

HOLLYWOOD ASSASSIN

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HOLLYWOOD ASSASSIN

MZ Kelly

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Chapter One

Hollywood exploded with the crack of gunfire.

I turned away from the smog-shrouded city of dreams that shimmered like a mirage beyond the shuttered windows of the Pinewood Apartments as Captain Marvin Drake unloaded his Glock-9 on Detective Jack Bautista. The detective, wanted on a murder rap, tossed a bag of groceries, hopped a fence, and sprinted downhill through the gang-infested neighborhood.

I lunged at Drake, pushing his gun away. At the same time, Bernie, my canine partner, strained against his leash and began running in the direction of the suspect, pulling me and my alabaster Gucci blouse through the dirt and grass.

By the time I got to my feet and released the dog, my blouse was ruined, the humidity had turned my hair into a frizz-fest, and Drake was screeching like a fat turkey that had swallowed a wasp. Bautista was already over the fence, disappearing faster than a necklace on a Lindsay Lohan shopping spree.

The big bellied captain did a mad turkey trot toward me. With lots of attitude and bad breath right in my face, he shouted, “What the hell do you think you’re doing, Detective Sexton?”

I looked down into an angry face—his complexion more ruddy than usual. Even the wattle of fat spilling out of his collar had turned red. I almost laughed as I watched his comb-over flapping in the breeze. “I was trying to save you from shooting an unarmed suspect in the back.”

“If I hadn’t acted, we’d both be dead!” he spat.

“Bautista was unarmed, walking down the sidewalk in broad daylight with a bag of groceries in his arms. Were you afraid he’d hit us with the pasta or the tomatoes?”

The turkey’s anger became a mad screech. “He was armed, Sexton. You just fucked the pooch.”

Now *I* was getting annoyed, impulse control not being one of my strong points. The elderly captain’s attitude and an October afternoon that was hotter than a pair of Justin Timberlake’s Fruit of the Looms were wearing on me.

“First of all,” I said, fixing my gaze on Drake, “the pooch’s name is Bernie, second I don’t fuck dogs, and third you just made me ruin my \$200 blouse.”

I walked away as the LAPD captain’s rant turned obscene. I almost never walk away from a fight. Maybe turning thirty this past year had mellowed me.

I called for backup, knowing that the steamy fall afternoon would soon be an alphabet soup of OIS, RHD, and PMS. Not the best time of the month for me to

be dealing with the Officer Involved Shooting Unit and Robbery Homicide Detectives.

While the LAPD clean-up crews were on their way, I walked over to the fence line of the condemned apartment complex. I saw a festering sore of graffiti, rust, and decay. The Pinewood was scheduled for demolition in a few weeks, part of the city's urban renewal master plan. And none too soon.

I found Bernie pacing at the fence and snatched up his leash, controlling him. I ran my hand over a hairy mop of brown and black fur, the result of a DNA soup consisting of some German shepