad of photographers, evidence technicians, and a pair of Ventura County Sheriff's detectives.

The ambulance door closed and they began the ride to the hospital.

Wednesday, 6 pm, USC General

David looked around the hospital room, his head aching, still feeling groggy from the anesthesia and painkillers. Martinez had been waiting when he was wheeled in after surgery and a stint in the recovery room. "They put you in a double, Davey," he has said, "but you won't have a roommate. I made sure of that."

David had nodded. A private room was a little perk often provided to injured officers.

He had dozed through most of the afternoon, not remembering when Martinez had left. Now he looked up, seeing Blair standing in the doorway.

Instead of the leather gear David was familiar with on the muscular black man, Blair was dressed in black jeans and a polo shirt. He looked good—affluent, rested, happy. EMTs make that much money? he thought to himself. David pulled the sheet up, noticing the IV that was in his arm.

"How'd you know I was here?"

"Bartender at the Eagle sees another cop, a Bryan Williams? You know him?"

Bryan had been instrumental in getting David through his outing, probably saving his career; certainly his sanity. He nodded. "Sure, I know him. Didn't know he went to the Eagle."

Blair went on. "I hit the bar for the early happy hour and he let me know." Blair pulled up a chair and handed David a package. "I bought this a few days ago—was going to give it to you the next time we got together."

David opened the simply wrapped package and found a full gleaming chrome and leather harness. He half pulled it out then recognized what it was and stuffed it back in the box. The smell of warm leather filled the room. He felt a wave of nausea sweep over him and he groaned.

Blair took the box from him. "Maybe this isn't the right time," he said softly. "I didn't realize how bad it was. The bartender said it was just a flesh wound."

"I was in surgery for two hours," answered David, by way of explanation. "Lots of flesh, I guess." He smiled wanly. "Thanks for the present."

Blair gave him a sly smile. "Always wanted to see you in some gear." He licked his lips. "I know you'd look hot."

"Blair..." David wanted to tell him it wasn't appropriate to give him such a gift, but even as the words

formed he felt the stirrings of an erection. God, he was really losing it.

“No rush,” said Blair. “When you’re feeling better we’ll gig you out.”

David gave up. “Can you take it back to my place?” He had given Blair a key once he had started spending nights.

“Sure,” he said. “Since I’ll be at the house, anything you need?”

David paused. “Maybe a change of clothes. My shirt is history and there’s probably blood on the pants. And you’ll find my book beside the bed. It’s the one with the bookmark. Not much to do here but watch TV.”

“You got it. I’ll bring everything over in the morning.”

“Thanks, Blair.”

Blair looked at David’s “dinner” on the tray on the over bed table. Jello, apple juice, and a bowl of chicken broth. “When are they going to let you eat real food?” he asked.

David shrugged. “I don’t know. All these years on the force and this is the first time I’ve ended up with a knife in my gut. Maybe tomorrow?” David gave him another wan smile. “You’re the EMT. You should know.”

Blair chuckled. “Yeah, I only see folks in the ambulance on the way to the hospital—not afterwards.”

David’s eyes started to drift shut and Blair stood up. “I’ll be going,” he said, motioning with the box. “See you in the morning.” After checking to see if anyone was in view, Blair stooped and kissed David lightly on the mouth. When he straightened he was smiling.

“Later.”

Then he was gone and David found he was missing the man before the door even swung shut. When the nurse came in to take his vitals he barely acknowledged her. His supper sat on its tray, untouched.

Return to TOC

Chapter 7

Thursday, 7:30 am, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, LosAngel es

CHRIS ROLLED AWAKE groaning as his head throbbed and nausea launched an assault on his stomach. His teeth felt slimy and his tongue was thick and fur covered. He could still smell the stink of sex and poppers. God, not again. But the bed beside him was empty, though he had a vague memory of someone. Dancer. Broadway dancer. Star. Right, Star, the incredibly lithe dancer of the dexterous mouth and talented cock. No, wait, that was the night before. Last night had been who...? Miguel. Another conquest from Man2Man. The hot, dark Latino had enticed him with descriptions of acrobatic sex and a monster uncut cock. The cock part had been a lie. The acrobatic part wasn’t too far off. Chris’s whole body ached. At least this time he was pretty sure they had used condoms.

He sat up in bed, letting the sheets pool in his lap. He sank his head into his hands. What the hell was he doing? What was wrong with him? Was he trying to get himself killed? Make himself sick? He'd managed to escape this long without the virus, was he intent on reversing that good luck?

He crawled into his shower and did his best to scrub himself clean. He dressed with care, pouring coffee down his throat as he went through his BlackBerry looking over his schedule. He was supposed to see Phil DePalma, from Pharmaden about some work he was starting next week. He had never felt less like going to work in his life. But he couldn't afford to screw with his single biggest client.

If he wanted to fuck up his life that was one thing, but messing up his livelihood was pure insanity. Had he really fallen that far? It was time to put the brakes on his behavior before he did irreparable damage to the really important things.

He finished up with Pharmaden early and spent the rest of his time there cleaning up loose ends, leaving with a feeling of a job well done. He made the night even better by resisting the urge to stop at the Nosh Pit for happy hour. Instead he drove out to Des's place and cooked them one of their favorite meals.

After dinner they sat in the living room sipping the lemonade Chris had made as a non-alcoholic peace offering.

"This tastes good," Des held up the frosted glass and smiled. It was the first smile Chris had seen in ages. He grinned back.

"Yeah, it does, doesn't it." Suddenly Chris's look turned sly. "You interested in a walk on the wild side?"

"What do you mean?"

"We could hit the Nosh. Tonight's retro night. Abba and Donna Summers."

Des's smile faded. "So this was a lie?" He held up the lemonade.

"We don't have to drink. I can live with a virgin Daiquiri."

"You want to go out?"

"Why not? It would be good for both of us." Chris crossed his fingers over his chest. "Swear I won't try to pick up anyone."

"Promise?"

"I promise." Chris took his hand. "Come on. We need to do this."

Des stood up. "Let me get dressed," he said with the first enthusiasm Chris had heard in a while. His heart lightened as he followed Des into his bedroom.

10 pm, The Nosh Pit, Hyperion Boulevard, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

If Ramsey was surprised to see Des with Chris he didn't let on. Always the soul of discretion, that was Ramsey. Once he collected their drinks, both virgin, which raised an eyebrow on Ramsey's part, Chris

led Des to a table in the back where they could watch the action on the dance floor but still carry on a conversation.

Ramsey was deep in conversation with some guy at the bar. He kept throwing glances at Chris and Des. The guy left the bar and so did Ramsey, putting his Tongan waiter in charge while he approached their table. The look on his face alerted Chris.

“What?”

“I was just talking to a bartender from the Eagle.”

Chris had been to the leather bar once or twice. It wasn’t really his thing, though he’d had no trouble admiring some beefy leather men. “Thinking of moving into new territory? Going to get us all into leather and spandex and rubber?”

But Ramsey didn’t respond to his joke. “He heard something about David.”

Chris’s radar went into alert mode. “David?”

“He’s at USC General—”

“Christ!” Chris bolted upright. “What for?”

“He was stabbed while he was making an arrest.”

“Stabbed—” Ice invaded Chris’s gut. His heart slammed into his chest and his skin felt clammy. “My God, is he okay? Is he—”

“I hear he’s fine. Had some stitches put in, but nothing serious.”

Chris barely heard. He stood up, looking pleadingly at Des.

“I have to go, Des—”

Des put his hand on Chris’s arm. “It’s late, hon. Visiting hours are probably over. We can go first thing in the morning.”

“We?” said Chris stupidly.

“Of course. You’re there for me, I’m there for you.”

Chris looked down at his drink. Suddenly he wanted to be anywhere but here, at a bar. “Let’s go,” he said. “I want to get a good night’s sleep and I’ll pick you up first thing in the morning.”

Des grabbed his jacket. “Of course.”

Chris barely nodded. Ramsey clapped him on the shoulder. “Say hi to the big guy for me, will you. Tell him I miss his ugly mug... nah, don’t tell him that. He’ll only get a swelled head. Just tell him to get well.”

Friday, 9:00 am, North Palm Drive, Beverly Hills

The next morning, Chris picked up Des who was waiting for him, standing on the front step. They sped down Sunset east toward the County Hospital. At the front desk Chris found out what room David was in and would have plowed straight ahead if Des hadn't put his hand on his arm to stop his headlong rush.

"Think about this for a minute. David isn't expecting you. He's going to be surprised."

"So?"

"You might want to think about what it will be like if he's not... happy surprised to see you."

Something hard settled in his chest. David not happy to see him? He remembered all too well the look of relief he had seen on David's face when he told him their six week relationship was over. He had sworn then he would never let David hurt him like that again.

Now he was all set to throw all that resolve away because some punk had put David in the hospital?

"I have to see him, Des. You can stay here if you want, but I'm going to see him."

"No, I said I'm going with you, and I will. Hell, I want to see him too. Maybe I can give him a piece of *my* mind."

"Des."

"I know, I know." Des ran his fingers across his lips. "Sealed."

Chris ducked into the gift shop and fretted over what he could buy for David finally settling on a box of chocolate covered cherries, one of David's favorites.

Meal carts were being reloaded with dirty breakfast trays. The door to David's room was half opened. Chris slipped through first. He paused inside the door and took in the sight of David propped up in his bed, a broad white bandage wrapped around his shaved abdomen. Chris stared hungrily at his familiar craggy face and his fur covered chest, wishing he could settle himself into David's arms and find relief for the gut wrenching loneliness he'd felt since David left. He ached for what he had lost.

David looked up at his entry, opening his mouth to speak. Nothing came out. His eyes widened and he swallowed abruptly, clutching the thin sheet around his belly.

"Chris."

"David."

"What... how did you..."

"Ramsey heard about your... accident. I had to come and see if you were okay."

"I'm fine. Uh, thanks... You didn't need to."

"Yes," Chris said. "I did."

David's face brightened. "Well I'm glad you came. It's good to see you again." He paused and Chris

heard Des enter the room. David smiled. “Des, good to see you, too. How are you doing?”

“I’m doing okay.” His gaze darted from David to Chris. “Chris has been a big help. I’m seeing a therapist, you know.”

“Chris told me. I’m glad to hear it’s going well.”

“When are you being released?” Chris asked.

“Maybe this afternoon, maybe tomorrow. Depends, I guess. You know doctors.”

Chris glanced at Des. He had been hoping to do this alone, but he wasn’t going to pass up this chance. He might not get another.

“I’d like to see you again,” he said quietly.

David’s eyes darkened. “You would?”

“Yes. On your terms. However you want it. Where ever you want.”

“Chris—”

“Please, David. Don’t say no right away. Think about it. Let’s talk at least. Can we do that?”

“I… sure. We can talk.”

“Right. It’ll be good to talk. I can pick you up when they discharge you. Save you taking a cab. How’s that?”

“Sure, Chris. I’ll let you know.”

Belatedly Chris handed David the chocolates he’d bought. “Didn’t have time to get to L’Artisan. I promise next time.”

David smiled and accepted the gift. He put it on the tray containing his uneaten breakfast.

“Food that bad?” Chris smiled.

“It’s not that—”

Suddenly the door swung open and a muscular black man strolled in carrying a bag from Starbucks. He stopped dead when he saw Chris and Des.

“Oh, didn’t know you had company. Sorry, I’ll come back—”

“That’s okay, Blair. They were just leaving.”

Chris stared as the good looking man walked over to the other side of the bed and set the sack of food down beside his chocolates. David looked all too familiar with this stranger and Chris felt nauseated.

He grabbed Des’s hand and beat a hasty retreat. “I’ll see you later, David.”

David barely looked up long enough to say goodbye before Chris fled.

Outside the room Chris leaned against the wall, hyperventilating. Des grabbed both hands in his and rubbed them furiously. “Get a hold of yourself. Don’t you dare fall apart on me. It might not be what it seems—”

“Give me a break.” Chris jerked away from Des’s touch. “It’s exactly what it looks like. He’s fucking that guy and you know it. That’s why the bartender at the Eagle heard about David. That’s where he’s been going. Probably met twinkie toes there. He’s bringing him breakfast—how long has he been here?”

“So does this mean you’re going to let it go? You’re not going to see him again?”

“I said I would.”

“You said you’d take him home.”

“Yes,” Chris said stiffly. “And I will.”

“Remember the man’s sick.”

“What does that mean?”

“That Christopher Ryan Bellamere giving him a piece of his mind might not be the smartest thing to do right at this minute.”

“Well aren’t you suddenly full of advice.”

“Hey, I love you two. I think you belong together, but I am not going through that shit again. This last month was bad enough. Never again.”

“I wouldn’t—”

“Good.” Des linked his arm through Chris’s and led him down the hall toward the bank of elevators that would take them back to the parking garage. “That’s healthier for all of us.”

Return to TOC

Chapter 8

Friday, 10:40 am, USC Medical Center, State Street, East Los Angeles

DAVID LOOKED AT the empty door for several heartbeats after Chris had gone through it.

“I came at a bad time, didn’t I?” Blair asked softly. He didn’t pull up the chair. Instead he leaned over David and studied his face. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No! For God’s sake, no. Stay. I just wasn’t expecting him...”

“Who is he?”

“Chris. We, ah, we were together, for a while.”

“But not anymore?”

“What?”

“You’re not together anymore.”

“No, no we’re not.”

Blair was discretion itself. He made no further mention of Chris. Instead he said, “I fed your cat. What’s his name? Sweeney. I think he misses you. I think he was telling me he wants you to come home. I told him he can stand in line.” He opened the Starbucks bag and pulled out a cranberry-orange muffin, a scone, and a cherry-cheese Danish. “I wasn’t sure what you were in the mood for.”

David reached for the muffin. “I like them all, but this looks good,” he said. “Thanks,” he added, with a small smile.

They ate mostly in silence. Blair tried to keep a conversation going but David answered mostly in monosyllables or with nods. After an hour or so, Blair started picking up the debris and stuffing it in the bag. “I’m working the evening shift,” said Blair. “So I need to get a move on. Do you know when you are getting discharged?”

“Today or tomorrow,” David said. “Depends on the doctor.”

He paused. “If it’s today, I won’t be able to give you a ride home.”

“That’s okay, Chris said he’d pick me up.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, David regretted them. “Just a ride...” he added lamely.

“Well that’s great, then,” said Blair. “Either way, give me a call and let me know what’s going on, okay?”

David nodded yes, suddenly feeling tired and realizing his abdomen ached. He wondered how long it would take to completely recover. “Can you push the button for the nurse?” he said softly. “I think I need another pain pill.”

Blair nodded and did as he was asked, then stooped over the bed. “Time for me to get going,” he said. “You get some rest.” He leaned over the bed and gave David a light kiss, letting it linger for more than a few seconds. He stroked David’s five o’clock shadow. “Guess I should have thought of a razor. But I like you like this.”

“I’m sure it would wear thin after a while,” David said, trying to muster the energy to return the kiss with some ardor, and failing miserably.

“Get well soon,” Blair said. “I miss you.”

David nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “And when I am feeling like myself again, I can thank you properly for your gift.”

Blair gave him a wink as he stood up straight. “Sounds good,” he said. “I’m waiting for that moment.”

He ended up staying the extra night since his bowels were not cooperating with the toilet. But the next day, he was discharged early and realized he was eager to get out of the hospital. David didn’t handle lying around well, even if he was trussed up like a turkey with stitches and an abdominal binder. He put on the clothes Blair had brought for him, realizing there was no sign of the clothes he had been wearing when he was attacked by Bitterman.

When Chris called he almost told him not to come. It would only open old wounds and he wasn’t sure he could take the pain all over. But he thought of how Chris had looked standing next his hospital bed the previous day and he knew he couldn’t refuse the chance to see him one more time. Face it, Chris was firmly entrenched under his skin and nothing short of exorcism would get rid of his obsession.

And he wasn’t sure he was ready to let it go.

So he told Chris when to come and he spent the next hour getting ready. A candystriper brought him toothpaste, a toothbrush, disposable razor and some shaving gel from the hospital gift shop and carefully scraped off his incipient beard, trimming his mustache too.

When Chris arrived, David was waiting, sitting stiffly in the chair in the corner of the room. He handed Chris the small bag of toiletries and Chris looked at it, surprised. “This is it?” he said. “No clothes?”

“I wasn’t planning on being admitted,” said David. “And I think the clothes I was wearing must have made the acquaintance of the incinerator.”

“Ah,” said Chris. He picked up the box of chocolates he had brought and noticed they were unopened. A large bouquet of flowers stood in a vase on the window ledge. “What about those?” he asked.

“Just leave them,” said David, gruffly. Blair had brought them Thursday morning. They brightened the room but David didn’t want them in the house, reminding him of his hospital stay.

Chris pushed the wheelchair David had to use to get out of the hospital. Still stiff from his stitched wound, Chris helped him into his Lexus, buckling him in and putting his few possessions in the back seat. Then he climbed in and started the engine. He made no move to kiss David. David wasn’t sure if he was glad or disappointed.

He tried to convince himself he was glad. Why start something he knew he couldn’t finish.

Right.

Given how all he could do was remember what it was like to make love to Chris, to hear his passion, to taste his desire and feel his perfect body respond to every one of his caresses. He clenched his hands into fists to keep from reaching over and sliding his fingers between Chris’s jean clad leg to feel his swelling cock. He wanted to hear Chris moan his name and—

He cursed under his breath. Chris looked over at him in alarm.

“Are you in pain? Do we need to get a doctor—?”

“I’m fine,” David ground out. “Let’s just go.”

“You could come back to my place,” said Chris. “Spend a day or two recuperating...”

“No,” said David, his voice sharp. “My house, please.”

Chris recoiled and frowned. But he put the SUV in gear and roared out of the parking lot. In stiff silence they rolled toward Glendale and David’s place.

Chris parked behind David’s yellow and white ‘56 Chevy Two-Ten sport coupe and killed the engine.

“Would you like to come in for coffee?” David asked.

“Instant?”

“No, I’ve got a grinder now.” David’s smile was ironic. “You spoiled me for real coffee.”

“Least I managed that,” Chris said sourly, then immediately looked contrite. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to be snippy. Let’s do that again, okay?” He smiled tiredly. “I’d love to have a cup of coffee.”

“Come on then.”

Before David could reach for them, Chris grabbed the bag and followed David up to the front step. They stepped into the small foyer and were immediately engaged by Sweeney who wound around David’s feet demanding an apology for David going AWOL for the last three days. David scooped the complaining cat up and cradled him in his arms as he led Chris into the tidy kitchen.

Chris paused in the doorway and looked around the familiar room. He couldn’t have counted the number of mornings they had shared breakfast at the kitchen table after a night of stunning, unforgettable sex. David saw his eyes scan every corner and wall. Looking for some sign of another man? He wouldn’t find anything. Blair might stay over occasionally, but he didn’t leave his things there. Things had never gone that far, though sometimes it seemed like Blair might like it to. David wasn’t sure he’d ever feel that way again. As personable and hot as Blair was, he wasn’t Chris. Which was really what it all came down to in the end.

David pulled out the coffee maker and placed it on the counter, then clutched his side as a spasm of pain swept through him. “Do you mind?” he asked. “Can you make the coffee?”

Chris looked at the wave of pain that crossed David’s face. “Sure,” he said. “No problem.” He motioned to the chair at the table. “Sit there and just tell me what to do. Where do you keep the coffee?”

“In the freezer,” David answered, gingerly moving in the chair until he found a comfortable position.

Chris busied himself with the coffee preparations, feeling David’s eyes hot on his back.

“So what have you been up to?” David asked as he watched Chris. “Keeping busy?”

“Picked up a couple more clients. Pharmaden’s still my biggest. Phil keeps me busy. Not busy enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“Being on my own is different. With DataTEK I worked with assholes but had a paycheck I could count on. Now... I like the people but the money isn’t flowing in in quite the same way.”

David nodded, watching Chris's smooth movements as he retrieved two cups from the cupboard. Even with his aching side and taped up belly, he felt a stirring in his groin.

"I think I'm going to have to trade the Lexus in for something more economical," Chris continued "Insurance and gas prices are killing me."

"What are you thinking of?" One of the few things they had shared was an abiding love of cars, though Chris loved their style and status, and David loved the mechanics. They had talked about attending the L.A auto show together, maybe even the Palm Springs show, but now... those plans seemed like they had happened in a different universe.

"Something smaller, but still practical. I need to transport equipment for some jobs. I'm looking at a compact SUV, maybe a Ford or Chrysler."

"I've always been partial to Fords," said David.

Chris gave him a wink. "I thought I saw a Chevy in the driveway."

David chuckled. "Yeah, well they don't make them like they used to. For new cars, I'd suggest a Ford."

"Well, that's as good a recommendation as any," said Chris, as he poured the coffee into the two mugs on the counter.

"If you like I could go with you when you start test driving."

"I'd like that. You know me, a real ditz about cars. I'd let the first smooth talking salesman sell me a bill of goods."

David laughed. "Somehow, I think you're selling yourself short," he said. He picked up the mug that Chris placed in front of him. "I think there is some cream in the fridge," he said. "Nothing flavored but I know it's not sour."

"That's fine," Chris said, adding a generous splash to his cup. "Thanks." He sat in the chair and lifted the steaming mug, wrapping his hands around the cup, inhaling the fragrance. "Mmmm, smells good. Where did you get this?"

"From the Farmer's Market," David said. "It's organic."

"I'll have to get some."

"Then you can invite me for coffee."

Chris put the mug down and met David's gaze. "Any time."

David cleared his throat, feeling a sudden and unwanted hardening in his groin. Chris had wanted to talk. Well he'd go along with that, but he wasn't going to pursue anything else. Not now. Maybe not ever.

God, he was such a liar.

He wanted nothing more than to tumble Chris to the floor and make him scream for him, just like he

knew he could. Like he had so many times in the past.

He put a hard brake on his desires. They were beyond that now. He had Blair, who he suspected was falling in love with him. And Chris had... his mind shied away from images of Chris with another man. Or men? That would be worse. Chris had been an admitted slam hound before he had met David. Had he gone back to that behavior? David didn't want to know.

"How about you?" Chris asked. "How are things with you? Still partnering with Martinez?"

"Yeah, we're still running together. We fit. Always did."

"I'm glad." And the truth was, Chris was happy for David. He and Martinez hadn't hit it off when they'd first met, but then Martinez was convinced Chris was a vicious killer even when the evidence pointed to someone else. He had seemed to need to believe in Chris's guilt. He had never been at ease around Chris and any socializing between cops rarely included Chris and David, which he had always known had hurt David, whose life revolved around being a cop.

He indicated the hidden bandage across David's abdomen. "How'd that happen?"

"Cornered guy freaked when he realized we'd made him. I guess I was slow to react. My fault."

"You deal with animals, don't expect them to act rationally."

David shrugged. "I guess." He started to get up but Chris stopped him, jumping up and grabbing the pot.

"You want a refill?" he asked and David nodded, thanking Chris with the smile in his eyes.

After several minutes of easy silence David murmured, "You want to go out sometime?"

Chris smiled, then clamped down on his reaction. He ducked his head. "Yes, I'd really like that."

David never quite knew why the next words popped into his mouth. Maybe he was testing how much Chris would be willing to do in his desire to see David again. "Let's go bowling. You like bowling?"

Saturday, 1:15 pm, Piedmont Avenue, Glendale

Chris stared at David. Was he serious? Bowling? Chris didn't think he'd ever been inside a bowling alley in his life. Bowling was something beer swilling grunts did while wearing other people's shoes—he froze. Didn't that describe David? He was a blue collar stiff with no pretensions of being anything else. He hadn't lost that even during their time together. Chris had always known that. He had fallen in love with him despite what he would have always thought were flaws. Those things were part of what David was. Part of the man he had grown to adore.

"Ah, I don't know," he admitted. "I've never been."

"Well then, it's about time you tried. New experiences and all."

"I'm always game to try something new," he lied. "When?"

David hitched in the chair, feeling another spasm of pain. "The doctor told me to lie low, take a week off

work, so I suspect I won't be in shape to throw a bowling ball anytime soon. Want to say a week from today? Next Saturday?"

Chris hid his disappointment. A whole week? He wasn't sure he could wait that long but then—he had to wait that long, if that's what it took to be with David. Chris made up his mind.

"Next Saturday would be great. You'll have to be patient. I know nothing about bowling."

"I'll teach you." David seemed amused. "You'll see. It's fun."

"Right. I just hope I don't drop the ball on my foot."

"I'll make sure you come out unscathed." He was definitely laughing now. "Besides that's one of the things the shoes are meant to prevent."

Chris grimaced. David was really enjoying this. Finally Chris grinned ruefully. "If I do, you can pay for my cast."

"I'll sign it too."

"I can hardly wait."

David laughed. He reached over and took Chris's hand. "You will have fun."

Chris wanted to believe it. He had to settle for the knowledge that he would be with David for a few hours. That had to be worth some discomfort.

Coffee finished, Chris stood reluctantly. He wanted to stay, but knew he should take things slow. All he really wanted to do was jump David's bones, but that would have to wait.

Instead he leaned toward David and kissed him on the mouth. "I'm sure I will." And hurried out the door, leaving David standing in the foyer, watching him.

He flipped his hand and smiled when David waved back. He could tell by David's tension that he wanted Chris to stay almost as much as Chris wanted to.

Maybe this would work out after all.

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Chapter 9

Saturday, 2:30 pm, All Star Lanes, Eagle Rock Boulevard, Los Angeles

THE CACOPHONOUS ECHO of sounds assaulted Chris as soon as he followed David into the bowling alley. The alley was high ceiling and cavernous, with long rows of lanes, most of them occupied. The nearly continual sound of brightly colored balls rolling on the wooden floor and the clack of the red and white pins crashing under the rolling balls never let up. The backdrop of Stars and Stripes on the backboard was garish but somehow fitting.

None of it was what he had expected. The first surprise was when David showed up at his place with a large bag that held his own bowling ball and shoes.

“So not fair,” Chris muttered. “I want my own shoes.”

“Then go buy some. I’ll make sure you get to wear them often enough.”

“Right.”

David touched his elbow and pointed toward a long desk. Chris eyed the rows of shoes stacked along the opposite wall. God, they were ugly. When David asked his size he told him and gingerly took the blue and brown things he was handed by the attendant. He met David’s amused stare and smiled ruefully.

“I know. Trust you. It’ll be fun.”

“Honest.”

The funny thing was he *did* trust David. He took the shoes and followed David to a seat at an empty lane. They both shed their street shoes and put on the bowling shoes. Chris tried not to think of all the other feet that had already been in them.

David had his shoes on first and he went up to select a ball for Chris.

“This the place you come to all the time?”

“We have a league here and play once a week.”

“Who’s we?” Although Chris already knew.

“Martinez. A few of the other detectives. Bryan comes, too.”

Bryan Williams was another out gay detective who had helped David with his problem when he’d been precipitously outed. Chris hadn’t known the two saw each other outside of work. A niggling worm of something unpleasant worked through him. My God, was he jealous of Bryan? Did he think David and this guy were lovers too?

David came over with a chartreuse ball in one hand and his own ball, which was a sedate dark blue. So David.

He showed Chris how to hold the ball and demonstrated how to line it up and guide his throw down the lane. David’s ball arrowed straight through the array of pins, knocking them all over. Chris looked from the downed pins to David.

“That’s good, right?”

“That’s very good,” David said smugly. “A strike. Ten points.” In his next turn his ball knocked down seven of the ten pins in his two tries. “Seventeen,” David said.

“What’s your highest score?”

“I did two-fifty once. Three hundred is a perfect game.”

It didn't look hard. Chris inserted his fingers in the holes like David showed him, refusing to think about how many other fingers had done the same and stepped up to the throw line.

"Not too close, or you'll be stepping over. That's a foul. You lose the pins for that ball."

Chris took a step back. Wound up again. He let the ball go, aimed right into the center of the distant pins. It bounced then started rolling toward the distant pins.

The ball made it half way down the lane before sliding off into the gutter, gliding past the untouched pins. "Not good."

"No, it's not very good. But look at it this way, you can only get better." He gestured toward the ball return. "You get another shot."

Chris squared his shoulders and took another ball. This one did no better, going into the gutter again.

He grabbed another ball. David stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "My turn."

"Oh." Chris backpedaled, feeling foolish. He watched as David took another strike and five pins.

"Fifteen."

"Rub it in."

"It's about fun, not winning," David commiserated.

"Sure it is."

"Let me give you some pointers." David came up behind Chris as he pulled a ball out of the chute and positioned himself in front of the line. "Release the ball smoothly. You don't want it to bounce."

"I don't?"

"No, this isn't tennis."

Chris looked down at the ball he was holding with three fingers. It must have weighed twelve pounds easily. "Right, not tennis. I'd hate to hit this sucker with a racket."

David grinned. "I'd like to see you lob it that high."

Chris drew his arm back and swept forward, trying to let the ball go smoothly like David said. This time it didn't bounce and it didn't go into the gutter. But as it rolled down the lane it lost momentum. By the time it reached the pins it was barely moving. Two pins fell, a third wobbled then held its place.

Chris threw his arms up and rolled his eyes. "This is harder than I thought."

"I know. Go on, you've got another turn." David stepped closer, his hips touching Chris's, his breath warm on Chris's neck. He reached around to position Chris's body. "You need to address the ball. Like this." He moved Chris's arm and put a hand on his hip, sending a jolt of raw lust through him. "Now you want to offset it just a bit, put a bit of spin on the ball and bring it into that king pin, number five there in

the middle.”

Chris could barely concentrate. David’s words were warm puffs of air on his suddenly flushed skin.

“Now let it go.”

Chris obeyed and the ball sped down the lane, smashing right where David said it would, knocking all eight pins askew. The pin setter came down and removed the fallen pins, setting up the next set.

David retrieved his ball and lined up his next set. This time only five pins fell. He smiled at Chris. “See, it is hard.”

Over several more turns Chris learned to line his shot up like David had shown him. With his last shot the ball flew out of his hand and he gyrated on the floor, forgetting everything around him, forgetting everything except David and his ball. His ball slammed right into the sweet spot, and every pin went flying. He leaped into the air with a yell, slamming his fist up and yelling, “In your face!”

David was laughing when he came down and realized several nearby bowlers were watching him with amusement. He flushed and grinned.

“Well?” David said.

“Well what?”

“Is it as terrible as you thought it would be?”

“God no,” Chris gushed, barely stopping himself from grabbing David’s arm. “It’s fun. I’m glad you invited me.”

“Yeah, me too,” David said, his smile slipping as he held Chris’s gaze. “Hey, let me buy you a drink.”

“Sure,” Chris said softly. He followed David into the bar where they took a booth and got menus from the server. Chris looked it over, checking out their drink menu.

“Martini?” David asked.

Chris shook his head. “Maybe just an iced tea,” he said the server when she came back. David raised an eyebrow but said nothing. He ordered his Bud.

Along with the drinks David ordered pot stickers and egg rolls which turned out to be surprisingly good. Chris realized he was hungrier than he had even known when the food was set down in front of him. It occurred to him that he hadn’t had much of an appetite for the last few days. He had been thinking about David, convalescing at his house, wondering if he could call. Wondering if the good looking guy from the hospital was there playing nurse. He wolfed down two egg rolls and a half a dozen pot stickers.

“What did you do all week, anyway?” Chris asked, trying to keep his voice light.

David studied his beer. “Took a lot of pain pills the first few days, started to feel like myself by Wednesday,” he said. “Saw the doctor on Thursday, got my bandage changed. The stitches come out next week.”

Chris looked alarmed. “You still have stitches?” he said. “Should you really be bowling?”

“There’s a reason we played only one string,” said David, his voice soft. He shifted in his seat and his knee brushed Chris’s. The jolt that swept through Chris’s body was predictable but no less powerful for its familiarity. His cock strained at his denim covered crotch. He moved to ease the sudden swelling. It didn’t help.

The tension between them escalated and Chris knew David was just as hard as he was. He was about to suggest they go back to David’s place when David leaned back in his seat and broke eye contact.

He picked up his beer and took a deep drink. Lowering the bottle he met Chris’s gaze. “Come to dinner next week?”

Chris thought about it for all of ten seconds.

“No.”

“No?” David’s face fell and he looked down at the table. “Oh, okay—”

“I want to take you out to dinner.”

“Oh? Oh, sure.” David visibly brightened. He was not a man who hid his feelings, at least not when he wasn’t in his cop mode. “I’d love to.”

“Good. When did you say you were getting your stitches out?”

“I didn’t say, but Wednesday. Two weeks after my surgery.”

“Shall we go out to dinner then? To celebrate? When do you have to go back to work?”

“I’ll be riding a desk the next couple of weeks. I could go out on Wednesday...”

“I’ll pick you up then, eight. Wear your finest.” Chris knew he had a few good quality suits—Chris had picked them out for him, loving the transformation he had been able to bring about by dressing David in fine clothes. David shone, something he would never have admitted to anyone, still insisting he was just a plain joe.

“Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see.”

And Chris wouldn’t say anything more.

They played another string, which David barely won. Chris suspected he was in more pain than he was admitting. He dropped Chris off at home just before five. Chris accepted his kiss and didn’t press David for more, though it was obvious they both wanted to go to the next level. Not yet, he cautioned himself, watching David drive down Cove toward Silver Lake Boulevard and home to Glendale.

Inside he picked up his landline and speed dialed Des, who answered on the second ring.

“You’ll never guess where I was,” he said with restrained laughter in his voice.

“You know I hate guessing games,” Des said. “Tell me, boyfriend or I’ll put a serious hurt on you.”

“Bowling.”

“Bo—You’re joking, right? Chris Bellamere *bowling*?”

“Yeah.” Chris giggled. “With David. He asked me out.”

“Oh God, I want the dish. Tell me all the gory details. What did you do? Bowling? I don’t believe it. You’re really gone, aren’t you?”

Chris thought about it. It was true. “Yeah, I guess I am.” He sighed. “What am I going to do, Des?”

“See how it plays out, I guess. I think David feels the same way you do. I have a really good feeling about you two, but you have to figure out how you’re going to do this. I mean you guys are so black and white. Polar opposites.”

“So how do we find some middle ground where we can make it work?”

“Sex is always good,” Des said, and laughed, ruining his pose.

“Don’t remind me.” Chris grinned slyly. “I asked him out to dinner on Wednesday.”

“Someplace special, I hope.”

“Of course. I was thinking Xiomara.”

“God yes, they have the greatest mojitos.”

“I know. But David doesn’t drink mojitos.”

“Hon, for you David would drink swill.”

“Now there’s a charming picture.”

“You know what I mean.” Des giggled. “What are you going to do then?”

“Jesus, I don’t know, Des. What do you want me to say? That I’m going to jump his bones?”

“Well aren’t you? Don’t tell me the Christopher Bellamere I know wouldn’t trip him in a heartbeat and beat him to the floor.”

“You know, there’s such a thing as knowing a guy too well.”

“Well you better call me as soon as you get home and dish me the dirt.”

“And what if I don’t come home?”

“Then you’ll have even more to tell.”

“Fair enough.”

“I’ve got good vibes about this, Chris. Whatever you do, don’t fuck up.”

“Such confidence is inspiring.”

“You know what I mean.”

He did, he just didn’t like hearing Des put it so plainly. He’d fucked up with David once, could he stop from doing it again?

“Be smart, Bellamere. You only get one more shot at this.”

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Chapter 10

Saturday, 5:10 pm, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

DAVID BACKED OUT of Chris’s driveway and headed downhill towards tree-lined Rockford Street, overlooking the Silver Lake reservoir, to get back down to Glendale Boulevard. Already several of the homes were decked out with Christmas lights and lawn ornaments, looking incongruous in the relentless California green. He couldn’t believe it, checking the date on his wristwatch. It wasn’t even Thanksgiving and people were decorating their homes? He understood why stores put up their Christmas displays early but now homeowners? David shook his head. He felt disoriented from missing a week of work and early Christmas decorating did nothing to help his confusion.

It had taken all of his willpower not to follow Chris inside his house and tumble him onto the bed they had shared so many times and do to him what they both wanted. Sometimes he wondered who was showing the most restraint. David, who wouldn’t ask for it, or Chris, who couldn’t? Who was the stronger because of it?

Or were they both being stubborn fools instead of enjoying themselves the way they both wanted?

What was Chris planning for Wednesday? More than just a simple dinner, if David knew anything. David knew it would be an expensive one. When Chris wanted to impress he always went all out, which had always been a bone of contention between them. David wasn’t a material person. He was happy with his simple, uncluttered life. His cat, his antiques, the car he was still working to restore. He didn’t need or want anything else. But Chris lived in a world David had only caught glimpses of in his work as a homicide detective, where death visited the rich just as it did the poor and the disenfranchised. He saw the way they lived, the elaborate charade they often erected around their bubble of wealth and privilege to pretend a normalcy that didn’t exist. The rich were different. And Chris had spent most of his adult life in that rarefied gilded tower. The only common ground they seemed to share was in the bedroom, where they had fired a passion that David had never experienced before or since. Even at its best, sex with Blair never reached the levels it had with Chris. And something told David it was the same for Chris.

But could they forge a relationship on just sex? Even the best sex ended and what was there to fill that void?

Today had been promising. Maybe Chris could step out of his walled world and live in David’s. He’d

had fun today. It had seemed to be genuine and David thought he could read Chris well enough to know when he was faking it. And he hadn't been faking today.

So did that mean there was hope?

He desperately wanted to think so.

Once home he fed Sweeney, put the Bud in his fridge and pulled a steak out to barbecue. All he'd had all day were the bar snacks from the bowling alley. He was starving. A rare steak and a salad filled his stomach and an old John Wayne movie following the news would round out his evening. It would have been perfect except for the fact that he would be going to bed alone.

Sweeney jumped onto the chair beside him and butted his head against David's chin, demanding a belly rub. Once David complied he curled up on his lap and started purring.

David watched the news with only half an ear, then had another beer while he watched John Wayne save the west again. Finally he went to bed where his dreams were filled with aching erotic dreams where he pursued and caught Chris only to see him fade away into a sticky dawn. Groaning he dragged himself into the bathroom where he tried to clean himself up while keeping the bandages around his stomach from getting wet, no easy task. He'd be glad when the reminder of his carelessness was gone.

In the meantime he needed to find something to fill his time.

He had a room full of old clocks and Victrolas he was painstakingly restoring. He could spend a few hours doing that. And there was always the car. It was a bottomless pit of repairs and special order parts that weren't always easy to get. But he was determined to restore it as close as he could get to cherry, and was willing to wait for the right part to come along.

He took it easy on Sunday and Monday. By Tuesday he was bored and decided to clean the house. He realized his pain had ended and was looking forward to getting back to normal—and work. He was eating a simple lunch of a grilled cheese sandwich and a bowl of mushroom soup, when the house phone rang. He scooped it up, surprised to find Des on the other end.

"Just wanted to see how you were doing," Des said.

"Good," David said. Quietly he added, "How about you?"

"I'm doing okay. It's still rough, you know. Sometimes I think it will never get better, then it does. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I do." David encountered a lot of grief and rage in his job. He saw often how it destroyed some people and made others stronger. He had the feeling Des was the type to get stronger. "You'll be okay, Des. You're one of the survivors."

"Sometimes I think that's the problem."

David knew enough psychology to understand survivor's guilt. Des's sorrow came from the simple fact that his lover, Kyle had died, and he hadn't. And that was something Des would have to work through on his own.

"It's rough," he said. "All you can do is take it one day at a time. You know Kyle loved you and he

wouldn't want you to be in pain because of what happened to him. He'd want you to be happy."

"I know," Des's voice broke. "But I miss him so much."

"Do you want me to come over, Des? I'm just finishing lunch, but we could go for a walk. Get out of the house. Talk."

"Would you? I'd like that."

"I'll pick you up in about an hour. Maybe we can down to the beach, watch the lifeguards," David said, fingers crossed that Des wouldn't be upset at the suggestion. According to Chris, Des didn't even look at guys right now. The very idea of being with someone seemed to trigger too much pain.

But Des only laughed. "You're on."

The Santa Monica pier was the end of the legendary Route 66 so it was only appropriate that David and Des parked David's '56 Chevy in the Pier Deck parking. They strolled through the boisterous crowds of parents and children. Even on a Tuesday, the place was packed. The famous carousel with its painted ponies, dancing chariots, and gleaming brass glowed in the deepening dusk. In the distance the solar powered Pacific Wheel carried its human cargo aloft against the clouds massed out over the Pacific.

Raucous hawkers peddled everything from cotton candy to giant stuffed pandas. Des walked at David's side, dwarfed beside his six-four frame. He stuffed his hands in his jean pockets and seemed relaxed.

"Chris and I used to come here a lot when we were at UCLA. We weren't much more than kids I guess, though we thought we were pretty sophisticated. He won me a tiger once, gave it to me right here," Des glanced around the milling crowds of couples and kids. "Didn't give a damn what anyone thought. Just handed me this big black and orange thing with this shit eating grin on his face." He shook his hairless head at the memory. "I tried to win one back so we'd be even, but I couldn't win jack. You want some cotton candy?"

It was on the tip of David's tongue to say he didn't really like the stuff then he looked down into Des's open face and saw his broad smile and acquiesced with a grin. "Sure."

Des bounced over to the nearest vendor and returned minutes later with two cones covered with pink and blue spun sugar clouds. David took the blue one and bit off a mouthful, which instantly dissolved into a sticky mass of crystals on his tongue.

"What was he like?" David asked softly, almost to himself.

Des didn't need to ask who. He smiled and stuffed a finger full of cotton candy in his mouth. "He was always up for an adventure. He wanted to 'try' life, he said. He dragged me out to go sky diving once, I almost shit my pants. Another time we had to go to Australia and try reef diving, because he heard the best diving was there. He dragged us out of school for a long weekend at the balloon fiesta in Albuquerque and hooked us up with someone in the mass ascent on opening day. But he never let his grades slip. The guy was a genius—even when he didn't try, he aced a 3.0 grade point average. When he put his mind to it he always got a 4.0. It was always easy for him."

"Even being gay?" It had taken David years to even be able to say that word. It had taken him nearly as long to come to terms with the fact that he was part of that disenfranchised group. It had always seemed like a ridiculously frivolous word for such a life changing thing. But it was a word he'd learned to

embrace since it gave him a freedom he'd never had before. A freedom just to be himself.

"Even that," Des said. "He told me once he knew he was gay in junior high. He claimed he was really nerdy back then, told me he looked like 'the dog's breakfast' which I never believed, but he insisted. I guess he got seduced by some jock in the locker room after a big football game and always said he knew what that made him. But he had a supportive family and when he finally came out to them in senior high there were no fireworks. What about you, what was it like?"

"I knew young, but I didn't want it to be true, so I pretended it wasn't. But there was this sergeant at the academy... he showed me what it could be like. Of course back then if you came out on the job you were committing career suicide so we all learned to keep our mouths shut."

"That's got to be hard. I always had it pretty easy. Hell any one who knows anything about fashion assumes we're gay even if we're not. Hooray for stereotypes, right? No one cares. Right wing god jockeys don't tend to buy what I'm selling anyway. Your parents... do they...?"

"They know," David said stiffly, thinking of his rigid, New England born and bred mother and her Puritan sensibilities and morals. "They made no bones about not liking it. At least my mother did. My stepfather's less... judgmental."

Des's smile turned coy. "I'll bet you never thought you'd fall in love with someone like Chris, did you?"

"The truth? No. What have we got in common? I mean, look at me."

"You're sexier than you think. Chris sure thinks so."

"He said that?"

"No, but then for the first time Chris wouldn't talk much about that at all. Usually he'd dish all his dates. I expected it. But with you," he shrugged. "He wouldn't talk."

David was amused and slightly alarmed at the notion of Chris talking him up to Des. But what did he expect? The two had been best friends for most of their lives and had shared so many things, good and bad. Of course Des would want to know all about the men in Chris's life.

That raised a chilling specter. "What about now," he said. "Does Chris still tell you all the 'dish'?"

Des suddenly looked away, his stance growing rigid. David's heart stopped beating.

"What does he tell you, Des?"

"I can't do that David. I can't tell stories out of school anymore."

"You mean you can't, or you won't?"

"Won't and don't ask me. It's not fair to Chris or me. I stood behind you guys all the way. I still think you belong together, but you're not sure, are you? So whatever Chris does is his business, however ill-guided it is."

All too true, David thought bitterly. He'd given up his right to criticize Chris's lifestyle choices when he walked away from their relationship. The reasons behind his walk were still valid, but he had to wonder if

he'd been too hasty in giving up. Maybe they could work things out, if they both wanted to.

"Does he ever talk about me?"

"Does he think about you, you mean? He does." Des blinked and stared out over the park to the sunlit sea beyond. "I've seen him cry, you know," he whispered. "If that's what you want to hear. He misses you more than he could ever admit, but he's too damn stubborn to come to you, with his hat in his hands. Too prideful."

He was hardly the only one. He could be stubborn too. Chris would have said pig-headed.

Finishing up his cotton candy he dumped the sticky paper cone into an overflowing garbage receptacle and strolled towards the pier that extended out into the ocean. The sun was moving around to begin its western descent. Sails dotted the horizon and further out a large tanker moved south, toward San Diego.

Des leaned on the rail and gazed down at the foamy, roiling waves that pounded against the pylons underpinning the pier. At low tide David knew lovers often took advantage of the privacy the pier afforded. So, unfortunately did dealers and others who preyed on them.

From where he stood David couldn't see anyone down on the sand. He put his back to the ocean and faced Des who was still nibbling on his candy floss. Behind them the sounds of revelry rose and fell like a tide of noise. They continued moving down the pier, toward the Mariasol Cocina Mexicana restaurant.

"Do you really think we have a hope in hell of making it work?" David asked softly, half afraid of the answer, but needing to know.

Des turned to face him squarely. "I think that's up to you and him."

Not much of an answer. But then what did he expect, a magic fix? It was going to be work, for both of them. Was he up to it? Was Chris?

What was the alternative?

He sighed and tipped his head sideways, avoiding Des's knowing look. But Des would have none of it. He stepped closer, forcing David's face around.

"Do you love him?"

"What? Yes, of course. I always did—"

"That's your answer then, isn't it?"

And in the end it was as simple as that.

David did something then he'd never done before, even with Chris. He drew Des into his arms and hugged him, not caring a whit who saw him or what they thought. Then he leaned down and kissed Des on the mouth.

Des stood frozen, his hands on David's arms. He blinked up at David then a broad smile broke over his face.

“I dare you to do that again.”

David looked around and flushed when he realized they were surrounded by people. But he gamely tightened his grip on Des’s shoulders and kissed him again. They separated and Des gestured toward the Mariasol. “Buy you a drink?”

“I better not. But let me take a raincheck.”

Des nodded. “Okay. When you have some good news to tell me. We’ll come back then.”

Wednesday, 5 pm, Piedmont Avenue, Glendale

David started dressing early for his eight o’clock date. He took a long shower and scrubbed all over, enjoying the freedom from his bandages and stitches. He looked at the three inch scar on his belly, realizing that it would never completely fade and would always be a reminder of his encounter with Bitterman.

He spent an inordinate amount of time picking out what he was going to wear. Until Chris he’d owned one suit outside of the LAPD uniform he wore for formal events like police funerals. Chris had insisted that change. He had gifted David with three suits, all from Des’s Beverly Hills boutique. He looked them over then chose the gray Amalfi, pairing it with a pale rose shirt and dark gray and cordovan rose tie. Back in the upstairs bath with the full length mirror he studied himself, knowing he looked as good as he could, given the material he had to work with. He had shaved following his shower but even so he ran a hand over his face, grimacing at the rasp. His beard grew fast. Too damn fast. He pulled out his electric razor and buzzed himself again. Then he took his mustache comb and scissors and touched up his ‘stache, frowning over the gray hairs he spotted mixed in with his sable black.

Finally he put his tools away and left the bathroom. He glanced at his Timex. Seven-fifty-five. With stiff fingers he smoothed the cuff of his jacket down and brushed imaginary lint off his shoulder. Then he started pacing.

Sweeney followed him at first, trying to squirm around his legs, giving up only after David accidentally kicked him. Miffed, the Siamese left the room and disappeared into David’s bedroom. He almost followed the cat, then knew he didn’t have time. Apologies would have to come later.

He heard a vehicle turn up his driveway. He hurried to the front door, but refrained from throwing it open. When the doorbell pealed, he forced himself to take his time answering it.

The doorbell rang again.

This time, he did throw the door open.

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Chapter 11

Wednesday, 8:10 pm, Piedmont Avenue, Glendale

CHRIS WAITED FOR David to buckle up before he headed south. Sticking to surface streets they neared West Hollywood.

“Where are we going? Or is it still a surprise?”

Chris only grinned at him. “You look nice.”

David looked over at him, his gaze raking Chris’s slim form. “So do you. Is that new?”

“Des just got a new shipment in from Italy. Couldn’t resist this.” He patted his pin-striped leg. “Ah, here we are.”

David was familiar with Melrose, but not this location. He glanced up at the impressive arched window overlooking Melrose. The sign said Xiomara. Chris parked his Lexus on Seward and waited for David to get out and led the way back to Melrose.

“What’s t his place?” David asked as they were led into the dining area by the maitre’d. They passed a massive black bar that took up nearly one whole wall and were led into an alcove and handed two menus.

“Neuvo latino—you have got to try their Mambo mojito. It’s to die for,” Chris said.

“You know I don’t drink things like that.”

“Honey, tonight, I’m in charge.”

David was visibly taken back. He had always been the take charge guy in their relationship. Chris had always wanted it that way. Well things were going to change, starting here.

“You’ll like it. Trust me.”

“Do I get to choose my meal?” David asked with an uneasy smile.

Chris scooped the menu out of David’s hands and handed them back to the obsequious waiter who had appeared moments after they were seated.

“Two Mambos to start. We’ll have a bottle of the Smith-Madrone Riesling with dinner, then the Pepper Crusted Goat Cheese and Red Beet Salad and Ceviche as appetizers.”

“Very good, sir.”

“I’ll let you know what we want for the main course in a bit.”

The waiter did everything but click his heels as he left the table. He returned within minutes with two tall glasses. Chris took a sip and sighed. Still as good as always.

Chris raised his glass and smiled. “*A su salud, a su amor y a nosotros*,” he said softly.

David touched his glass to Chris’s and brought it to his lips. “*Salud*.” He drank and at Chris’s look, nodded. “You’re right, it’s good.”

When the appetizers arrived David sampled both. He nodded. “Good.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“You’ve been here before?”

“Sure.” Chris didn’t say anything else. He could tell from the unasked question in David’s eyes that he wanted to know with who, but wouldn’t ask. And Chris wasn’t talking. He wasn’t about to tell David he’d been here with a client for a business lunch. Let David think the worst. Jealousy kept a man on his toes.

The waiter was back. Chris gave his order. “Charcuterie and Chino-Cubano Arroz Frito with Maduros.” When the waiter left he met David’s gaze. “Mixed meats done Cuban style. I think you’ll like it.”

“Well, you know me and meat.”

The obvious double entendre did what David intended, it sent a bolt of raw desire along Chris’s already sizzling nerves. He took a deep drink of mojito and ate some ceviche. He extended a forkful to David who took it. They stared at each other across the table then Chris offered him another bite.

Chris was aware of nothing else in the room, in the world, except David. He could see the wide pores on his rough skin, the green ring around his dilated pupils, a bead of sweat nestled in the silky black hairs of his mustache. His lips were slightly opened and Chris could see his pink tongue as it took in the ceviche and tasted it. A pulse beat in the shadow of David’s throat and Chris stared at it, mesmerized. David licked his lips and Chris almost came then and there. He looked away, a flush flaring up his neck, burning the skin of his face.

The wine he had ordered earlier arrived and was opened by the sommelier. Chris tasted it, nodded and watched as their two wine glasses were filled. The acidic wine had just the right flowery essence for the meal he had in mind.

And it was.

“So when do you go back to work?” he asked.

“Probably light duty starting Monday. The doctor wanted me to take a few more days off and Lord knows, I have enough sick time saved up.”

Chris topped their wine glasses. “What have you been doing to keep busy?”

“Picked up a Motorola Stereo Hi-Fi,” David said with sudden enthusiasm. “It’s in a Drexel Cabinet. Needs a lot of work but it’ll be sharp when it’s done.”

“I’d like to see it sometime,” Chris said. He meant it too. He’d always been impressed by the painstaking work David gave to his collection. “Maybe we can have a music night in.”

“Sure,” David said roughly, not meeting Chris’s knowing gaze. “We can do that.”

“I think I found the car I want,” Chris said. “It’s a Ford, like you suggested. And you always say we should buy American.”

“Sure, keep the jobs here.” David nodded. “What model?”

“An Escape. Lot better gas mileage than the Lexus. But there’s still room for me to bring equipment to a job site.”

“You still want me to go with you for a test drive?”

Chris nodded. “Yes. You know what I should be looking for better than I do.”

“I doubt that,” David said dryly. Chris grinned.

“So we’re on?”

“Sure. When?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Give me a time and place.”

“How about I pick you up,” Chris said, watching David’s face. “I’d like to go early.”

“Fine by me.” Again the tension Chris recognized. “Give me a call.”

“I will,” Chris said softly, knowing he wouldn’t be calling David. He wouldn’t need to.

They finished the meal with more easy conversation. Both of them declined dessert. Chris ordered coffee instead. They returned to the car and Chris headed back to David’s. Once there they both climbed out of the Lexus and stood in the driveway. Chris gazed up at the gabled roof over the front door. It had been painted recently.

“You’ve been fixing the place up.”

“Figured it was about time.”

“It looks good.”

David stared down at his feet, then back up at Chris. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“What now? You’re in charge, right?”

“Oh, that. Not anymore.”

“What?”

“The night’s over. I’m giving it up.”

“Oh,” David said. He thought for about a minute then a slow smile broke over his craggy face. “In which case, I’m taking over.”

Chris eyed him warily, not sure where this was going.

He pulled Chris into his arms. "Lock that thing up," he said, indicating the Lexus. "You're coming with me."

He took Chris's hand and led him up to the front door, unlocking it and then locking it behind them. He turned to face Chris in the tiny alcove. Chris stood motionless, his body vibrating with tension. David was so near, yet so very far away.

David bridged that gap. He reached up and cupped Chris's face in his hands. Heat pooled in Chris's gut and his legs grew weak. He leaned against the wall for support. Gently David pressed his mouth to Chris's, his lips open. His breath was warm and his mouth tasted of coffee. The kiss deepened and he filled Chris's mouth with his tongue, savagely plundering him, his hands closing into fists on his shoulders, shoving him back into the wall. He skimmed his hands down Chris's side, gripping his ass and lifting him off the floor. Chris wrapped one leg around David's hip and arched against him, slamming David's hips between his legs, pressing against his hardening cock.

He broke away from David and gasped for air. "God, David—"

"Shut up," David growled. "Don't talk. Don't move."

He grabbed Chris's hand and pulled him to the bedroom, pushing him on the bed and reaching for his shirt.

Chris raised shaking fingers to undo David's shirt, but David brushed his hands away. "Don't move."

Chris froze and watched David shuck his jacket and shirt, dumping them over the only other furniture in the room, a ladder back chair. Mesmerized, Chris watched hard muscled flesh as it was exposed to his hungry gaze. David's chest rippled and flexed as he stripped, only leaving his pants on, the fly opened, exposing his boxers. Chris stared at the raised red scar on David's lower abdomen, sharply contrasting with his dark skin.

Ignoring David's orders he sat up. "My God, David. Should we be doing this?"

"The stitches are out. It's healing. The doctor told me to get some exercise."

"But you said light-duty..."

"I'm fine, Chris." He approached the bed, his eyes pinning Chris to the quilt covered mattress. He stopped beside the bed and reached into his bedside table for his lube and condoms. He pointed at the bed. "Down. Now."

Chris subsided.

David set the items down on the table and turned back to Chris. Leaning over, his hot breath dancing over Chris's overheated face, he began to skim the buttons on his shirt open, slowly, one at a time, with each button open he stroked the exposed skin. "This time you will do exactly what I tell you to do. No questions, no back talk. Understand?"

"Understood."

"Good." David wrenched Chris's shirt off and threw it on the floor. After pulling off his shoes and socks

he went to work on his pants, finally exposing the jockeys that barely covered his raging cock.

While Chris silently urged him on he slid stiff fingers down under the waistband and slipped the taut material off, smoothing his palm over Chris's ass before he wrenched the material off and flung it after his other clothes. Chris squirmed on the bed, opening and closing his legs in need.

David stopped him with a firm hand on his hip. "Don't move."

"Oh, God, David—"

David put his hand over Chris's mouth, stilling his moans. "Shhh."

He straightened and under Chris's glazed eyes, he finished stripping his own clothes off. He stood beside the bed, his hand on his cock, lightly stroking himself. Chris could see a drop of pre-come oozing from the bulbous head half-concealed by his foreskin. He pushed the skin back, revealing his swollen head to Chris's avid gaze.

Chris licked his dry lips. He could barely breathe, couldn't see anything but David. He watched as David knelt on the bed beside him, his mouth coming down to caress Chris's throat. His mustache whispered over Chris's supersensitive skin and sent waves of desire firing along his nerve endings. He moaned and bit his lips to keep from crying out. David pressed his mouth against his lips, sliding his stiff tongue past his teeth and tangling with his tongue. Then he trailed his hot wet mouth down Chris's collar bone, tracing the outline of one nipple. With excruciating slowness he circled the rapidly hardening nub, only to move off it to the next one.

Chris would have ignored David's injunction but David used the weight of his body to hold Chris in place. He couldn't move. Couldn't do anything but endure as his desire mounted and he thought he was going to die of need.

David's mouth moved lower, tasting and licking every inch of his tight, vibrating body. Chris mindlessly thrust his hips up, blindly seeking release. He threw his head from side to side, fighting for breath, a low whine rising in his throat. His body was so tense he heard his muscles creak.

David shoved his legs open. Then he slipped to the end of the bed and took Chris's foot in his hands. He wrapped his lips around his big toe, sucking it gently then moving on to slather each of his toes with hot saliva. He used his stiff fingers to knead his soles and his heel, replacing his fingers with his tongue and his teeth.

"David..." Chris broke through his self-imposed silence. But David had his own agenda. He ignored his plea and continued his painfully slow ascent, pausing to slake his thirst on each dimple of flesh and knobby joint.

David's tongue slipped between his balls and stroked his hole. Chris lost it. He cried out and moaned David's name, thrashing on the bed. When David reared up over him he opened his legs and welcomed his assault. This time it was David who lost his tightly wound self-control as he slammed his latex covered cock up Chris's hole, filling him with one savage thrust. He levered himself above Chris and rocked into him. Chris met him thrust for thrust. He began grunting out Chris's name and his thrusts grew erratic, as his control abandoned him. Then the only sound in the small bedroom was the sharp slap of sweating flesh and their moans.

David rammed his mouth down on Chris's. His tongue delved into his hot mouth, wrestling with his

tongue, lapping at his teeth. He gripped his hips so hard he left dimple bruises on his hips. Chris could feel David's orgasm mounting. He wrapped his legs around David's hips, thrusting up to meet his out of control movements.

Suddenly David froze. He cried out and thrust one more time, burying himself up Chris's gut, his cock throbbing in release. He collapsed on top of Chris, who held him in trembling arms. David pressed his open mouth above Chris's Adam's apple. Then he reached down and gripped Chris's cock and pumped it furiously.

Chris shouted David's name and came, splashing hot come across David's fist and his stomach. David collapsed, rolling at the last minute to take his weight off of Chris. He stripped his condom off and threw it in the bedside waste receptacle and rolled off the bed, coming back moments later with a damp towel which he used to wipe them both down. Then he settled back on the bed, folding Chris into his arms, nuzzling his damp chest.

"Jesus," Chris inhaled David's deliciously familiar scent. "Tell me why we stopped doing this."

David rubbed his hip, smoothing away the marks he had put in his skin. "Because we're not compatible."

Chris folded his arms around David's broad shoulders. He nuzzled the skin above David's heart. "This is so not compatible. We should have tried this earlier."

A rumble of laughter rolled through David's chest. "I thought we did."

Chris grew serious. "Did we really try, though?"

"I thought we did," David said softly. "Are you saying we didn't?"

"I'm saying I don't know." He rose on one elbow and stared down at David. "Do you love me, David?"

David nodded. "Since the first time I told you."

"Then why can't we make it work?"

"I... I don't know. Do you want to make it work?"

"I'm willing to try, if you are." Chris stroked his thigh, feeling his muscles tense and relax. "I had a lot of fun bowling last week."

"You want to do it again?"

"Yes."

"No strings?"

"None, unless you count coming home to finish the night up here."

"I think I can live with that." David grinned against his throat. "Bowling and you."

Chris played with the damp hair on David's chest, tweaking one of his nipples. Gently he touched the

scar. "You're sure you're okay?"

"Didn't I just prove I am?"

"Not what I meant. You're being careful, right?"

"Always. This guy just got the jump on me. Guess the same way he got the jump on his wife and boyfriend."

Chris leaned up on one elbow. "I want to take care of you."

David's eyes darkened. "Would you? But I'm fine."

"No you're not."

"I'm not?"

"No, you need me."

"I do?" David's breathing grew shorter. Chris didn't need to look to see that he was getting aroused again. So was he.

"You do. You never could look after yourself."

"Hey!" David tried to sit up but Chris held him in place. "I've been taking care of myself for years before I met you."

"You were buried so far in the closet you reeked of eau de mothball. How many secret trips did you make to Palm Springs to find some twink to fuck—"

David winced at the crudity. But he held his silence.

"Is that the way you like it? Secret? So nobody down at the station knows you're still fucking men?"

"Chris—"

"Who was that that guy in your hospital room? Someone you met at the Eagle?"

"How did you know about that—?"

"You tell me cops are gossips, well they've got nothing on bartenders. The bartender at the Eagle knows Ramsey." Chris grimaced. "Enough said, right?"

"I don't ask you what you've been doing since... since we were together."

And Chris could hardly tell him. He suddenly felt hot shame. If David had found pleasure somewhere else, who was he to complain? But he couldn't let it go.

"Who was he, David?"

"His name is Blair."

Blair. Chris turned the name over in his mind. Something about it dogged Chris. He couldn't let go of the image of David with that man. Blair.

Jealousy was wholly foreign to him. Even Geoff, the guy he'd lived with years ago, hadn't inspired him to care about who he slept with. But David... he saw red every time he thought of David in bed with another man.

He hated that David had the power to raise his blood pressure to dangerous highs.

"Do you love him?"

"What? Who—no, it's not like that."

"Just a fuck buddy?"

"Why are you doing this, Chris?" David rolled over, staring up at the ceiling. "Do I want to know what you were doing for the last month?"

Chris closed his eyes, "No," he whispered. "You don't."

"What do you want, Chris?"

"You know what I want."

"Chris—"

"I want us to be a couple. I want you to be proud of me."

"I am proud of you."

"Then why don't you take me to LAPD events? That charity picnic you were invited to. You went alone. Why?"

David wouldn't meet his eyes. "You don't know any of the guys."

"I'm a pretty sociable guy, David. I clean up real good and I've been told people actually like being around me."

"Chris—"

"But that's not good enough, is it? All you can do is look at all of them and think they're seeing you and me doing this..." He cupped David's soft cock. "You can't get past that, can you?"

"Jesus, Chris—"

"I want us to live together," Chris said. This had always been the bone of contention between them. David liked the sex, but he couldn't or wouldn't commit to anything more permanent. It was like as long as he didn't physically move his things from one address to another then he wasn't living with another man. "I want to marry you."

David was silent. Chris sighed. “David...”

“You know what I think about that. We’ve been through this already—”

“We’ve been over it again and again, but all we’re doing is running in circles.”

“That’s because you won’t accept that I’m not going to move in with you.” David briefly looked at Chris then looked away. “I’m not getting married.”

“You mean you’re not marrying a man.”

“I’m not marrying anyone.”

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Chapter 12

Thursday, 12:40 am Piedmont Avenue, Glendale

DAVID REFUSED TO meet Chris’s gaze. He didn’t want to see the naked longing in his ex-lover’s eyes. He couldn’t give Chris what he wanted. Chris had to realize that. For the good of both of them. It had been a huge mistake to bring Chris back here tonight. But he had to face the fact that he had his own addiction. Chris did things to him by just being in the room with him that no one, not even Blair, did.

But that was no excuse for forgetting his vow to let Chris go. But like a crack head, he couldn’t stay away from his drug. No amount of therapy was going to fix his problem. Only time, and distance, could do that.

Pushing Chris away was only the first of many hard steps.

Putting his thoughts into action, he rolled away from Chris’s touch and went into the bathroom. When he emerged twenty minutes later, Chris had crawled under the covers and was asleep. David thought briefly of waking him to take him home, but in the end his own exhaustion won the night and he crawled in beside Chris, who curled around him, clinging even in sleep. David drifted to sleep with Chris’s warm breath on his cheek.

He awoke during the night and found they were spooning, his hard cock pressed up against Chris’s ass. He nuzzled Chris’s neck and slipped back into an easy sleep.

When he woke next it was to find Chris stroking him, his hard cock in his hand. “Come for me, baby,” Chris whispered and David did, his hot come splashing over his hand and abdomen. “That’s the right way to start the day,” he said, and David nodded.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice husky. He clamped his hand over Chris’s. “Let me do you.”

“In the shower,” said Chris, and David blinked.

“Shower?”

Chris nodded with a satisfied smile. “Yeah, shower. Then car.”

“Car?—Right, go test drive the car.”

Chris held David’s hand into the shower, only letting it go when they climbed in to the small shower stall together.

“This thing really isn’t made for two, you know.”

“I can suffer, if you can.” Chris crowded close, using a bar of soap to cover them both with slickness. David responded, forgetting his vow in the night to give Chris up. He kneaded Chris’s ass and stroked his cock, holding him against the wall and not letting up until Chris came, crying out and splashing the shower wall with come.

They stood together, breathing heavily as the water washed over them, finally turning cool. Chris turned off the faucets and led him out of the cubicle, using a towel to dry David first then himself. Back in the bedroom, David pulled out a pair of jeans and an LAPD T-shirt.

Chris looked at the bottom drawer of the dresser, remembering that David had gotten comfortable enough that he let Chris keep a change of clothes on hand. Chris reached for the drawer and pulled it open, rummaging among the contents.

“What are you doing?” David asked, a hint of alarm in his voice.

Chris replied, “Looking for my jeans. I don’t want to go buy a new car wearing a thousand dollar suit... puts me at a disadvantage for bargaining,” he added with a laugh.

“I returned your stuff, remember?” David said.

“Oh, yeah, that’s right,” said Chris, remembering with a pang how final it had seemed at the time. He paused. “I see you found something to put in the drawer in place of my things...” He stood up, letting the leather and chrome harness dangle from his hand. “I didn’t know you were into this...” he said, his voice drifting off.

“It... it was a gift,” David replied, a slight flush creeping up his neck.

“From that guy I saw at the hospital?”

David nodded, not saying a word. Chris felt a roil of jealousy in his gut, but tried to keep his tone light. “I bet it looks hot on you,” he said.

David looked down. “I haven’t worn it yet,” he said. “I’m... uh... still recovering you know.”

Chris stuffed the gear back in the drawer, kicking it shut with his foot. “Yeah,” he said, picking up his suit pants and pulling them on quickly. “Listen, how about if we swing by my place so I can change, then I’ll buy you breakfast at that diner you like on Hyperion.”

“This test drive sounds like it is turning into an all day event,” said David, guarded.

“Just a half day,” said Chris. “C’mon, you promised.”

David paused, then reluctantly said okay. Chris felt his heart surge and David wondered if he was even

capable of saying no to the man he loved.

Like David could refuse anything Chris asked.

Thursday, 11:30 am, Midway Ford, Vermont Avenue

After breakfast, they pulled into the lot of the Midway Ford on Vermont Avenue. A man who clearly knew Chris hurried over to them. “Back already?”

“I want to see the Escape again.” Chris glanced at David. “We’d like to take it out for a test drive.”

“I think you’ll be suitably impressed,” the salesman said with unctuous charm. They followed him into an office where he viewed Chris’s ID and picked up the keys to the model Chris had looked at earlier.

The Escape was a compact little SUV, half the size of Chris’s current set of wheels. Chris walked around it, popped the hood and peered inside. He looked over at David. “How’s it look to you?”

David peered into the engine block. “Six cylinder. That’s good. You’ll get good pickup on the freeway. What’s the torque?” he asked the salesman.

“Forty-three hundred rpm,” the salesman cut in. “Excellent gas mileage too, much better than any other SUV out there. Two hundred forty horses.”

“Manual?” David asked.

Chris shook his head with a weak grin. “I never learned. I’ll go with the automatic.”

David grimaced. “Better gas mileage with manual. I’ll teach you if you like. Taught a neighbor’s kid a couple of years ago.”

Chris brightened. “That would be great. How long do you think it would take to learn? That means you’ll be around a while, right?” There was a plaintive note to Chris’s question.

David flushed and realized he’d made a mistake making the offer. He tried to salvage the situation. “Uh, maybe you should get an automatic. Easier to handle with all the stopping and starting in city driving. Plus, it’s easier driving up hills, like around your place...”

“Nah, I want to learn. I’ll learn fast. I know it. I know you can teach me. Come on, David. It’ll be fun.” He turned to the salesman. “I’ll look at a manual if you don’t mind.”

The salesman looked from David to Chris. He nodded and reached for another key. “Follow me.”

Chris gestured to David to take the driver’s side. “You tell me what you think.” Then he climbed into the passenger’s seat.

They spun out onto Vermont and headed north toward the Hollywood Freeway where David opened the vehicle up. He kept to the speed limit until he goosed the gas to shoot around a panel van that was laboring in the right lane. He exited the freeway at Silver Lake Boulevard and headed back west. They passed the grandiose glass and stone clad entrance to the Vermont and Beverly Red Line Station. Instead of hooking a left onto Vermont, David kept on driving west. They cruised down Beverly.

“Well?” Chris asked after the third light. He had been carefully watching David drive, studying the way he smoothly shifted gears.

“I think it would suit you fine. But do you really think you can learn a stick?”

“I’ll learn. You know me, a fast learner.” Chris nodded. “But no bench seats,” he said, referring to the seats in David’s Chevy that allowed Chris to sit right beside David.

“I’m sure you’ll adapt,” David said dryly.

Chris sighed melodramatically. “I’m sure I will.” He leaned over and slid his hand between David’s legs, squeezing his basket. “But it won’t be the same.”

David swung around the block and within fifteen minutes they were back in the lot, being met by the obsequious salesman.

Chris jumped out of the vehicle and before David could move away, he grabbed his arm. “I’ll take it. Let’s start the paperwork, shall we?”

“Of course, sir. This way.”

They went through the whole song and dance, haggling over what Chris would get for his Lexus, what sort of deals they were willing to put on the table. David had never realized it, but Chris was in his element when he was haggling. He marveled at how this blond-haired pretty boy was actually a bargaining giant, who was rapidly leaving the salesman in the dust.

David leaned back, watching as Chris wrapped up the negotiations. “Financing, sir?” asked the salesman, trying to squeak one last bit of money out of the deal.

“I’ll talk to my bank,” said Chris. “They usually have better interest rates.”

The salesman nodded. “And when would you like to pick this up?”

“A week?”

He glanced at the calendar. “Next Thursday... that’s Thanksgiving—we won’t be open.”

Chris seemed surprised. “Thanksgiving already? Where does the time go...” He paused. “All right, how about the day before? Wednesday—late.”

Back in the SUV’s cab Chris rubbed his hands together and threw the vehicle in gear. “That calls for a drink. My treat.”

Before David could object, they were back out in traffic heading for Silver Lake. When he turned onto Santa Monica Boulevard David had a sinking feeling he knew where Chris was going. It was confirmed when Chris pulled up in front of the Eagle. He glanced at the dashboard clock. Two pm. Little chance anyone he knew would be around yet. Blair usually didn’t make an appearance until after six, unless he was working evenings and then it would be as late as midnight.

“Buy you a Bud, copper.”

“You trying to bribe an officer of the law? That’s a serious offense.”

Chris held out his arms, palms out. “Cuff me then.” He dropped his voice. “Or better yet, maybe you could model that leather rig and I’ll cuff you.”

David never would have thought such a promise would have aroused him, but it did. He was instantly hard. Chris knew it too.

“Interesting.” Chris licked his lips. “I’m tempted to take you home.”

“Except the leather is at my place,” David said softly.

“I can change that fast enough.” Chris held out one arm. “Come on, let me get you that beer—and maybe a burger. Ready for lunch?”

They entered the bar and instantly every eye in the place was on them. The bouncer, a big burly bear who had often caught David’s eye, though neither of them had ever acted on their desires, looked Chris up and down with interest then met David’s smoldering gaze. He smiled and dropped his eyes, acquiescing to David’s proprietary glare.

At the bar the bartender greeted David with an effusive, “Davey, you’re back. Good to see you. Heard you got into a spot of trouble.”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

No one looked at Chris. Until David put his hand on his arm and introduced him, no one wanted to be caught looking at the pretty boy. They all assumed he was David’s. He wasn’t about to disabuse anyone of the notion.

Chris ordered two Buds and followed David into the dark back pool room. David put his beer down on a small table and gestured toward an empty pool table.

“Game?”

Chris shrugged and set his beer beside David’s. “I’ll warn you, I play it about as well as I bowl.”

“Well then I guess I know who’s going to win, don’t I? Want to lay down some coin?”

“Bet with you? Are you nuts?”

David waggled his eyebrows. “Maybe you’ll get lucky.”

Chris grinned. He sauntered over and picked up a cue. “Maybe I will.”

David ran the table on the first round. Chris looked up to find the late lunch crowd had gathered, watching them. He pretended to glare at David. “You’ve been practicing.”

“Of course.” He racked the balls again and took the first shot, scattering the balls over the felt topped table. This time it took him a little longer but he still won handily. Someone else claimed the next game and Chris was sidelined. He stood over the table holding his beer and watching as David challenged and

won the next two games. Finally he lost and joined Chris.

David was all too aware of the eyes on them. Or rather, on Chris. Even without his designer suit Chris stood out everywhere he went. David had never gotten used to the attention he garnered. He had never been the jealous type but Chris seemed to bring out the worst in him. One more reason he needed to distance himself from the man.

So what was he doing here? Worse, what was he doing here enjoying himself and wanting the day to never end?

He glanced at his watch. It was nearly four. He tipped his beer back and drained the bottle. “Can you run me home?”

“Sure, of course.”

“Let’s go then.”

Chris turned in behind David’s Chevy and climbed out. He met David under the gabled front door and stood with his hands folded over his chest. David stood awkwardly in front of him. When Chris stepped forward to kiss him, David sidestepped the contact.

“I’ll call,” David said, knowing he wouldn’t. Just like he wanted to invite Chris in, but wouldn’t.

“Okay. Take care of yourself.”

“You too.”

David waited until Chris rolled back out to Piedmont before he unlocked the door and went in to greet Sweeney.

[Return to TOC](#)

Chapter 13

Monday, 7:20 am, Northeast Community Police Station,

San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

DAVID SLIPPED HIS jacket off and draped it over the back of his chair. Flipping on his computer he pulled out the blue murder book they had started for the John Doe found at Forest Lawn. Martinez had been busy. The body had been IDed as Augustus “Gus” Crowley, a known hustler who worked out of West Hollywood. A canvass of the area had come up with one of Gus’s buddies who had recognized Bitterman from a photo lineup. So that was one tie.

The body in the garage had indeed been Meredith Luxton Bitterman, wife and mother who had discovered her husband’s extramarital activities when she had returned early from a business trip where she demonstrated and sold medical supplies. She had discovered the theft of her Stryker saw and immediately suspected her husband, though David doubted she’d guessed what he wanted the tool for. Bitterman had panicked at her unexpected return, seeing his whole life crumble around him and he had lashed out, striking his wife on the head, resulting in a subdural hematoma, meaning she had bled out into

her brain. He hadn't had time to turn her own saw on her before the police had started sniffing around him about his stolen car containing the body parts from another homicide.

David studied the report Martinez had written up while he'd been hospitalized and recuperating. None of it had come from Bitterman who had lawyered up the minute he hit the interview room. So Martinez had gone back to the house where Scientific Investigation Division had gone over the whole house for forensic trace. They found it in abundance. The Stryker saw found in the trunk with the body parts and a regular saw found in the garage, which both held DNA from Gus and Bitterman's fingerprints. It was pretty much a slam dunk case.

Martinez had left a note saying he wanted to reinterview Bitterman. David figured he had been waiting for David to return to work. Martinez rolled in at seven-thirty and clapped David on the back.

"Good to see you back in the saddle, cuz. You ready for this little get together with our confused boy?"

"Confused?"

"Yeah, he don't seem to know if he's gay or straight. No offense."

"None taken," David muttered. "At least I never had that problem."

"Guess not..."

David and Martinez never talked about David's orientation, though at least Martinez had stopped asking about his hot dates as a single guy. Probably didn't want to hear what really went on in David's bedroom. He had accepted David and their working relationship had never been stronger. Even their social life, Angel's games and the bowling league had picked up again after a lag following David's outing.

He still got the odd remark from other cops, usually the older ones who were a lot less tolerant than their younger counterparts. But the people who mattered, his Captain and Lieutenant were supportive, even if they didn't understand. As long as he did his job to their satisfaction, they were more concerned with meeting the Federal consent decree's draconian rules than hassling one gay cop.

Knowing Bitterman had lawyered up, David asked, "His mouthpiece going to be there?"

"Sure, gotta earn his fee, don't he?"

David had to give the guy credit, he was a bulldog, though he was fighting a losing cause. Bitterman's lawyer, Joel Stiller, went on the offensive even before David and Martinez had pulled up chairs to sit across from the shackled Bitterman. The ADA, Ann Marie DeSoto, was already present and had clearly been the subject of Stiller's blandishments before their arrival. She did not look impressed, which did not bode well for Bitterman.

"What are you offering my client?" Stiller demanded.

David looked from DeSoto to Bitterman, then blandly met Stiller's belligerent gaze. "Considering what your client is facing, nothing."

"He's prepared to cooperate."

“Sweet of him,” Martinez said. “We’ve got him dead to rights on two counts of aggravated first degree homicide.” He started ticking things off on his thick fingers. “Weapons used to commit, motive, opportunity, instruments used to dismember the corpse of Augustus Crowley—really, man, what do you think the male jurors are going to think about that little number you pulled on him? I can see them holding themselves right now.”

“The jury will never hear any of that. I intend to file a motion to suppress all the evidence seized in the house.”

“Don’t count on it, counselor,” DeSoto said. “The search of the garage was legitimate, and it’ll stand up to any attempt to rule it inadmissible. Forget it, counselor, your client’s got only one chance to avoid the death penalty—”

“Death penalty!” Bitterman went from slouching sullenly in his seat to sitting bolt upright, his face white under his sunburn. “What did I do to deserve the death penalty? It was an accident. I never meant—”

David got into it this time. “You stole equipment from your wife that had only one purpose—to cut bone. You reported your car stolen after witnesses placed you in West Hollywood with the victim the night he was last seen by any of his friends. A jury might discount the report on the car, but the Stryker saw? That smacks of premeditation. You meant to bring Crowley back to your place to make sure he didn’t carry out his threat to tell your wife. You probably would have succeeded too, if your wife hadn’t chosen to come home early from her trip.”

Bitterman shook his balding head sorrowfully. “She was supposed to be away until Friday. None of this would have happened—”

His lawyer put his hand on Bitterman’s arm, but it was too little and too late to stem the tide of words that poured out of the broken man.

“He was just a cheap hustler. Why would someone like that think I loved him? Loser...”

“But what about your wife, man?” Martinez asked softly. “She didn’t deserve that, did she? Now your kids are at county.”

Tears filled Bitterman’s eyes and he stared down at his manacled hands. “She shouldn’t have come home like that. She was trying to catch me up. She was always jealous of me. Always thinking the worst.”

Guess she was right on that. David kept his thoughts to himself. If the guy hadn’t seen the irony of his complaint David wasn’t about to point it out.

Stiller conferred with his client, who if anything, looked glummer.

“What are you offering us?”

DeSoto took over the negotiations. “I’ll take the death penalty off the table in exchange for a full written confession. Life without parole for both counts, to run concurrently.”

“My children—” Bitterman moaned.

DeSoto shrugged. “I can see you’re put in LAC, Cal State prison up in Lancaster. Your children can

visit, provided their legal guardian brings them.”

Bitterman moaned again. “The bitch shouldn’t have done this to me. I was a good husband. I took care of my kids. Why’d she have to go do this?” His voice drifted off, despondent.

DeSoto pulled out some forms from her briefcase and slid them across the table to Stiller, who glanced at them. “Our deal. He gives us full disclosure on both crimes. He’ll be expected to depose in front of a judge. In return for pleading guilty on both counts of second degree murder, you sidestep a murder one with special circumstances—and trust me, we can prove premeditation if you insist on going that road—and the state’s saved the waste of a trial. Win-win all around.”

“Win?” Bitterman whined. His one free hand swept the papers back toward the other side of the table. “You can’t send me to jail forever. I don’t deserve that!”

“Tell that to your wife and your motherless sons,” DeSoto snapped. She pushed the paper back across the table. “Talk to your client, counselor. Talk some sense into him. If you want I can have the detectives outline our whole case for you. Maybe that will convince you.”

Bitterman’s shoulders slumped. He nodded, whether in defeat or acquiescence, David didn’t know or care. His lawyer picked up the agreement DeSoto had drafted and flipped through them. Seeming to have given up any argument, he nodded as well and passed the papers and a pen to his client. Without hesitating Bitterman signed where he was told to and handed the papers back to his lawyer who added his signature.

DeSoto slid them back into her briefcase. “We’ll set up a court date for you, counselor. Your client will be held in remand until that time.”

“Can I talk to my children?”

“Your brother’s on his way, right?”

“Y-yes,” Bitterman said. “Karl and his wife, Rhonda...”

“He’ll be able to contact you. Whether he wants the children to talk to you will be up to him,” DeSoto said. She did nothing to soften her words, reminding David that he’d heard her called Iceberg DeSoto on the courtroom grapevine.

David and Martinez took Bitterman’s confession, a tape of which would be transcribed and signed by all parties before he went in front of a judge to do it all over again. Then they left DeSoto and Stiller to finish up their legal wrangling and picked up their weapons from check in. Back on the road in their unmarked David sighed and sagged back in the passenger’s seat. His side had started aching half way through the interview. He resisted the temptation to take any of the pain meds the doctor had prescribed for him. He didn’t want Martinez on his case for pushing too hard, too soon. Back at Northeast David pulled the murder book out one more time and finished up the report. One more case filed under closed. He still had two sixty-day reports to finish up for Lieutenant McKee. McKee had reminded him of them before he and Martinez had headed out to interview Bitterman. And there was the Drew Street drive by which was looking like another sixty-dayer, though that could change.

The paperwork gave him some much needed respite. Even with two weeks out of work, he was still sore. Before lunch he broke down and took one of the pain meds. For his first day back he met Martinez at El Tepayac, the Mexican restaurant in Boyle Heights where rumor often had Joseph Wambaugh, the

ex-LAPD cop who had made it big selling stories about cops and helping to redefine the LAPD ate with some of his cop friends. There they ran into some Hollenbeck division detectives who joined them around a big back table. Wambaugh was a no show. David ordered the signature Hollenbeck burrito and sweated through the fiery salsa. Martinez never had anything but the chicken taquito loaded down with guacamole he swore his own mother couldn't make.

Back at the division station he went back to his reports. All around him phones rang and voices filled the detective's squad room. Light from the noon sun bled through the dirty windows and low smog that blanketed the city since early morning and had only thickened as the day waned.

He pulled out the Drew Street murder book. She and her daughter had been shot with a .25 caliber, probably an automatic. Maria Real had a long rap sheet given her young age. No father had been listed on the birth certificate of Adora Beatriz Real. Martinez had interviewed the living relatives he could locate and only her grandmother had given him anything. The girl had been born trouble according to her eighty-two year old grandmother who Martinez had called a sharp-tongued *abuela* who reminded him painfully of his mother-in-law. "That one could peel paint off the wall with her tongue." Martinez had married into a huge family when he'd wed his Mexican born wife.

The closest guess Maria's grandmother would make on the *bebé pobre*'s father was an OG, original gangster from the *Sureños* set who had bewitched her baby girl and ruined her. She had turned to the streets after that and none of her *abuela*'s pleas or prayers had done any good.

"She was lost, *pobre nino*. Lost to the drugs and the street." Martinez had told him, shaking his head in disgust. "She tried to do good by the girl, but she couldn't shake the meth. Same old story, only the accents change."

Martinez had figured the shooters weren't out to get the girl, but she'd been in the wrong place with the wrong person. If they could figure out who she'd been with that fateful day they might be able to work out who the shooter was. "Forget following the money," Martinez said. "Follow the tweakers."

"Well we both know someone knows something," David said. "We just need to find the lever to get them to talk."

"Someone's got to be feeling bad about that kid going down like that."

David nodded. "How much you want to bet grandma knows something?"

"I don't bet on sure things." Martinez stood up and grabbed his jacket, a hideous houndstooth that looked like it came from Sally Ann. "So let's go *hable abuelita*."

Tuesday, 2:55 pm, Drew Street, Glassell Park, Los Angeles

Maria's grandmother was indeed a sharp tongued sprite who scorched the two nosy detective's hides with a stream of blistering Spanish that David did not ask Martinez to translate. He knew enough of the language to know he'd never heard anyone's grandmother talk that way. When she finally stopped her barrage and fell to furiously rocking in the chair that had to be as old as she was, he stepped onto the rickety wooden veranda beside her and held out his hand.

"We want to catch the men who did this to your granddaughter and her child."

“Will you?”

David nodded. “Yes, we will.”

“You cannot stop these men.”

“Begging your pardon, *Abuela*,” Martinez said softly. “But we will. We just need to know who they are.”

She started rocking again, her tiny feet scuffing the faded termite eaten boards under her feet. “Find them, *oficiales*. Find them for my *bebé pobre*.”

David knelt beside her, taking her hands in his. “Give us their names, ma’am.”

“Don’t call me ma’am. It makes me feel old.”

“Yes, ah, *Señora* Robles.”

“She was back with that *Sureños*, though I tell her he no good for her,” Robles said with a very unladylike snort. “She love him she says. He ruin her life, but she love him. He was no good. Then or now—”

“His name, *Abuela*,” Martinez said. “We need his name.”

“Bautista Goyo. Big G.” She pursed her thin lips. “Stupid names. I knew his mother, bless her soul.”

“Who does he run with? Who’s in his set?”

“Ronaldo Torres. He called Lil T by his boys.” Robles made another face, her mass of wrinkles screwing up, making her look like a brown walnut. “They are thugs. I tell Maria this and she laugh in my face. He is her man, she says. Well now look at what her man did to her.”

“What set did they run in, Mrs. Robles?” David pressed her.

She shook her wizened head. “He was a *carnales* in the *Mexikanemi*. A soldier in their war against God and the people.”

Mexican Mafia. Big in the prison populations of Chino, San Quentin and other California correctional institutions. *Los sureños*, *Sur 13*, *sureños trece* or *La EME*, were a Southern California network of gangs heavily involved with DTOs, or Drug Trafficking Organizations in and out of prisons. Any one a half dozen rival gangs could have made the attempted hit. There was no shortage of suspects.

“Do you know where we can find these men?” David asked.

She gestured down the street toward Estara Street. “The corner. That is where they hang out.”

It occurred to David that Drew Street was literally a stone’s throw from Forest Lawn Memorial Gardens. But there was no peace here. He looked around Robles’s tidy, nearly grassless yard, a sharp contrast to the street beyond the rusting fence that was the only barrier from the world beyond her door. An abandoned sofa on the curb had been sprayed with graffiti. Even the scarred eucalyptus tree beside it bore gang tags. From where he sat he could see S-13 carved into the mottled trunk. But another tag had

been sprayed over with a large black banger tag. He pointed this out to Martinez.

“Avenue bangers doing some set tripping?” Martinez asked.

“Not good news if they are. Was the attempted hit a shot across the bow?”

“A warning?”

“Let’s hope that’s all it is.” The last thing L.A. needed was a full fledged gang war. The Avenues were one of a half dozen gangs charged under a gang injunction. Were they making a comeback?

“Let’s go run our suspects through the system, see what pops up,” David said after they had been given descriptions of the two *Sureños*. As they strolled back to their unmarked. “Somebody’s got to have a jacket. Maybe something there will tell us who are hitters were.”

He let Martinez drive; his side was still stiff and achy. Not that he would let on to such a weakness. Martinez could be worse than Chris when it came to mothering him.

The database came up with half a dozen hits on Ronaldo Torres, AKA Lil T and Bautista Goyo, or Big G, both known associates of *Los sureños*. Both recent guests of Chino in San Bernardino county, a Level I penal institution. Graduates from one of the training programs offered to inmates, Torres was using the skills he’d learned and was driving an ice cream truck in Glassell Park. David wondered if he’d sold ice cream to Maria’s daughter. Goyo remained unemployed, though not necessarily insolvent. Most of his beefs had been drug related. Was the ice cream gig a cover to let the dealers move freely through an area?

Gangers liked to start them young. Get a homie hooked as a pre-teen and he was yours for his short, miserable life. Ice cream and crystal. Tweakers usually had a sweet tooth. Were Goyo and Lil T just distributors or did they use their own product?

Their jackets didn’t say. They’d have to track them down and let them sweat in an interview room for a while to see.

Now they just had to find the dynamic duo.

Before their rival bangers found them and finished what they’d started.

Return to TOC

Chapter 14

Tuesday, 12:15 pm, Lansdowne Street, East Los Angeles

CHRIS SPENT THE day at Pharmaden, getting the servers ready for the migration to the new systems. He broke for a quick bite at a local café where he drank several cups of coffee and did his damndest not to think about David.

He wasn’t very successful. Face it, the guy was completely and irrevocably under his skin. Detoxing was going to be as hard as what any junkie faced quitting their drug of choice. It took almost nothing to make him think of David. A voice in the next booth, a glimpse of swarthy skin and crisp, dark hair. A

smoldering look from a total stranger. But even those didn't move him and he turned away from the odd encounter that he knew would end up in someone's bed. He didn't want some nameless, faceless cock up his ass. He wanted David.

And he couldn't have him.

Face it. David was out of his life, by his choice. He'd made that more than clear.

"Get over yourself," he muttered as he paid up and slunk back into Pharmaden's subbasement where he could bury himself in his work. Something he was very good at.

He didn't leave the job until long after the sun had gone down in flame behind a thick bank of cloud and smog. He emerged to find his Lexus sitting on a flat tire, courtesy of a nail, or so he thought until he called AAA and they discovered the tire had been slashed.

"Tough luck that," the tow truck driver commiserated with a grin on his lying face. "Nice truck."

"Not for long," Chris muttered as he handed the goon his AAA card and paid to have the ruined tire taken away for recycling.

"Getting something prettier?"

"Yeah, a tank," Chris snapped. He roared away into the night before the smirking jerk could respond. Still seething Chris slammed into a parking spot on Hyperion and stomped into the Pit.

Ramsey looked at him in alarm, and when Chris climbed onto a barstool and planted his elbows on the bar he silently got his Ciroc martini and put it, along with a bowl of peanuts, in front of him. Chris ignored the food and dove into the drink.

Ramsey refilled it. But when he would have moved off down the bar, Chris stopped him with a hand on his arm. "You ever have one of those days?"

"All the time. Everyone does. It's what makes the good days seem better."

"Oh is that what it is." Chris buried his nose in the top shelf vodka, barely appreciating it. "Give me another one."

"Give me your keys."

Chris handed them over. In the beginning he'd argued with Ramsey about how drunk he really was, but it was an argument he was destined to lose, so now he didn't even try. Ramsey brought his third drink, which Chris didn't try to inhale. He even nibbled on a few nuts.

"Is it David?" Ramsey asked quietly, for Chris's ears only.

"What? No, it's not David... Well, maybe it is. I don't know anymore. The guy messes with my head, you know?"

"Yeah, I know."

"Don't tell me you think we're made for each other. I swear if I hear that fucking platitude one more

time, I'll scream.”

Ramsey shrugged and busied himself wiping down the mahogany bar. “Doesn’t matter what I think. It’s what you and David think.”

“And I think people should mind their own business.”

“Fair enough.”

They let the silence settle between them as Chris’s unfocused rage slowly subsided. He grew aware of other people in the bar, some he knew. He nodded to a few guys but made no effort to join anyone. Even the hot looking guy who slid into the space beside him, brushing his hip against Chris’s, didn’t get any attention. After a while the hot guy left in search of more receptive game.

Chris got another martini. After a bit, Ramsey murmured, “How’s Des doing? Still the same?”

“Up and down,” Chris admitted. “Some days are good and I can see him getting better, then the next day...” He flipped his hand over, imitating a diving plane. “More good than bad, so that’s probably a good sign.”

“I’m glad. I went to see him at the hospital. That was rough.”

Chris was startled. He’d never thought Des and Ramsey even knew each other outside of the bar. Certainly Des had never mentioned him. Thinking about Des made him want to talk to his best friend. He pulled out his BlackBerry and checked the time before hitting speed dial. A few minutes after six. Probably getting dinner ready. He hit call.

The brrr of a ringing phone greeted him. He let it ring until voice mail kicked in. Thoughtfully he disconnected and set the BlackBerry down on the bar. He finished his martini and picked the phone up again. This time it rang several times and he expected it to go into voice mail again. Instead it fell silent.

“Hello? Des? Is that you?”

Silence. The hairs on his neck rose. The call was eerily reminiscent of the night he had called Des four months ago to similar silence. When he had gone to investigate he had found Des’s lover Kyle butchered and Des missing. That had been the beginning of Des’s nightmare that continued to this day.

What was going on?

“Des? Are you there—”

“Chris?”

Relief flooded him. He felt something loosen in him and he took a deep breath. “Des, you scared me. Were you sleeping?”

“No, I’m awake,” Des’s voice was softer than normal. “Can’t sleep. Wish I could...”

“Hey, boyfriend,” Chris dropped his own voice as if he was too forceful he might scare Des somehow. Which was silly. Hadn’t Des been scared enough in his life that nothing Chris could do would make a dent in him? “What’s cooking, man. Want me to come over? We can kvetch—”

There was only silence. Chris's hairs stayed up. "Des. Talk to me. What's going on, buddy?"

"Just so tired. Need to sleep. That's all..."

"Did you take something, Des? Did you take something to help you sleep?"

"Sleep. Yes."

Chris looked up in a panic and found Ramsey watching him. He waved the bartender over. "I need a cab, stat."

"What—"

"It's Des. I need to get over to his place."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know." Chris thought fast. No sense alarming Ramsey or hurting Des if it turned out to be a misunderstanding on his part. "Probably nothing."

"Right." He picked up the bar phone and punched in a number. After a short conversation he nodded and hung up. "Be here in five."

"Thanks."

It took a nerve wracking thirty minutes to reach Des's Beverly Hills bungalow. When he finally stumbled out of the cab and hurried up the flagstone steps he was beginning to hyperventilate. His last phone call had gone straight to voice mail as though Des's phone was off the hook.

He pressed the doorbell, hearing the distinctive theme to *Gone With the Wind*. No answer. He tried again with the same result. Then he fell to pounding on the oak door with his fist. No Des.

He pulled out his house keys, sorting through them to find the key Des had given him years ago. He threw the door open, instantly alert to anything out of place. Still no sign of Des.

"Des, hon. Where are you?"

He passed through the living room, then the dining room and kitchen. No Des. Not good. He hurried into the master bedroom Des had painstakingly turned into chic urban glitz. There was a single light on in the normally brightly lit room. The curtains were drawn giving it a claustrophobic feel.

Des was in bed, half covered by the tangled bed clothes, naked. His skin, normally a rich cafe au lait color was wan and gray. His eyes were shut and his breathing was shallow. More alarming, a half empty glass of wine and two vials of empty medication sat on the bedside table.

Chris swiftly took in the room, and the body on the bed. "Des!" He bent over the horribly still body and felt for a pulse along his neck. It was there, slow but steady. His lips were parted and a bubble of air escaped along with a heavy sigh. "For God's sake Des, what did you do?"

He grabbed for the pills, hitting the wine glass and sending it crashing to the carpeted floor where it

spilled its contents on the richly colored Aubusson. He ignored the mess. The pills were the two subscriptions Dr. Weiser had written for Des. One was the Ativan, the other a mild sleeping aid he knew Des had requested when sleep began evading him and he needed to escape from his waking nightmares.

Had he wanted to escape permanently?

For the first time the thought that maybe Des had done this deliberately crossed Chris's mind. No, not Des. Des might be feeling on edge, might be in the throes of a severe clinical depression but Chris couldn't believe he would kill himself.

It had to be an accident.

He grabbed Des's shoulders and hauled him upright. "Des! Wake up! How many pills did you take?" Another glance at the pill vials revealed they were both two weeks old, so it didn't mean there had been a lot in either bottle. Des could have taken one or two extra or he could have taken a handful. How long had he been out? How long did he have?

Without thinking Chris grabbed his BlackBerry. He stared stupidly at the device, blinking as though he'd forgotten what it was. Belatedly he smashed his fingers down on 911 and was breathing fast by the time an operator came on the line.

"Nine-one-one, what is your emergency?"

"My friend is... sleeping..." He refused to say dying. Didn't want to mention his suspicions. "He won't wake up."

"Is he conscious?"

"No, I just said that. He won't wake up. Send somebody. I think... I think he may have taken too many sleeping pills."

"EMTs will be dispatched to your location," the woman rattled off Des's address

"Yes, that's it. Come quick. Please—"

"They're on their way, sir. Please stay on the line and tell me if his condition changes..."

It seemed like hours, but was probably only minutes before Chris heard the wail of an approaching siren. He hurried to unlock the door and fretted while the EMTs bustled into the house carrying equipment and a portable stretcher. They pushed him aside as they worked on Des, calling in the details on the prescriptions, asking Chris if he knew how many the victim had consumed.

"I don't know!" Chris wanted to scream, but that wouldn't help Des. He shook his head, his vision fading in and out as panic assailed him. "He was like this when I found him. I wasn't here when he took the pills.."

"What made you come over?"

"I called and he sounded... off. I rushed over."

"Has he done this before?"

“No! He didn’t do anything. It was an accident—”

He knew from the questions that the two thought Des had tried to kill himself. No doubt they saw it all the time. He tried to tell them it wasn’t like that. Des wouldn’t do that.

“Where are you taking him?” he hurried after the medics as they scurried out the door to the ambulance.

“We’ll transport him to Cedars Sinai.” Then they were gone, refusing to allow Chris to accompany them to the hospital.

It took forever to get a cab to come out to the house. While he waited he packed a few of Des’s clothes, plus a razor and his favorite after shave. Chris regretted his earlier drinking. This would be a whole lot easier if he had his car.

He locked up and urged the cabbie to hurry. Even so, it took forever to reach Cedars, where he eventually found Des in a private room. He set the suitcase he had brought on the floor beside the bed and sat on the edge, taking Des’s cool hand in his.

After a couple of hours the nurses came in and told him he had to leave, visiting hours were long over. He left and snagged a cab outside the hospital’s main entrance. This time he went straight home. He checked his email and didn’t even bother looking at Man2Man. Suddenly it all seemed very trite and trivial.

Whatever he was looking for wasn’t going to be found online.

[Return to TOC](#)

Chapter 15

**Wednesday, 8:00 am, Cedars Sinai Medical Center,
Beverly Boulevard, West Hollywood**

CHRIS GOT UP early. He called the car dealer and postponed picking up his new car until Friday. Today was all about Des. He got yet another cab to take him back to the Nosh Pit where he picked up his Lexus.

Then it occurred to him he needed to call David. He’d want to know about Des. Chris refused to think that he was using this as an excuse to talk to David. He put the thought out of his mind and speed dialed David’s work.

“Detective Laine, Northeast division,” David snapped. He had to have seen the caller ID.

“Hi, David. It’s me.”

“Yes?” David kept his voice cool. Chris’s chest tightened.

“I’m sorry to bother you. It’s Des...” He trailed off. Not sure how to say it. David was being so cold.

“What is it, Chris? I’m working and I’m too busy for this.”

“It’s Des,” he blurted. “He’s in the hospital. He ODeD.”

“What?” It was as though an electric charge had gone through David. Chris could almost see him bolting upright, alarmed. “Suicide?”

“No, he says it was an accident. I believe him.”

David didn’t speak for several seconds, then: “What hospital is he in?”

“Cedars Sinai. I’m heading there now.”

“How long are they going to keep him?”

“He was held overnight. They’re springing him today. No psych exam.”

“That’s good then.” David cleared his throat. “Thanks for calling. Listen, I can’t talk. We’re heading out into the field to do some canvassing. You’re sure Des is okay?”

“Yeah,” Chris sighed. “He’s fine. Go see for yourself.”

“Sure, sure. I will.” Already David was drawing away, shutting down. “I’ll go talk to him later.”

“Sure. He’d like that.” He disconnected and sat in his Lexus, his head resting against the steering wheel. Then he shook himself and drove back to Cedars Sinai.

He stopped in the gift shop and browsed for something whimsical. He saw the crimson crystal roses with silly faces and knew they were perfect. That and a box of Godiva chocolates should cheer Des up.

Des’s eyes opened when he entered the room. He smiled tiredly when he saw the tinkling cartoon flowers. “I thought I was dreaming. You did come.”

“Of course I came.” Chris’s voice dropped. “What happened, Des. What were you thinking?”

Des shook his hairless head. He looked puzzled. “I don’t remember. I was watching TV. I had a glass of wine... I was hoping it would help me sleep.” He sounded plaintive. “But it wasn’t helping.”

“So you took your pills?”

“I only wanted to sleep. You don’t know what it’s like. I just wanted to sleep for a few hours. Is that so horrible?”

“No hon, it’s not. You just need to be more careful.”

“I know...” Des whispered. Then he started crying.

Sorrow tugged at Chris. He sat down on the bed and took Des into his arms, awkwardly patting his gown-covered body. Des’s tears stained his Lacoste shirt. “It’s going to be okay, hon. I promise.”

“They called my parents. I don’t want them to see me like this.”

Des's parents had moved out of Bel Air years ago and bought a chalet in Switzerland where Des visited, usually in the summer. He had been talking about Chris joining him on his next trip, but that had been before the Carpet Killer and Kyle's death. Des had put his whole life on hold since then.

"I'll talk to them, hon. Don't worry. They love you, no matter what."

"I know," Des sniffed. They both looked up when a woman in a white coat entered the room. She smiled when she saw the two on the bed.

"Mr. Hayward? I'm Dr. Markland. How are you feeling?"

"Good," Des said warily. "When can I go home?"

"Soon. I just need to ask you a few questions." She looked at Chris who stood up and would have left but Des grabbed his hand.

"Don't go. He can stay, can't he, Doctor? He can hear anything we might say."

"If you like."

Chris sat down again. Des never let go of his hand.

"Can you tell me about what happened, Desmond? Did something happen yesterday to upset you?"

"Upset me? No, nothing. There was nothing special about yesterday..." Suddenly a look of pain crossed Des's beautiful face. "No..."

"What? What are you thinking of, Des?" the physician urged.

Chris felt Des tremble under his touch. He wanted to tell the Dr. Markland to shut up, that if Des didn't want to talk, no one had the right to force him. But another, saner part of him, knew Des had to face his demons if he was going to heal. He had to stop hiding behind his drugs and his evasions.

"Tell me what happened," she pressed.

Des looked at Chris with despair. "I was cleaning up my studio. You know what it's like in there, don't you Chris? All the junk I can't throw away. You always tell me I'm such a pack rat..."

"Yes, hon, I know the place." Compared to the messes Chris sometimes left in his office Des's 'mess' was nothing. But Des was such a fussbudget.

Des plucked at the sheets pooled in his lap. "I found an old photo album and thought I might go through and label them. You know how I hate coming across pictures that don't tell you who or where they were taken..."

Even before his voice broke Chris knew what was coming.

"I came across some pictures we took on that picnic in Griffith Park last summer. You remember, don't you, hon?"

Chris nodded, wishing he could tell Des to forget that day. He remembered it all too well. Kyle had been in one of his particularly snitty prima donna moods, whining about bugs and sun and overall how life outdoors sucked, ruining the day for everyone. Chris had no idea what pictures Des had managed to take that day that would trigger this kind of response. But clearly it had. The why no longer mattered.

“When we go home later today—” Chris shot a glance at the doctor who remained silent, “we can go through the photos together. You shouldn’t be alone and doing that sort of thing.”

“I’d like that.”

“Can he go home today, Doctor?”

“Dr. Weiser, who I believe has been handling Desmond’s therapy, has been informed of Mr. Hayward’s presence and will no doubt drop in to see you before you’re discharged. I’d prefer to wait for his visit before we talk about discharging you.”

Chris was surprised and a little dismayed when Des agreed quickly, a look of relief on his face.

“Des?”

“It’s okay, hon. It’s a good thing, right? They’ll help me.”

Admitting that had to be hard. Was Des also admitting that his actions had been premeditated? It seemed like the physician might be wondering that too.

“What were you thinking when you looked at those pictures?” Markland asked.

Des stared into the far corner of his room. “I wasn’t expecting to see them...” His voice broke. “I still miss him so much. It’s not fair that he’s gone.”

Chris couldn’t stand it anymore. He had to know. He forced Des to look at him. “Did you do it deliberately, Des? Did you try to make the pain go away forever?”

“You mean did I try to kill myself?” Des shook his head fiercely. “No, I swear. I don’t want that. I swear. I just want to go home.”

Chris believed him. Apparently so did Markland. She nodded. “I’m sure that can be arranged.” To Chris, “You’ll be staying with him?”

“As long as I can.”

“I’ll see you’re not disturbed.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

She left after conferring with the nurse who came into the room.

Chris and Des sat quietly for several minutes.

“Thanks for coming around to check on me.”

Chris shrugged. "I was worried."

"Good thing. I don't know what I was thinking. I guess I forgot I'd already taken my meds."

"But the drinking, Des. You know you can't do that with those pills. What was that all about?"

"I wasn't thinking." He stared down at his hands. "It won't happen again."

"I don't want you doing something stupid on me, Des," Chris said.

"I won't. I promise." Des's gaze left Chris. He stared over his shoulder toward the door and his eyes widened.

Chris spun around.

David stood in the doorway, a Starbucks coffee in one hand, a large stuffed tiger Chris recognized from the gift shop in the other.

"Oh," David said. "I didn't think you'd still be here. Hi, Des. How are you doing?"

"Good." Des looked from Chris to David. "Great, in fact. Is that for me?" He looked at the tiger, which David promptly put in his arms. "Thanks. He's cute."

David offered the coffee and Des took it. "Thanks hon," he said, using the endearment as effortlessly as he did with Chris. He gave Chris a mock glare. "All you brought me was candy. You trying to make me fat and unattractive?"

David laughed and Chris blushed. "I thought it was getting too late for coffee," he muttered.

Des brightened. "Listen, you guys want some lunch? I can order us up something."

"They have room service?" Chris laughed. "I guess it really is the hospital to the stars." He glanced at David. "I'd love some lunch. Vichyssoise or a nice French onion soup." He grinned, knowing the French onion was David's favorite.

"Sorry, I have to get back to work. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Sure, he's good," Chris said. "Well, thanks for coming by. I'm sure Des appreciates it."

"I do," Des said, smiling. "Listen, I'll be home later today. Maybe we can do lunch tomorrow or maybe this weekend." He hugged the stuffed tiger to his chest. "Maybe we can go back to the Mariasol and I'll buy you that drink."

"Sure. That would be nice."

Chris glanced at both of them, wondering about the reference to the Mariasol but not saying anything.

After a pause... "Can you tell me why you did it, Des?" David asked stiffly.

"I didn't... I wasn't trying to hurt myself."

“Good thing you weren’t trying.” David glanced at Chris then back to Des. “That was a jackass stunt, real or not. If you wanted to send us a message I can give you the number for Western Union.”

“Honest, David. It was an accident.”

David shook his head. “I’m trying to believe you, Des. But...” he sighed, “don’t let it happen again, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

Chris watched David walk out the door without a backward glance. His shoulders slumped as he turned back toward the bed. Then his eyes narrowed.

“What did you mean going there for lunch? Did you and David go out some other time?”

“Oh, don’t get your Calvin’s in a knot. He took me out to the pier. We talked.”

“About what?”

Des smiled. “You, mostly. He misses you, you know.”

“Yeah, well he’s got a funny way of showing it.”

“Yeah, well David’s a funny guy. No, I take that back. He’s a complex guy, is what he is. You ought to know that.”

“Complex. Yeah, that pretty well says it all.” Chris sighed. “His problem is he doesn’t want to be gay. And I don’t know how to fix that.”

“You can’t. Only he can chose to accept that or not. I know he loves you. Maybe someday that will be enough.”

“But can I wait that long?”

“You can wait, or you can move on. And *you’re* the only one who can chose that.”

“I guess we’re in the same boat, aren’t we?”

“What do you mean?”

“You can either hang on to Kyle’s memory or you can move on. What do you think Kyle would want?”

Des stared at him for a heartbeat then he shook his head. “You are such a bitch, Bellamere.”

“Yes, I am.” He approached the bed. “What do you say, boyfriend. Do we move on?”

Tears sprang into Des’s eyes, matching the ones in Chris’s. “Yeah,” he whispered. “Let’s take this show on the road.”

He waited for Des to be released then he drove him home. They ordered pizza and drank iced green tea and shared the chocolates. Only when Des grew drowsy did Chris kiss him good night and put him to

bed before he locked up and left the house.

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Chapter 16

Wednesday, 1:25 pm, Northeast Community Police Station,

San Fernando Road, Los Angeles

DAVID GRABBED A chili dog on his way back to Northeast. Martinez was already at his desk. They were bringing *Señoras* Robles in for a formal interview. They had already issued BOLOS or Be On the Lookouts for Torres and Goyo. The owner of the ice cream truck had been contacted but it turned out Torres hadn't shown up for work for a while. Since not long after the fatal shooting.

David was worried that the Avenue bangers who had tried and failed to kill the two *Sureños* would be looking for them with more street resources available to them than the LAPD had. He had already called in his CIs to put the word out that he needed to find them. Whether anyone would come through remained to be seen. In the meantime they had other angles to explore.

But not enough. It was never enough.

It wasn't helping that he couldn't stop thinking about Chris and how he had looked at the hospital. Vulnerable and so desirable he had wanted to take him in his arms and never let him go. But that horse was dead and there was no sense flogging it any more.

But oh dear God, he didn't want it to end like this. Not when he only had to close his eyes and traitorous images of Chris impaled on his cock, riding him into delicious oblivion, appeared. Or the taste of Chris and the sounds he made when he came. All memories he couldn't expunge no matter how hard he tried.

He hadn't been back to the Eagle since he'd been there with Chris. He also hadn't taken any of Blair's calls. He refused to acknowledge that he was ignoring the sexy leather man. He just wasn't ready to take that relationship up again.

What had happened with Des scared him. Chris and Des were so close, in a way that had always made David jealous. Not that he thought anything was going on between the two, but rather at their closeness. To see Des so on edge was a painful shock. If something like that happened to him, who would be there for him? Des had Chris and if Chris ever fell that far they both knew Des would be there for him one hundred percent. Who would be there for David? Had he driven everyone away to the point that no one would be there to stand beside him?

Except Chris. When he had heard that David was in the hospital he had come out immediately, no questions asked. Even after over a month of being separated he had been there. Would David do the same thing for Chris? Or would his fears keep him at arm's length even then?

He glanced over at Martinez who made it very clear that he liked it just fine when there was no mention of David's bedroom preferences. Could he fly in the face of that to bring Chris back into his life openly, denying nothing?

He tried to imagine what his life would be like then. His mind consistently shied away from that kind of declarative statement.

But... could he give up Chris because of that?

Martinez got off the phone. "Got a hit. My CI says Torres is on the street. He's got a hurt on and he's scoping for some ice."

So at least one of them was a tweaker. Only a need for methamphetamine would drive the rat out of his hole. David grabbed his jacket off the back of his chair, checked his Glock .45 in his shoulder holster and followed Martinez out to sign a car out of the motor pool.

"There's a park at the end of Drew. My CI says that's where the buy will go down. It's pretty open there. They'll see us coming."

"We'll take my car then," David said. "That won't stand out as much. It still needs a lot of body work."

"Gotta blend a bit better than a Crown Vic."

Drew was less than a mile from the station, but it was a world apart. They cruised past the razor topped yards on Andrita Street to residential W Avenue 32, finally west on Drew to where it dead-ended. David parked the Chevy in the shade of a tagged Sycamore. Sitting in the car, he studied the park across the street. David spotted the hunched figure scuttling down the incongruously sunlit street. He looked like a hurting unit. Probably why he never noticed the two men crouched low in the front seats of the ancient car.

He ducked into a passageway that led past a covered picnic area. A beat up Impala crawled past the Chevy. David had the briefest glimpse of two Black men. The passenger's side door opened and a short prison-muscled man with a blue baseball cap and a Pirates sweatshirt strolled across the road toward the park.

Martinez popped his door open and rolled out of the car in a crouch. David waited until he was clear of the door and threw the Chevy into gear, slamming his foot on the gas. Tires squealed and he skidded sideways, blocking the Impala. The driver abandoned the car, bolting across the road toward the open space of the park. David was hard on his heels. "Stop!" David yelled. "Police!"

The driver jinked right, David followed. Martinez went sideways, tackling Torres who had tried to rabbit past his connection back out onto the street.

Legs pumping, lungs screaming for air, David felt a strange exhilaration sweep through him. This was what he did best. Good police work was more fun than anything else, even restoring his classic car. Even Chris.

The driver came to a row of dense bushes and tried another ninety degree turn. David anticipated him and met him head on. They went down in a tangle of arms and legs. The driver tried to crab crawl through the spiny manzanita ground cover. David hauled him back, yelling at him. "Get down on your stomach. Put your hands on your head, your fingers laced—"

"Fuck you!" the driver spat at him, lunging around on his back and kicking and punching David's chest, gut and thighs. David pushed him onto his stomach, kneeling on him to hold him down while he pulled his cuffs out and slapped them on one wrist. Before he could get the metal bracelets around the second

wrist, the driver went berserk, nearly throwing David off in his wild gyrations. David hung on, grimly aware of the feel of something hard in the other man's waistband, a knife or a gun, he didn't know. Didn't want to find out.

Adrenaline pumped and he used his greater weight to slam the driver back onto his stomach and snicked the last cuff in place, immobilizing him. He kept his knee on the small of the man's back. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Martinez propelling Torres back toward the Chevy.

He called for a couple of black and white shops to pick up their prisoners. The second dealer had fled and neither David or Martinez made any effort to find the guy. They kept the two birds in hand prone on the ground, ignoring their curses.

Martinez toed Torres who was already beginning to sweat, though the air was still cool.

"Where's your partner, Torres? He leave you hanging out to dry alone on this beef?"

"What beef? I din't do nothing," Torres whined.

"Tell that to *Señora* Robles."

"Who?"

"Maria. Adora, Maria and Adora Real. The little girl and her mother you got popped."

Martinez jerked him upright as a shop pulled in behind the Chevy. He threw the tweaker toward the first uni who stepped out of his vehicle.

"Let him sit in lock up for an hour or two, see if he wants to talk them."

The uni stuffed him into the back of his shop. David heard him tell the shaking junkie, "You toss your cookies in my car and I'll plant my boot up your ass." A second black and white pulled up and they loaded the driver, who turned out to be Winston Guardia from Highland Park crew with a long list of priors and his name on another gang injunction, into the back.

Once the two shops had rolled away Martinez strolled over toward the park. David followed. He watched his partner move slowly past the screen of whitewashed palms and unkempt boxwood. "Looking for something?"

"Think I saw Torres toss something when he got wind of us."

David studied the ground as they walked. Not likely to be drugs. Torres had been too hyped to have had drugs already. It had to be something else. Something he didn't want to get caught with.

David spotted it first. He pulled on a pair of nitrile gloves and gently parted the manzanite cover and pulled the handgun out for closer inspection. Martinez stepped up to examine the weapon. It was a Raven .25. "Our killer's?"

"Right caliber."

Martinez looked puzzled. "I thought we figured our shooters were involved in a hit against Torres and Goyo. You saying you think those two shot their own?"

“What if Maria was playing outside the fold? Greener pastures. You heard grandma, she was ruined by the drugs.”

“She’s banging an Avenue and Goyo finds her out. He’s going to be pissed.”

“Pissed enough to kill both her and the kid?”

“That’s cold,” Martinez muttered.

“They say hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. What about a banger getting cuckolded,” David said. “Kid just becomes collateral damage.”

“So we’re not looking for an outside shooter?”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

Back in the Chevy they drove toward Northeast. But instead of heading toward the station David turned toward Los Feliz Boulevard. “Lunch?”

“Sounds good.”

“Baby back ribs at Mimi’s?”

“Sounds better.”

After lunch they set up an interview with Torres in county lockup. The little tweaker was even more strung out than when they’d picked him up trying to score. But he’d had enough self-preservation left in him to lawyer up.

His attorney, Gerald Godwin, a wet behind the ears PD immediately launched into a bluster designed to overwhelm the world weary cops. David was not impressed. He introduced himself and Martinez, then he stated the date, time and location for the interview. Then he faced a belligerent Torres across the table.

“What probable cause did you have to pursue my client? He was in the park for therapeutic reasons. He had no reason to think the overzealous police would chase him down and assault him.”

“Just taking a walk in the park. That it, counselor?” David asked.

“Yeah, just taking a walk. Getting my, what do you call it, my constitution. Ain’t that protected?” Torres was bobbing and twitching, in full withdrawal mode.

“I think you mean constitutional, there Mr. Torres, and that’s not protected in this or any other country. Nice try, though.”

“Are you mocking my client?” Godwin asked.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, counselor.” David glanced at Martinez. “But we would like your client to explain how he was in possession of a gun that was used to kill a young woman, Maria Real and her six year old daughter, Adora Real.”

“But was the gun actually in his possession? As I understand it, you found the weapon in the park, on the ground. Not in my client’s possession.”

“Except we saw Mr. Torres ditch the weapon in question moments before we apprehended him, during the commission of another felony.”

“And what was that?”

“Purchasing a Schedule I drug from known drug dealers in an area known to be inhabited by a gang under an injunction by the City of Los Angeles. Any one in particular he’d like to start with?”

“I don’t know nothing about no ‘junction,” Torres said, his hands starting to shake. He kept licking his lips with a tongue that looked like sandpaper.

“You like a Coke, Mr. Torres?” David asked, knowing he was probably having a sugar crash to go along with his methamphetamine fit. “I can get you a pop, or a chocolate bar—”

Torres perked up at the mention of chocolate. He nodded eagerly. Martinez went to get the requested candy.

Both Torres and Godwin were silent while they waited for Martinez to come back. Once he did, Torres wolfed down the Snickers bar and guzzled the Coke, giving himself hiccups, but he seemed mellowed out by his snack.

Maybe he’d be more talkative.

“You’re in some serious shit, Mr. Torres. I hope you realize that.”

“I din’t do nothin’,” Torres said.

“We’ve got your gun. We’ve got your DNA, which I’m sure we’ll find somewhere in the vicinity of the bodies. We’ve even got your drug dealer. I’m sure he’ll love to squeal when we start talking about the kind of deal we can offer him.”

Torres surged forward, rattling his chains. “Why give that black skank a break. He’s bad news all the way around.”

“Probably an accurate assessment,” David said. “But we don’t have him on a one-eighty-seven, unlike yours truly.”

“I din’t do nothin’.”

“Who did it then?”

“You ever do the girl?” Martinez asked casually.

Torres grinned, showing stained, broken teeth. He ran his tongue over them. “Yeah, why not. She hot.”

“And Goyo didn’t mind you porking his squeeze?” Martinez could manifest crude in a way that always amazed David.

“He don’t know.” Torres looked around in alarm as though he thought someone had slipped his partner in to the interview room. “You ain’t gonna tell him, are you?”

“Your secret’s safe with us,” David said softly.

“She was a fox,” Torres said wistfully.

“Take us through that day,” David said. He checked his notes to be sure he had the right date. “Three weeks ago. Monday.”

Torres scratched his acne ravaged chin. “I was s’posed to go into work. G was gonna meet with me so we could move some product. But he was late, and I had to start my run without him.”

“But he met up with you later? When did he do that?” David asked.

“Yeah,” Torres said. “He din’t show up until afternoon, and boy was he pissed. He come into my truck screaming something awful. The boss was always on me about having him around the little kids. G never could watch his mouth.”

Or his temper from the sounds of it. David made a note.

“He carry the gun with him?”

“He always had his piece.” Torres confirmed what David had suspected. “Never went nowhere without it.”

“So he had it with him that day?”

“Sure, said that, din’t I?”

“You ever borrow the piece?” David asked casually.

“Sure,” Torres answered just as casually. Too late his attorney put his hand on his arm. Torres shook him off. David loved stupid criminals. “I wanted to buy my own so G let me shoot his. I just gotta save up the money...”

“He ever use it in licks?” Smash and grab artists liked the power a gun gave them. They always thought they could control a situation. And when it fell apart the fall-out was severe. “We can check you know,” he lied. “Lot of jacks and burglaries in that area.”

Torres went white. “No, no. He never do that. G’s not violent.”

“But you are, right? How did you get the gun?” David suddenly threw out. “G just hand it to you?”

“What? I din’t—okay, he give it to me to hold. We was gonna sell it for some cash...”

“Were you stoned the day you shot Maria?”

“No!”

“So you did shoot her?”

Realizing what he had let slip Torres glared at him.

“What about the little girl, man. Did you have to kill her too?” Martinez asked gently.

David shook his head. He stood up. “We’ll be in touch, counselor.”

“You gonna let me go?” Torres asked. “I wanna be home for Thanksgiving.”

“You might want to explain things to your client, counselor. To start with, that he’s going to be away for a few Thanksgivings. We’ll see you in court.”

Torres was still sputtering when David and Martinez let themselves out and went to collect their handguns before heading back to Northeast where they planned to write up their report and call it a night.

Return to TOC

Chapter 17

Wednesday, 7:10 pm, Piedmont Avenue, Glendale

DAVID FED SWEENEY then set about making his own supper. Soup and day old bread he’d picked up at a Silver Lake baker. He was just rinsing off his dishes and loading them in the dishwasher when his landline rang.

He scooped up the receiver. It was Blair.

“Hey, man, I missed you at the bar.”

“Ah, well, I’ve been busy,” David fumbled for excuses.

“Heard from the bartender you were in the other day.” There was no censure in Blair’s voice, only quiet resignation. “He said you were with a ‘gorgeous guy’—his words.”

“Blair—”

“It was Chris, wasn’t it?”

David gave up lying. Blair deserved the truth. “Yes, it was.”

“So it’s not really over, is it?”

David clutched the phone, his knuckles white. “I don’t know. But I don’t think I’ll be coming down to the bar anymore. Not right now, at least.”

“I understand,” Blair said softly. “Good luck, David.”

He disconnected and David slowly put the phone back in the cradle. Sweeney leaped into his lap and he

mindlessly smoothed his fingers over the cat's back. He stared unseeing at the TV he had turned on at some point, though he didn't remember what he'd been watching.

An obnoxious Santa and a bunch of equally obnoxious elves came on hawking some ludicrous toy that would no doubt break the day after Christmas. David was glad the only toys he ever bought were for the LAPD toy drive held every year. It kicked off with a formal party that was held on the Sunday after Thanksgiving and wrapped up three weeks later with a community event where the gifts were distributed to needy kids.

He usually went. It wasn't required, but it looked good to participate. Martinez always went with his wife. David was always solo.

In the bedroom he paused by his open closet, pulling out the uniform freshly back from the cleaners in preparation for the party on Sunday. He didn't have to wear it, but he chose to every year. Sometimes he wondered if he didn't do so to prove he could still get into the uniform he'd owned since his Academy days.

He smoothed the stripes on the dark arm and brushed imaginary lint off the shoulders. He put the suit back and shut the closet door. Then he braced himself and left the bedroom.

He didn't stop long enough to think through what he now knew he was going to do.

He was done over-thinking.

Wednesday, 8:25 pm, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

Chris was online. Spiritless, he clicked through Man2Man, barely glancing at the images of hot guys parading across his 32" monitor. No one caught his eye long enough to engage his mouse finger.

A message popped onto the bottom of his screen: Hi. U up 4 sum fun? It was from someone called Bg8Luv. Chris clicked through his profile. His picture might have aroused Chris at any other time. Bg8Luv was wearing a leather harness all too reminiscent of what he had found in David's drawer. Over top of the leather he wore a dark blue vest and a pair of striped cop pants. His chest was muscular and covered with dark hair. He had two nipple rings.

Chris reached between his legs and stroked himself into semi-hardness. But there wasn't any fire there. He exited Man2Man and went back into his business email account. There were a couple of queries from referrals. He looked them over and forced himself to put together a response. He couldn't afford to let business slide, no matter what was going in his personal life.

It wasn't exactly like anyone was standing in line to take care of him.

He sent off the emails, including a sample contract to two of them. After that he tunneled into one of his newer clients and checked the status of a couple of servers he had recently updated with new security patches. They were running well, no odd glitches or reactions from the updates.

Then he shut down his system entirely. In the kitchen he pulled out a bottle of white Zinfandel from the fridge and poured himself a glass. He pushed open the door leading into his neglected backyard to let in some fresh air. He wandered back through to the living room and stood at the large bay window overlooking the reservoir that gave the area its name. Lights from Silver Lake Boulevard and the hills

beyond danced on the restless water. He could hear the rustle of wind through the white alder in his backyard. Back in the kitchen a cool breeze blew through the open French door. The smell of night blooming Jasmine filled his immaculate kitchen. He'd always loved that scent.

He finished up his wine, considered having a second glass, then abruptly changed his mind and put the bottle back in the fridge. Shutting and locking the back door, he rinsed out his wine glass and left the kitchen.

He headed toward his media room where he planned to channel surf until tiredness drove him to bed and hopefully sleep.

There was a sharp rap on his front door.

Puzzled he headed toward the front of the house.

David stood in the tiny front courtyard. He was dressed casually in jeans, a golf shirt and the black leather jacket Chris loved on him, so he must have come from home. Chris threw the door open.

"David."

"Was in the neighborhood," David said. "Thought I'd stop by, see how you were."

Liar. There was nothing in this area that would bring David around. But all Chris could do was smile.

David nodded at the Lexus. "You didn't get your new car today?"

"No, I postponed picking it up until Friday. I wanted to have the day free to help Des with whatever he needed."

David nodded. "He doing okay?"

"Yes," answered Chris. "I just left him a few hours ago." He paused, feeling awkward on the step. "Hey, you want to come in? Can I get you a drink?"

"Beer?"

"Sorry, no beer. Got a nice bottle of white wine."

"Ah, sure. That would be nice."

Chris led him through to the kitchen, where he popped the patio doors back open, letting in the night blooming jasmine smell. David took a deep appreciative breath. When he had been coming around more, David had started doing work in the garden, weeding and moving plants around to maximize their growth. As far as Chris was concerned David was a genius with a double green thumb. He could get things to bloom that Chris had long ago given up on. The garden had been his grandmother's prize. He had always admired what she had left him, but had no idea how to keep it going. He'd been more than happy to leave it in David's capable hands. Now it was back to being neglected.

David nodded and followed him out to the patio. They both took seats in the Adirondack chairs with a red wood table between them. They sipped their wine silently, then, "What did you come here for, David?" Chris asked softly.

“I, uh, wanted to ask you something...”

“Sure. What?”

David turned and met his gaze. “I’d like you to come with me to the LAPD Christmas party.”

David had never invited him to anything like this before. Walk into the dragon’s den of other LAPD cops and their hetero partners? Chris felt a wave of coldness fill him. But... this was what he’d wanted, wasn’t it? For David to invite him into his world, accepting the risks that came with being out there in everyone’s face.

“Uh, I don’t know, David...” Bullshit. He knew and he wanted this so bad. Why kid himself. A huge smile blazed across his face. “Who’s going to be there? Martinez?” He suddenly didn’t mind if Martinez was there. He didn’t care if the Chief of Police was there. “When is it?”

“Sunday. I know it’s not much time, but I was hoping you wouldn’t have other plans... Martinez will be there. With his wife. They get a sitter for the kids.”

“I don’t have any plans. Are you sure, David?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

Chris laughed, feeling an unbearable tension leave him. “Then I’d love to go.”

David’s face brightened. “I’ll be by to pick you up around seven-thirty.”

“I’ll be ready.” Chris sipped his wine, watching David do the same. An easy comfortable silence settled between them. Nearby something croaked in the dense garden. Somewhere a dog barked. Another one answered. Chris could hear light traffic sounds down on the Boulevard that ran the length of the reservoir.

“Good.” David reached across the table and lightly touched Chris’s hand.

“What should I wear?” Chris swallowed against a rush of desire. He reined it in. This wasn’t the time or the place. This was a new beginning, and as such, had to be treated like the most delicate thing. He wasn’t going to jeopardize everything he wanted by prematurely rushing David.

“Whatever you want. You’ll look good in anything,” David murmured. Chris stared at his mouth, feeling a pulse beat in his throat.

“No, really,” Chris said. “Is Versace going too far?”

“No. Lots of people will be dressed up.”

David meant the women. So he’d be a peacock among drab geese. He could live with that. He never minded being the center of attention.

“You don’t need to ask me what to wear. You know.”

“Right, my keen fashion sense.”

“Keener than mine.” David grinned. “Listen—you want me to go with you to pick up the car?”

Chris looked at him in surprise. “Yeah, I guess so...”

“I told you I’d teach you how to drive a stick.”

Chris paused. “Actually, I called and switched to one with an automatic. It seemed... prudent.” Chris had picked up on the hesitation in David’s voice when he offered the driving lessons.

Now it was David’s turn to be dejected. “Ah, yeah, okay,” he said. “Well, I guess you won’t need me along.”

Chris picked up on his disappointment. “Tell me a little bit more about this party,” he said, trying to move them back to the earlier happy moment.

David gave him a small smile, conscious of what Chris was doing. “Yes... well it’s the annual toy drive...” he said, launching into an explanation.

They sat and talked for another half an hour, erasing the tension but still not at a place of easy comfort. Even so, Chris was buoyed by the visit and after David left, he sat outside for awhile longer, enjoying the soft evening air and the scent of flowering trees that filled his garden.

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Chapter 18

Friday, 11 am, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

CHRIS PICKED UP the phone and dialed Des’s number, listening to three rings before he answered. “Hey, it’s me,” he said.

“Oh, hi, hon,” Des said without any emotion. Chris’s heart sank.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I guess.” He paused. “I thought I’d hear from you yesterday.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t call. It was Thanksgiving—I spent the day with my family.”

“Yeah—I watched the Macy’s parade on TV. It seemed like the holiday snuck up on us this year.”

“It did,” said Chris. “And now we’ve got the Christmas frenzy. Listen—the reason I called—I’m picking up my new car today and I was wondering if you wanted to come along. Maybe we can go out for coffee or something afterwards.”

“Oh, I don’t know...”

“Come on, Des. It’s not every day I get a new car—even if this one is a step down from the monster truck.”

That got a chuckle out of Des, but he still hesitated.

“Hey, hon,” Chris said. “I can be just as stubborn as you. You know I can.” He calculated how far he could push his best friend. “I’m coming over. Now. Get dressed.”

Des sputtered a bit, but Chris overrode his protests. He hung up and went to change his own clothes, choosing black chinos and a mauve Izod shirt.

Making sure he had his wallet, keys and BlackBerry he grabbed a jacket and headed for the door.

Chris was afraid he had pushed Des too far and he’d find him in his PJs, refusing to go anywhere. Instead he found Des hovering around the door of his bungalow, dressed to the nines in a brand new Mauro Grifoni suit. Des’s mood had elevated. Chris hoped it wasn’t a manic phase that Des was going to crash from. He tried to keep the mood up. He whistled.

“Man, now I feel like a bag lady. Why didn’t you tell me you were going all out?”

Des flushed. “Am I overdressed?”

Chris took Des’s arm. “No, hon, you look perfect. Let’s go show those Ford salesmen what they’re missing.”

They drove in easy silence to the dealership on Vermont.

They met with the salesman and sat down in his office to sign all the paperwork. Chris had already secured a loan from his bank. Once the paperwork was done, and the keys to the Lexus handed over, Chris and Des walked through the lot to where the metallic Kiwi green car sat baking in the late morning sun. He popped the front door open and slid into the driver’s seat. Des climbed in beside him, inhaling the intoxicating new car smell.

Once in the new car he turned to Des. “I changed my mind. We’re too beautiful for Starbucks. Let’s hit The Abbey.”

“Are you sure...?”

“Still talking coffee,” Chris said. “I won’t be drinking. You can if you want.”

“I got my mind set on coffee. Maybe something chocolate for dessert.”

“Caramel fudge brownie cheesecake,” Chris said with a laugh at the look of mock horror on Des’s face. “It’s okay, I’m feeling a little giddy. David came by Wednesday night. He invited me to the LAPD Christmas party.”

“He did?” Des squealed. “I’m so happy for you. Oh, God, I’m so hoping this is finally it. You two so deserve each other.”

“I hope that’s a good thing.” Chris said.

“Me too.” Des was practically bouncing on the seat. “You will never guess who called me after you invited me out.”

“No, I can’t.” After his ordeal a lot of Des’s friends had been slow to come around. They had a hard time dealing with the violent rape—something Weiser had said was all too common. He had been glad that Chris had never abandoned his friend, though Chris never told him it was as much guilt as love. He had brought the Carpet Killer into their lives and blamed himself not only for Kyle’s death but Des’s rape and near death experience.

He was glad to hear someone had made the effort to come back into Des’s life. He just had no idea who.

“Come on, Des. Spill.”

“Trevor.”

“Trevor? Trevor Watson?”

That’s him.” Des grinned. “He’s coming home.”

“Home—I thought he moved to New York.”

“He did, and did very well, I gather. He’s coming back to shoot a pilot for some new TV series. If it’s picked up he’ll be here to stay.”

Chris hadn’t heard Des get this excited in ages, well, since Kyle had died.

“He’s going to stay with me, at least until he finds a place. I can’t have him languishing away in some cold hotel room.”

From what Chris remembered of the man who had almost been his lover, Trevor might languish, but he’d only do it alone if that’s what he wanted. The guy was a hot pistol and Chris doubted he ever went without a lover for long.

Chris frowned. “You sure that’s a good idea? Maybe I should talk to the guy—”

“I wouldn’t do that, boyfriend. Trev is still major bummed out that you thought he was that killer.”

Whoa, that wasn’t me, Chris wanted to say. That was... the police. He almost said David, since it was David who had interviewed the kids in the arcade where Trevor had gone to pick up his nephew who had vanished soon after, only to be discovered much later, another victim of the Carpet Killer. It turned out the Carpet Killer had been after Trevor, but got his nephew instead.

“That wasn’t me,” Chris said weakly. Des waved a scented hand at him.

“I’m sure he’ll get over it. Trev can’t hold a grudge.”

Chris shook his head, still not sure this was a smart move for Des. Des was one of those people who thrived in a relationship. Even a bad one, like he’d had with the spoiled narcissist, Kyle. But was Trevor the kind of guy who could give Des what he needed? Stability? Love? Sure he could give great sex, but what about the rest? Chris wasn’t even sure if Des was ready for anything physical. Dr. Weiser had touched on that subject often. Rape victims often suffered PTSD which could be triggered by further acts of intimacy. He didn’t want to see Des go back into that black hole of despair because someone like Trevor tried to take it to the next level too fast or too hard.

“I don’t know, hon. Maybe you should let him book a hotel. You can have him over for dinner, or better yet, we can go out to dinner and I can apologize to him for what he went through—”

“I don’t want that.” Des had his stubborn, ‘I’m not listening to you’ face on. “I think it will be fun to have him stay with me.”

Chris sighed. “Okay, you know what you want.” Privately he thought he just might have a talk with Trevor about how fragile Des was right now. If he cared for the guy at all, he wouldn’t push. “Even if he is pissed at me, I still want to see him.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll want to tell you off, but he’ll be happy to see you, too.”

“Right,” Chris said, resigned to a bitchfest with Trevor before the ax could be buried. Hopefully not in his head.

“When’s he arriving?”

“Day after tomorrow. I said I’d pick him up at the airport.”

“Ah, Sunday. Same day as the Christmas party.”

Chris surrendered the Escape to a red-coated valet and entered The Abbey, the grand dame of West Hollywood gay bars. Instantly overwhelmed by house music, Chris followed a waiter toward the row of curtained cabanas that would give them privacy.

They gave their orders for a latte and a cappuccino and Chris added some brioche as an afterthought. Then Chris and Des leaned back in the cushioned seats and contemplated each other.

“Sure you don’t want a drink? I won’t mind,” Des said.

“Nah, I’m trying to cut down. Doing too many stupid things when I drink.”

Des’s eyebrows rose in mock surprise. “Christopher Bellamere worried about consequences?”

“Yeah, it’s called growing up.”

“Mmm.” Des suddenly smiled. “I should try it sometime. Only in small doses, though.”

“That’s the secret. Maturity in little increments. Works for me.”

Their coffees and brioche arrived. Des dove into the food like he was starving. Chris watched him in amazement. “You want to get a menu? We can get some appetizers—or lunch.”

“Maybe in a bit. So give me the dish, boyfriend. I want to know what’s going on with David.”

“Nothing to tell. He came by and asked me to the Christmas party.”

“And then...?”

“He went home.”

“You let him go home? How could you?”

“I’m not about to wrestle the guy into my house,” Chris said dryly.

“Why not? He might like it. I’m pretty damn sure you would.”

Chris grinned. “But I want to do things differently this time.”

“What do you want?”

Toying with his coffee mug, Chris looked sheepish. “I want more than a roll in the sack. We had that for a month, and it wasn’t enough.”

“Is it David?”

Chris shook his head then frowned. “He’s had so much trouble accepting the fact that he’s gay. I’m so proud of him, but I’m afraid he can’t see that.”

“He’s not ashamed of you.”

“No? But he won’t be seen in public with me. Or he wouldn’t. Maybe that’s changing.”

“Now he wants to take you to an LAPD party? That’s pretty in your face.”

Chris smiled at the memory. “He even wants me to dress up. I wonder what he’ll wear?” Suddenly he laughed. “He could go naked for all I care. I just want to be with him.”

“I really envy you,” Des said softly. “I wish…” His voice trailed off.

Chris reached over and took his hand. “You’ll find someone, hon. You’re too good a person not to.”

“I wish I could believe that. I thought Kyle was my last hope.”

“No he wasn’t and I want you to stop thinking like that. You’re a good man. An incredible man. I don’t know anyone else who could have gone through what you did and survived. I know I wouldn’t have.”

Des squeezed his hand back. “Now who’s being hard on himself? Come on, let’s face it, we’re a couple of bitches who don’t give up. That’s why you’re going to get David back. That’s why I’m going to move on, and put Kyle where he belongs, in my memories.” But there was still a wealth of pain in his voice.

Chris scooted over on the bench, pushing a pillow that separated them aside and slipped his arm around Des’s shoulder.

“No matter what, I’m always here for you. You know that, don’t you?”

Des wept softly on Chris’s shoulder. For several seconds there was no sound but his soft sobs. Then he hiccupped and raised his tear stained face. “There, I think I’m ready now. In fact, I think I’d like a drink. A mojito.”

Chris signaled a nearby waiter and put in the order, asking for a virgin strawberry Daiquiri for himself.

He was determined not to drink anywhere where there might be the temptation of a ready cock.

When their drinks arrived they put aside their nearly finished coffees. Des raised his highball glass in salute. “To your love. May it never fade and go away.”

“To yours.”

They touched glasses and drank.

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Chapter 19

Sunday, 7:30 pm, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

DAVID ARRIVED EXACTLY on time. Chris threw the door opened to find David, and blinked at the man in front of him.

David was wearing his LAPD uniform. Three chevrons were sewn onto the sleeve of his navy serge jacket. The custom made suit was designed to hide the requisite shoulder holster that Chris knew he wore underneath. Even to a Christmas party he wore his duty weapon. All the cops did.

“Wow,” he said a little breathlessly.

David flushed. “It’s okay?”

“It’s perfect.”

He stepped close and straightened David’s tie, smoothing his hands over the lapel of his jacket. He felt a heaviness in his cock, which he struggled to ignore. Instead he looped his arm through David’s.

“You look wonderful. Come on, we’ll be the best looking couple there.”

The prospect didn’t seem to please David but he followed Chris down the steps. “Your car or mine?” he asked.

“Let’s take mine,” said Chris. “It still has the new smell. You can drive,” he added, handing David the keys.

David suddenly stopped walking and Chris looked at him in confusion.

“What—?”

“Forgot something...” David walked over to his car. Chris was about to follow him when David opened the trunk and pulled out two brightly wrapped gifts. “I told you, it’s a toy drive. I picked up a couple of presents—I didn’t know if you would think to get something.”

“The thought never entered my head so I’m glad you did,” Chris laughed. He scooped the larger of the two presents out of David’s arms. “So, what did I get?”

“A Barbie horse.” David smirked. “Pink.”

“Pink.” Chris winced. “What did you get? A tank?”

“Nah, I won’t buy weapons of mass destruction. Or any kind of weapon. It’s a fire truck. What kid doesn’t like fire trucks?”

“Hmph. So why can’t I give the fire truck?”

“Can you imagine the horror on those cop’s faces if I start handing out pink horses?”

Chris rolled his eyes. He looped his free arm through David’s. “Come on, butch. Let’s make this party before the ice melts in the beer tub.”

The parking lot of the Academy was nearly full of mini vans and hulking SUVs with trailer hitches. David had told him once many of the cops had boats or campers. The mini vans were for the cops with families. Martinez’s second vehicle was a Dodge Caravan that his wife drove most days.

A steady stream of uniformed cops and their wives moved into the Christmas themed auditorium where the party was being staged. A band was setting up in one corner, four cops who regularly played LAPD events. David led the way past glitter and tinsel, not looking left or right, as though afraid of who he might see. Chris was having none of it. He marched beside David, head thrown back, eyes meeting everyone who looked their way. He would smile at each person and nod to the odd familiar face—there weren’t many of them—but spoke to no one until they were cornered by one young cop and his even younger companion.

“David,” he said. “Good to see you here. Is this Chris?”

So word had gotten out about him, Chris thought. Figured. David always said gossip ran like wildfire through the force, far outstripping the facts in their need to titillate.

“Yes, this is Chris, Christopher Bellamere. This is Roderick Billings and...?” David looked from Billings to the woman at his side.

“My wife, Alicia.”

She held out her hand. “Nice to finally meet you.”

“Thanks.”

When next he looked up it was to see Martinez plowing through the crowd. “Davey, didn’t think you were going to make it.” His dark eyes slid over Chris and he forced a smile. “Chris. Good to see you again. Things going well?”

“Fine.”

“Where’s Inez?” David asked.

“She was going to come, looking forward to it, but one of the kids came down with some kind of nasty bug so she stayed home with him.”

“Hope it’s nothing serious,” David said.

“Me too. So far just a slight fever and he’s cranky as hell. You’d think he was five instead of twelve. But you know mothers. They worry about everything. Come on, let’s go grab a beer.”

Getting himself a Bud and Chris a glass of white wine, David fell to mingling uneasily as he moved through the crowd. He introduced Chris to a few more of the people he worked with, including Bryan Williams who was there alone. He shook both Chris and David’s hands vigorously.

“Glad the two of you could come. Really great to see some of us out in force.” Bryan was the Northeast’s Gay and Lesbian Liaison.

As the band started playing, couples moved onto the dance floor. David wouldn’t entertain the idea of dancing—at least not with Chris.

He did dance with a young Latino uniformed officer who must have been half his age. Chris asked a tight-faced blonde to dance and made sure to whirl her past David and his partner. He laughed at something the breathless blonde said, though he had no idea what her actual words were. His gaze was riveted on David.

It was obvious David was well known and liked, at least by the younger cops. A handful of the older guys stood around the bar sending disapproving looks their way, including the fat pig who had brought Chris to the station where he had met David for the first time. Bulkowski. Chris remembered the leering asshole all too well.

Chris had a second glass of wine and spent some time cruising the buffet, sampling a tray of *empanadas* and another one of California rolls that were soggy and full of limp cucumber. He moved over to find a slender, uniformed Korean man studying the appetizers. His crew cut head caught the overhead lights. He smiled and took a bite of the rolls wrapped in a napkin.

“You’re here with Detective Laine, aren’t you?”

“Yes, we came together,” Chris said cautiously. Something in the way the guy was watching him triggered his almost nonexistent gaydar. But even he could see this guy was light on his feet. “We’re together.”

“We were all surprised when he was outed like that—” Then as though the use of such a familiar gay term might make him too obvious, he amended, “I never would have guessed.” He flushed red.

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Chris said with a knowing smile. “They don’t come much more butch than David. Hell, I didn’t know when I first met him.”

“But you’re together now. What’s it like?”

Chris couldn’t disabuse the guy who seemed to think he and David were living some fairy tale romance. If he wanted to believe that coming out could be a good thing Chris wasn’t going to kill his dream. Maybe this new generation of cops would make it so. After all who would have imagined gays could ever be seen as legitimate couples, entitled to full LAPD benefits? Maybe even marriage could exist, in the future. Certainly it was happening elsewhere in the world. It was a nice dream.

“It’s good,” he said softly. “Better than I had ever imagined.” He dropped his voice even lower. “Does

anyone in the department know?"

The guy shook his close-cropped head. "No. We're not ready for that."

"So your partner stayed home?"

He nodded. "Yes... studying. He's in night school. Pre-med. He's as worried about them knowing there as I am here. But guys like David... and you, and Bryan Williams. You give us all hope."

"Good to hear it."

A fresh faced Asian woman in a crisply pressed uniform and glossy black hair done up in a severe bun that did nothing to flatter her face approached the young officer. "Dao," she said. "I was hoping you would come tonight. Are you with someone?"

Chris chose that moment to go in search of something nonalcoholic to drink, leaving the hapless Dao to fend off his fellow cop's advances. He wasn't a bad looking guy; he probably had to reject eager cop groupies all the time. Male and female. David was always telling him about badge bunnies who only seemed to care about the shield and the gun, not the guy wearing them. It was one reason cop marriages were so volatile.

He slipped into the men's room and found a couple of cops at the urinals, relieving themselves. They both looked at Chris. The one closet one to Chris turned away and finished his business. The other one, an older balding guy with a walrus mustache that dwarfed his face, hurriedly zipped up and rushed out of the room without washing his hands. Chris raised his eyebrows at his hastily retreating back. The other cop glanced back at him and Chris shrugged and went about his business.

Back out in the hall, he bypassed the stage covered with its small mountain of presents under a massive real fir tree and found David standing by the punch bowl, talking to Martinez. At least that was safe ground. Chris walked up to them.

"Try the *empanadas*," he said when they both turned to look at him. "But steer clear of the California rolls." He raised his iced tea. "Tea's cold."

Martinez looked startled at the gesture. He shot a glance at David holding a beer. "How have you guys been doing?"

David shrugged. "Not much. Still working on the old jalopy."

"Yeah, how's that going?"

"It looks really good," Chris gushed. He moved to stand close to David who grew tense as though afraid he was going to touch him. "David's done an incredible job on it. It must be more than half done. Wouldn't you say?" He almost said hon, but knew David would freak out if he did.

Then David surprised him by smiling. "It does look good. I've even got a line on a couple more mint parts. It won't be long before it's done."

"R-r-ight," Martinez said. "Really, what would you do then?"

"He's got you there," Chris said with a laugh. "What would you do? Buy another junker?"

“It was not a junker.” David bristled. “It was a class—”

“Classic American car,” both Chris and Martinez finished the sentence for him. They’d both heard that more times than they could count.

“Hey, if I can find something...” David shook his head, grinning. “It keeps me out of trouble.”

Chris snorted.

They both danced several more times, but never with each other. Chris tried not to care. It had to be enough that David wanted him here. Don’t push it by wanting more than David could give.

Toward midnight David pulled Chris aside. “Ready to leave?”

“Sure.” Chris was tired. It was a good tired, but he was glad to be calling it a night. Then David surprised him.

“Let’s take a drive.”

Chris’s eyebrows went up. “Just drive? What’s the fun in that?”

“We can stop for latte if you want.”

“Where do you want to go?”

David shrugged and muttered, “Tis the season. Let’s go look at some Christmas lights.”

They said their goodbyes and left. David headed west, getting on the 110 freeway then onto the 10, finally onto the Hollywood freeway. Chris had no idea where they were headed until they left the freeway and began climbing up through the hills above West Hollywood. He turned to peer quizzically across at David.

“Mulholland?”

David leered at him. “We’re going to run out of gas soon.”

“Oh really.” In response he lay his head on David’s shoulder where he could smell David’s clean, unique scent, felt his warm breath and the pulse that beat under his chin. He snuggled his hand between David’s thighs. David murmured his pleasure.

“Ah, here’s the spot.” David pulled the car over onto the side of Mulholland Drive, facing toward city center. A sea of lights from the downtown towers greeted them. The normally brilliant lights were augmented by Christmas lights. Neither made any move to get out of the car. Chris seemed mesmerized by the scene.

David glanced at them, but his attention was on Chris. He always marveled at how he could go from smooth sophisticate who would have been at home with stars and the next minute show a child-like wonder at something as simple as a display of lights.

Eventually Chris turned his head to find David watching him. He smiled and nuzzled David’s throat,

feeling the rasp of new beard growth.

“You taste good,” he murmured. He felt the rumble of David’s laughter through his lips.

“We’re supposed to be enjoying the light show.”

“Oh I am.” He nipped and sucked on warm skin.

Overhead a helicopter played a search light out on the ground below it. David watched it circle. How ironic if he and Chris were caught up here by a patrol car. That would look good on his jacket. He closed his eyes as Chris burrowed his hand between his legs, stroking his growing hardness.

“I can tell,” he said, a little breathlessly.

Suddenly, Chris spoiled the mood by issuing a jaw cracking yawn. David looked at him, puzzled, then turned the Escape back on. “Guess it’s time to get you home,” he said and turned the car onto the road, heading down to Silver Lake.

But at the door Chris wasn’t ready to call it a night. “I’ve got my second wind,” he said. “Want a nightcap?”

“I shouldn’t...”

“Doesn’t have to be alcohol. I’ve got juice. Coffee.” He almost said *Me* , but didn’t want to scare David off.

David looked thoughtful. Then he nodded. “Sure, a coffee would be nice.”

With the coffee brewing they stood side by side next to the sink. Chris got out mugs, his flavored cream and spoons. When he offered to nuke a couple of blueberry muffins David shook his grizzled head. “Not for me.”

Chris kept throwing glances at David, studying his all too familiar face.

“You were the best looking guy there tonight.”

“Hardly.”

“Sure you were.” Chris turned to face David, close enough to see the pores on his rough skin. “You never want to believe how sexy you are.” He reached up and loosened the clasp of his tie—no LAPD cop worth his badge wore anything but clip on ties—why give the bad guys a way to hang you—and slid his fingers over the crisp pale blue shirt front. Suddenly his roving fingers stopped moving. He began to undo the buttons, splaying the edges open.

He stared at the leather harness hugging David’s broad, furred chest. He swallowed against a sudden rush of desire. His gaze went to meet David’s.

“You wore that all night?”

“Yes,” David whispered.

Chapter 20

Monday, 1:10 am, Cove Avenue, Silver Lake, Los Angeles

CHRIS TRACED THE outline of the chest strap, knowing it had been there all night, while David danced and laughed with his fellow cops. Knowing Chris would find it later and...

“Why?” Chris pushed the jacket off his shoulders and began to feverishly unbutton the shirt. He came up against the shoulder holster with David’s service weapon. “Get that off.”

David obeyed and drew his breath in when Chris dragged his shirt off and tackled his dress pants.

“Did you put... you did.”

David’s thick cock filled the leather cock ring, expanding, the blood trapped by the strap, prolonging his erection. The pulse leaped in his throat and turned his groan into a hiss as Chris’s fingers slipped past his balls to stroke the soft flesh behind them.

Then Chris said something David never expected to hear from him.

“I want to fuck you, David.”

“What?” He should have objected, should have flat out said no, he didn’t do that, but something stilled his words. All except, “Why?”

“I want to be inside you. I want to feel my cock in your ass. So perfect...” He muffled a groan as David’s cock responded to his words and swelled, jerking in Chris’s hand. He closed his eyes while he pushed the foreskin back, exposing his fat mushroom-shaped head. “I can tell. You want it too. Say yes.”

David thrust against the finger probing into his hole. He’d never let another man do that. Had barely ever considered it. But the fevered part of his mind still capable of thought wanted to yield, to surrender to the invasion for the first time—with this man. With Chris.

“Yes,” he hissed and rammed his mouth down on Chris’s.

They fought their way out of the kitchen, but never made it anywhere near the stairs toward the bedroom. In front of the window overlooking the Christmas lights of Silver Lake they tore each other’s clothes off. David bent over the leather chair in front of the granite coffee table. Chris gripped his hips with iron fists.

Hoarsely he said, “Hang on.”

He fell to his knees on the carpet behind David and parted his cheeks, his tongue unerringly slamming home, coating his hole with saliva and probing it with fingers lubricated with David’s own pre-come. Then he slid the tip of his cock past the tight sphincter and pushed home.

Sharp pain assaulted David’s ass, but quickly turned to burning heat, then liquid fire.

Chris leaned over and bit David's neck, hot words of love and lust mingled with moans until they were both reduced to gasping, shattered wordless cries.

David felt Chris released the strap of the cock ring and let go, exploding inside him at the same time his hand found and jerked David to orgasm.

They collapsed against the thick arm of the chair, shaking, barely able to breathe.

Slowly Chris untangled himself from David who turned to fold him in his trembling arms.

"Is it always like that?"

"Sometimes better." Chris traced the outline of David's swollen mouth. "You were incredible."

"I love you, Chris."

Chris's eyes lit up. "I love you." He smoothed a finger over David's pockmarked face. "All of you. Even the parts of you that aren't all that lovable. Your stubbornness, your neo-con sensibilities, your cop mentality..." He stroked his thick mustache. "Your gray hairs. Both of them."

He stared deep into David's eyes. David stared back, seeing things there he had never imagined before. "You have beautiful eyes."

Chris lowered his lashes, holding on to the moment, hoping it would never end.

"I want to be with you," said David.

"I want to be with you too," answered Chris.

They sat in the chair in each other's arms, Chris feeling his heart thumping in his chest, the heat from David's body enveloping them both. The house was completely silent—not even a ticking clock broke the stillness.

"Let's move in together," David said.

Chris looked at him, his breath hitching in his throat. "Are you serious?" he asked.

"I've never been more serious about anything in my life. I can rent my place out. We can split household expenses—"

"Shh. Let's talk practicalities later. Right now I just want to love you." Chris traced his hand across the leather strap and looked into David's eyes, his face suddenly breaking out into a hundred-watt smile that lit up the whole hillside.

"Be mine, Chris," David whispered.

"I thought you'd never ask."

The End

Return to TOC

Halloween Pickup

by

P. A. Brown

A David Laine/Chris Bellamere short story

WE MET IN THE MIDDLE OF Santa Monica Boulevard, just outside of the Rage. Though surrounded by hordes of other costumed revelers, he still stood out. The Elliot Ness mask covered his entire face, his police cap tilted rakishly forward, shading his eyes. The warmth of the day had lingered well past sunset and he'd taken full advantage of it, going shirtless with only an unbuttoned thin blue uniform jacket with an LAPD shield above his left breast. The jacket did nothing at all to conceal his magnificence. His broad well-muscled chest was covered with a gorgeous mat of thick, black hair. His stomach was washboard flat and two thick black nipples jutted out of his furry pecs. His legs were sheathed in black leather that clung to his rock-solid thighs and displayed a packed basket I longed to explore.

My cock immediately sprang to full mast. Under my own costume of long green leggings it was instantly on display to the whole street. A short, pudgy Tinkerbell eyed it longingly. He stroked my hardness discreetly and murmured, "Top?" When I shook my head—the feathers on my green half-mask fluttering around my face—he departed sadly, weaving through the mass of hot men looking for his own night of pleasure.

My eyes went back to the cop. He had just as clearly not taken his gaze off me. If he noticed what passed between Tinkerbell and me he gave no sign. He crooked his finger at me.

I didn't hesitate. As I stepped in front of him he slipped one big hand up under the tiny green vest that was all that covered my hairless, lasered chest. He suddenly pinched my exposed nipple, sending a bolt of pain and desire straight into my groin. I gasped.

"You like that?" His voice was as deep as I'd expected. It sent a shiver down my spine. "What's your name?"

"Chris." He did the twisty thing again and I thrust my hips forward involuntarily, offering my cock to him. A pair of big-busted drag queens tittered when they saw that.

"Oh, look, Silver, I think this pretty little queen's about to get rammed good."

Elliot Ness glanced at them and smiled, a slow sensuous twist of his lips. But he spoke only for my ears. "That true, queenie? You going to let me fuck you?"

"Yes!" I gasped, wishing we were someplace, anyplace else but here. Alone preferably, but the way I felt right now I wouldn't have cared if he told me to bend over where I stood. I'd probably have done it—and damn the consequences.

“Good,” he said, then leaned down and kissed me. Now, I’ve been kissed at least a million times since I started letting guys diddle me in high school. Maybe a million and two. But I’ve never been kissed like that.

He took control of my mouth and left no doubt who was in charge tonight. His mouth bruised mine and he forced his tongue between my teeth, savaging my mouth and sending bolts of desire racing along my nerve endings. I swear every hair on my body stood up and electric sparks shot off them.

He drilled me and I knew he fully intended to do the same thing to my ass in a very short time. My cock was so hard now it strained against the thin fabric of my tights.

“Move it along, fellas. Get a room or take it home, but get it off the street.”

I turned glazed eyes toward the voice and found myself staring up the nose of a very large brown horse. My gaze moved up and encountered an amused and grinning cop.

I was too befuddled to do more than nod. Elliot Ness was a bit more on the ball. Fellow officers and all that. I nearly giggled.

“Of course, officer,” Elliot Ness said. “We were just leaving.”

The cop nodded and turned his horse around to keep on patrolling the crowd for people having too much fun. I turned hot eyes back to my cop.

“You never told me your name,” I said.

“No,” he responded. “I didn’t.”

Then he twined his fingers through mine and led me through the costumed mob.

“Where are we going?” I asked. “I have a place—”

“Not like mine you don’t,” he said brusquely. “Now stop talking.”

I shut up and let this hot cop guide me. A small part of me wondered if I was doing something very foolish. What if this really wasn’t a good idea? Was I being too impetuous here?

Finally we broke through the worst of the crowds and my own personal policeman led me toward a silver Acura, unlocking the doors with his remote. I was a little disappointed he didn’t have a black and white; that would have really been hot. I dribbled a damp path of pre-come down my tights at the thought of being fucked in a cop car.

Before I could move around to the passenger’s side he stopped me with a hand on my arm.

“I want you to do something for me.”

“W-what?”

He pulled a black silk scarf out of his back pocket. “Put this on.”

Without waiting for my consent—like I could have said no to anything at this point—he slipped the silk

over my eyes and secured it. I was plunged into darkness. Sounds were suddenly magnified—I heard the clunk of the car door open, the whisper of his leather gear as he guided me inside. He secured my seat belt, sliding his fingers around my hips, brushing my straining cock with the lightest of touches. Seconds later he slid behind the wheel and keyed the engine on. The car smelled of leather and his cologne. Kenneth Cole. My cock throbbed, rubbing with exquisite torture against my tights.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Someplace private.”

We drove for maybe thirty minutes. The car stopped and for a full minute I listened to his harsh breathing. I was beginning to wonder if we were just going to sit there. Was he having second thoughts? I even raised my hands to take off the blindfold to see what he was doing.

“No!” he barked.

Before I could respond he rammed his mouth back down on mine. Our masks rubbed together with a rasp of rubber and plastic.

We were both gasping for breath when we broke apart. This time I had taken advantage of our sitting arrangement to explore the thick outline of his cock through the skintight leather. It pulsed under my eager fingers and I longed to taste him.

Before I could formulate the thought into action he grunted and pulled away from me.

“Not so fast, stud,” he growled. “Let’s take this inside.”

He guided me up a stone walk and unlocked the door, but before I could step through, he scooped me up in his arms and effortlessly carried me over the threshold. The house smelled of furniture polish and some kind of exotic flower, but all I was aware of was the warm smell of his skin as I pressed my face against his neck. I could feel the rapid pulse of his carotid artery under my lips.

He didn’t put me down until we reached a second door, which he also unlocked. Inside he relocked the door—giving me another moment to wonder how smart this was—then he turned on the overhead light.

I know it was overhead because he jerked the blindfold off my face just then.

I stared around the small, carpeted room in awe. I’ve never actually been in a dungeon before but I didn’t have any trouble recognizing it.

Black leather and black walls created a snug showcase for the X-style sling that hung from the equally black ceiling. The walls were covered with other bondage paraphernalia—cuffs, chains, butt plugs and dildos of all sizes, and even a black leather cat-o-nine tails.

Totally under his spell now I let him strip me. First he removed my feather-swathed mask, tossing it to the floor. He drew off my vest, peeling it off my shoulders and trailing his lips over every square inch of skin as it was exposed. His movements stirred the air; it stroked my super heated skin, brushing me with his tantalizing scent. Kneeling down he skimmed my tights off, but instead of taking me in his mouth like I so desperately wanted, he simply looked, his scalding breath brushing my rigid cock and shaved balls. He stood back up and proceeded to strap me into the sling, securing my arms and legs with leather straps, even putting a band around my head to keep it motionless so I wouldn’t miss a thing he did to me.

I hung at roughly a thirty-degree angle, with my uncovered ass at hip level. The straps held my legs up and open, exposing my pink-rimmed hole to his greedy eyes. The setup was designed to guarantee the dominant didn't have any strain on his legs while he fucked his submissive. My whole body trembled at the thought of being so completely in this cop's power.

Once I was immobile he began stripping. Leaving on his mask and the police cap, he shed his leather pants first, revealing a cock ring that girdled his monster cock and circled his thick balls. His cock was so hard it bounced against his flat stomach, leaving a smear of pre-come in his navel. As he worked the uniform jacket off his bulging biceps I could see a steady stream of pearly pre-come seeping out of his piss slit. The fat, uncut head of his cock pushed free of its foreskin and I longed to wrap my mouth around it and see if it tasted as good as it looked.

But I couldn't move. Instead he slipped down and rolled my own marble hard cock between his lips. I moaned as his hot mouth finally engulfed me, sliding all the way down to my straining root. He circled my cock with his velvet tongue, lapping up the fluid leaking from it, then shoved his agile tongue between my balls. He probed at my back door, prying apart and digging his stiff, fleshy tongue into my ass.

I writhed against my bonds. My hips were twisting, humping his mouth as he ate me. Then he replaced his tongue with two stiff fingers coated in lube. He stretched and probed, opening me up for a much bigger assault.

When he pushed his cock past my tight sphincter I cried out at the sudden sharp pain.

He reared up over me and jammed his mouth over mine, cutting off my cries. He paused briefly to let me adjust, then wrapped his big hands around my elevated thighs and worked his cock up my back channel.

We were both drenched in sweat and our harsh gasps filled the black room by the time he finally came to rest with his balls up against my ass.

"Hang on," he whispered hoarsely as he began to move. He held me tight as he steadily began plowing my ass with smooth measured strokes.

That didn't last long. His grip tightened as he began pounding into me. His thick, uncut meat drilled my hole and the only sound in the room was the sharp slap of flesh-on-flesh and our guttural breathing.

He kissed me again, but the mask got in the way this time. With a growl he ripped it off and I stared into his familiar pockmarked face. His mouth was hot against mine.

"Oh, David," I whispered.

"Chris, baby, you are so hot," he groaned and lost all control, slamming into me in an uncontrolled frenzy.

His cock throbbed inside me. With a long drawn out groan he came, filling me with his incandescent come.

I was close behind him, erupting all over my stomach, smearing us both.

He collapsed against me until only the sling kept us from tumbling to the carpeted floor.

"Hey, stranger," I murmured. "Fancy meeting you in a place like this."

David spread hot, moist kisses over my face and throat. He pulled his softening cock out of me with a faint pop and I sighed at the loss.

It might have been my idea to try out this role-playing, but once David had embraced the idea he had carried it further than I ever anticipated. I sure as hell hadn't expected anything like this. Sure, since I dragged David, kicking and screaming, out of the closet, he'd grown more and more comfortable with who he is and I'm proud of him. He might be an LAPD Homicide Detective during the day, but when he came home to me he was a hot stud with a nearly insatiable appetite for yours truly. And he was more than willing to try new things. But sometimes he surprised even me and I've been around the block a few times.

I looked around the gadget filled room. I eyed the handcuffs with more than idle curiosity.

"Next time I get to pick the fantasy," I said, already wondering where I could come up with the harem outfits and the Roman bathhouse to go along with them. "Whose place is this anyway?" I asked. As far as I knew we didn't know anyone into bondage.

David grinned as he undid my bonds, taking me in his arms and crushing me against his burly chest, distributing my come over us even more.

"You'll never believe me," he said.

"Who?"

"Bryan."

"Bryan?" I squeaked. He was right, I didn't believe him. "Uptight, by-the-book anal Bryan *Williams*?"

"That's the one."

"And you think you know a guy," I said. My eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute. How'd you find out about it?"

"All very innocently." David wagged his eyebrows at me. "We stopped in for a couple of drinks after a particularly nasty bust and he got a little into his cups. Started talking about how he'd paid a small fortune to have this room put in. And how it really added a new dimension to his sex life, which apparently is a lot more off the wall than I ever would have thought."

David's lips began making small forays across my sweaty skin. It tickled and aroused me at the same time. "Well, when I asked him if we could borrow it he almost had a heart attack. But he finally came around."

"How long do we have?" I asked as his cock stood up and pressed against my hip. He reached down to readjust his cock ring.

"As long as we want." David captured my mouth. "He's in San Francisco at a police conference and won't be back till next week."

"Oh good." I raised my arms. "Let's go for round two." Just before he lifted me up into the sling I reached for his hand and brought it to my lips. "Put the blind fold back on. Let's try something a little bit

different.”

He was more than willing.

Kidnapped

by

P. A. Brown

A David Laine/Chris Bellamere short story

I WASN'T SURE WHAT WOKE ME. I had gone to bed hours earlier after watching a four-hour marathon of Sex and the City, which completely failed to cheer me up. Lately my nights were restless and I tossed and turned for hours before drifting into an uneasy sleep. Let's be honest. I missed David. He was back east, attending a two-week training course at the FBI's Quantico. Apparently it was very prestigious even to be considered for the course and I was proud of him for being about the only openly gay cop invited. But I still missed him. He'd only been gone a week. I wouldn't see him for at least another seven days. I hated it. I didn't sleep well without his strong arms around me.

Not to mention I was horny as hell and I was getting damned tired of the company of my hand.

The Silver Lake house we'd shared for the last four years was too big and too empty. Every creak and settling door frame seemed louder than normal. Being alone had never bothered me before David. Now I hated it. Next time he was going to take me with him.

I had finally managed to drift into an uneasy sleep when a new sound brought me back out of it. Sweeney, the Siamese cat David had brought to our relationship, had abandoned his place on David's side of the bed and I should have been alone in the room.

I wasn't.

Even before I could sit up a large shadow detached from the door and in two steps was over me. A gloved hand clamped over my mouth, stifling my cry of alarm. Before I could struggle I felt the snick of metal handcuffs circle my wrists, immobilizing me. A gag replaced his hand and he unceremoniously hauled me out of bed and slung me over his shoulder. Terrified I pounded on his denim-clad back with my shackled hands, but I might as well have been an ant fighting an elephant. His broad back was impervious to my fear or rage.

He hauled me out of the house, jogging down the driveway past my silver Acura and David's Chevy sport coupe. I couldn't believe the brass balls of the guy—I was stark naked and flopping around like a giggled fish; if anyone had seen us they would have known he was up to no good. But he casually trotted down our street, past the homes of neighbors I had known for years. And of course not one of them was outside shouting, “Hey, what are you doing with Chris?” Why was I the only one suffering insomnia?

Finally we reached a dark Pontiac Sunfire, which he stuffed me into. The interior of the car smelled vaguely of refried beans and that phony chemical stink you only get from those pine-shaped fresheners you hang on your mirror. I nearly choked behind my gag. I tried to sit up but before I could he dragged me into a sitting position and wrapped a heavy cloth blindfold over my eyes. I tried to twist my head free,

but he effortlessly shoved me onto my back and shut the door. He slid behind the wheel and we roared off down the hill toward Glendale. I struggled to free myself but he'd done a good job of binding me and with a groan muffled behind my gag I sank into despair. I couldn't even beg him to let me go, or ask him why he was doing this. Was it some kind of revenge against David? As a cop David had a lot of enemies. Had one of them decided to strike back through me? I mean it couldn't be revenge against me—what kind of enemies did I have? I spent my days buried in basements hunched over computers. Someone got mad because they think I over-billed on a service call?

We drove through the night. Not that I could tell, since I couldn't see a fucking thing. But it couldn't have been much past two o'clock when he had dragged me from bed. My sense of time was totally shot but I thought the drive was at least two hours. Time gets pretty distorted when you're scared shitless.

Finally we drew to a stop and he killed the engine. I held my breath. The silence that descended was total. Wherever we were there was nobody else around. No traffic. No human voices. Not even a dog barking. That really freaked me out and I began to struggle in earnest when he opened the back door and hauled me out.

He made short work of my struggles and slung me back over his shoulder. This time I heard the crunch of dry leaves under his shoes and the distant sigh of wind through tree branches. The air against my bare skin had a wintry bite I hadn't felt down in the basin. When I heard the faint hoot of an owl I knew for sure we had left the city behind. I had no idea where we were or what this man intended to do to me but it couldn't be any good if he had to bring me to hell and back to do it. He clumped up wooden steps carrying me as easily as if I was a sack of potatoes. We passed through a door that creaked shut behind us and he abruptly dumped me on a bed. I immediately scrambled up only to be shoved back down. Deftly he unsnapped the cuffs but before I could react to my freedom, he attached another set to both my wrists and snapped them around the bed's headboard. I suppose it was small consolation that these were lined with something soft. Fur or velvet. I twisted my body around, knowing I was completely exposed to his gaze. I desperately wished I had gone to bed in pajamas. Or at least underwear. Not that it would have stopped him from ripping them off me, but I felt so damned *exposed*.

It was nearly as cold inside as out and I shivered. He left me on the bed and I could hear him banging around followed almost immediately by a sharp crackle and the smell of wood smoke. Either the room we were in was very small or the fire he had built was very big, but soon I felt the fire's warmth beginning to settle over my shivering limbs.

So far he hadn't spoken a word. I focused on his even, deep breathing in order to keep track of where he was in the room. When I heard him approaching the bed again I tensed, ready to fight if a chance presented itself. That was a joke, right, I thought bitterly. How do you fight someone when you're blindfolded and cuffed to the bed? Not that he gave me that opportunity. I heard the chilling slide of a zipper and the rustle and snap of clothing being undone. I tried to pull my legs up into a fetal position to protect myself but he slid his hands under my pits and levered me up until I was half sitting. He pulled the gag out of my mouth. Then he slid his fingers through my short hair and tilted my head back. When he pushed his cock up against my lips I tried to turn my head aside but he held me steady. His cock was slick with pre-come and I could smell the rich earthy odor of him as he rubbed the thick head over my closed mouth.

"Suck me," he commanded. His voice was hoarse and low, barely above a whisper.

I resisted, but he held my head firm. Finally, knowing I had no real choice, I opened my mouth wide and he eased his uncut cock past my lips and teeth and I struggled to suppress my gag reflex. Finally I began sucking him, figuring in some still thinking part of me that the faster we got this over with the better for

me. I swirled my tongue around his rigid shaft, tracing the thick ropy veins and pushing back the foreskin to expose the supersensitive skin of the head of his cock. I couldn't help it, I thought of all the times I had done this for David, how I loved the way his huge cock tasted. It wasn't fair that this *animal* could be so similar to the man I loved. Similar enough to evoke an unwanted reaction from me. A single tear leaked from my eye. I had just talked to David this morning when he was on his way to class. He had told me he loved me and would see me next week. Now I had to wonder if I would ever see David again.

My kidnapper's breathing roughened and I sensed that he was close to the edge. He rocked against me and I almost got his entire monstrous cock down my throat. With a grunt he held my head in both hands and pushed his throbbing cock forward. His hot come splashed across my tongue and tonsils. I gulped and swallowed, breathing through my nose as he stuffed his pulsing cock down my throat.

When he withdrew from me I sagged back on the bed. I was no longer cold, and it wasn't just the heat from the crackling fire that warmed me.

Briefly his fingers trailed over my swollen mouth. He spoke in a low whisper. "If you promise to keep quiet I won't gag you again. Deal?"

Eagerly I nodded. It was bad enough he tied me up like a side of beef, and kept me in the dark, but to be gagged too, made it all that much worse. But then I grew apprehensive again as he left my side.

He moved around to the end of the bed and grasping my ankles with both hands he pulled me flat on my back. Unable to see him I had no idea what he was doing until I felt his mouth settle over my big toe. I jerked at the wet heat and odd sensation of having each one of my toes sucked until they tingled. The tingling spread, traveling up my nerve endings and settling in my cock. To my horror it swelled and grew embarrassingly hard as his lips and tongue stroked my heel, then my ankle before moving up along my shins and calves. His surprisingly agile fingers stroked the delicate skin behind my knees.

His mouth followed and he left a trail of blistering heat up my leg, edging my knees apart and sliding his tongue and lips up the inside of my thigh. I arched my spine, thrusting my hips up and gasping as his hot breath brushed my stone-hard cock.

But instead of taking me in his mouth he lifted away from me until I couldn't even feel his breath. I groaned and lifted my pelvis, silently begging him to take me. I was instantly ashamed of the action. Jesus, I couldn't be responding to this guy. What would David say? David sure as hell wouldn't give in to this kind of seduction. What was this guy trying to prove anyway? That I was a hopeless slut? To what end?

I felt the bed shift again. This time he turned his attention to my other foot, following the same torturous path as before. I was moaning wordlessly as he inched toward my cock. I screamed in frustration as he bypassed it yet again. This time he wrapped his mouth around my right nipple. An electrical current slammed through me and I writhed on the bed begging him wordlessly to let me come.

But he wasn't done yet. He traced a volcanic path to my left nipple then moved up to my mouth.

"Do you want me to release you?" he whispered against my lips. "Say the word and I'll let you go right now. Your call."

I shook my head violently. "No." I don't know if I meant 'no' let me go, or 'no' don't stop.

He took it to mean the latter and pressed his mouth against my throat. He slid down my length. This time I opened my legs for him without prompting and he moved between them, slipping his hands up under my

thighs and lifting my legs up to expose me completely. I was drenched in sweat and shaking violently.

When he pressed his mouth against my puckered hole my entire body went rigid. My heart stopped and the air burst from my lungs in a deep groan. He probed my hole briefly then slipped his tongue between my balls, taking each one in his mouth and gently rolling them around before letting them plop out to leave a wet smear along my thigh. His tongue slithered around my cock, soaking me with his saliva. Finally his hot mouth closed over my cock and he swallowed me to the root. He held my hips in his iron grip as I writhed under him.

With a shout I blew my load. I swear I blacked out while my body emptied itself into his mouth.

Then he was gone. I swung my head around, holding my breath while I tried to trace his movements in the room. Finally I heard the rustle of material and the clump of boot heels tumbling to the floor. Seconds later his weight settled on the bed and he stretched his now naked body alongside mine. His chest was thick with hair and muscle and he pressed me down into the bed. He smelled of soap and smoke and a cologne I had never smelled before. I inhaled deeply, thinking someone ought to bottle that combination. Or maybe they had and that's why he smelled so much like David. Except David wore Kenneth Cole. But God, this guy felt so much like David I almost wept. It wasn't fair. His mouth moved along my throat and inched up toward my mouth. Our thighs pressed together. He was hard again.

Finally his mouth came down on mine. His tongue teased my lips and I opened up to him. Our tongues tangled and fought while his hands skimmed my body. His fingers slipped between my legs and when he slid one digit up my ass I thrust eagerly against his hand.

"You like that?" he whispered. "Then let's try this."

He eased between my thighs, raising my legs over his shoulders.

When he probed my hole with his massive cock I sank my teeth into my lips at the sharp pain. I wanted to shout at him— *Where the hell is your condom?* Only David had ever ridden me bareback. But the words wouldn't come. He pressed on, biting my throat as he penetrated me, then smothering the area with hot kisses. The pain receded, replaced by a growing heat in my gut. God, he was so big and he filled me so completely.

He didn't pause until his balls came to rest against my tailbone. By then we were both gasping for breath.

He wrapped my legs around his sweating back and urged me on with a voice now hoarse with lust and need.

Need drove us, thrashing furiously on the bed we growled and shouted as the pressure mounted. He pounded into me, harder and faster with each savage piston stroke. He cried out and I felt him throb inside me. His teeth worried my throat and for the first time he whispered words of passion against my hot, slick skin.

He shouted my name as his cock exploded inside me.

In response I came, blasting come across my stomach and chest, smearing it over both of us as I clung to him, my legs still wrapped around his hips, his cock still deep inside me. My mouth was on his, sharing our shattered breaths.

He shivered against me. Reaching over my head he did something to the cuffs and the next instant my arms were free. I rubbed my wrists then placed them over his back, cradling him in my exhausted arms. But he wasn't done. Next he slipped off the blindfold and I stared up into his green-flecked eyes.

"Wow," David murmured in a normal voice. "You almost make all the work worthwhile."

"You!" I scrambled upright away from him, crashing into the headboard I had so recently been cuffed to. I slammed my fist into his fur-covered chest. "What the hell are you doing here? I wasn't expecting you for another week."

He withdrew his still semi-hard cock from me and turned me around to face him. Over his sweat-soaked shoulder I could see the fire he had started earlier.

"So much for not gagging you. I think I liked you better when you were silent."

So I hit him again.

He caught me in a bone-crushing hug, though I'm not sure it wasn't self-preservation that made him do it as opposed to lust. I can be a bitch when I'm pissed. And I was definitely on the rag tonight—or this morning, however you choose to look at it. I glanced at my watch, which only reminded me that it was sitting on my bedside dresser back in L.A.

"You could have at least grabbed some damned clothes. I wouldn't have stopped you."

"Oh settle down, hon. I had Des pack up some things this afternoon while you were at work. They're out in the car." He renewed his assault on my body and I couldn't help but respond. Nobody did to me what David did. And the damn thing was, he knew it, too. Curse his miserable black heart. It was like even when I thought he was a stranger my body had known otherwise. "We can get them later," David murmured, dusting my chest with feather light kisses. My big strong bear must have been eating his Wheaties. He was already hard again. My skin grew marbled with goose bumps and it had nothing to do with being cold.

"You can get them later." I sniffed, not willing to concede the game to him just yet. "I'm not going anywhere like this."

"Good," he said. "Just like I want you. Barefoot and naked in bed. All greased up and ready for me." David grinned down at me. As though to remind me of just how ready I was, he slid a stiff finger up my ass that was still oozing his come. I squeezed my legs together, locking his hand in place. I squirmed to push him in further.

"Didn't you miss me, even a little bit?" he asked.

I wasn't going to be mollified that easily. The prick had *scared* me. "Don't tell me you went AWOL. Is the SWAT team going to come busting down that door?"

David's grin was devilish and seductive as hell. His finger wiggled inside me.

"Well?" I growled. I was flushed with desire.

His grin never slipped. "I'm afraid I wasn't exactly truthful. The conference only lasted a week. It ended early this afternoon. I caught the first flight home. I wanted to surprise you."

“Surprise? Is that what you call dragging me out of a warm bed in the middle of the night through the freezing cold? You scare the shit out of me—” I froze as it hit me. “And you lied to me?”

“You sorry I came back early?”

I opened my mouth to berate him some more. But I remembered how he had made me feel as he drove me mad with mouth and his hands and his delicious cock. How could I resent someone who would go to such lengths to do that? He drew me against him and I took advantage of his closeness to tweak a nipple. I caught a whiff of that unfamiliar cologne again.

“What the devil are you wearing anyway? Since when did you give up Kenneth Cole?”

“They were giving away samples at this mall we stopped in for lunch. I knew you’d recognize me instantly if I wore my regular stuff. I borrowed the hotel soap too.” He nuzzled my right nipple, biting me gently. I moaned. “I could switch if you like it.”

“No, I gasped. “Don’t bother. Where are we anyway?”

“Big Bear. I didn’t lie about taking the two weeks off. I booked this cabin for us for a week.”

“A week?” I sat up. “I can’t stay up here a week. I have clients—”

“Already taken care of. Becky’s going to handle all your work for the next week. Besides,” His grin widened and grew mischievous. “I’ve got you at a bit of a disadvantage.” He wagged the blindfold overhead. “You won’t get far with just this covering you. They’re predicting snow tonight.”

I glared at him. “That is so not fair.”

He leaned forward and trailed his wet mouth across my smooth chest, flicking his tongue over my other nipple, which instantly swelled and hardened. “Haven’t you heard, all’s fair in love and war.”

“You are so dead, mister.”

“Yeah, but what a way to go.” He dropped the blindfold on my chest. “Come on, if it’ll make you feel any better you can do a little role reversal.”

I licked my lips and stared down at my rapidly rising cock. I scooped up the blindfold. “What kind of role reversal?”

He guided my hands to his face where I shakily secured the blindfold.

“Why don’t you decide that?” He groaned as I wrapped my fist around his cock. “You’re in charge, after all.”



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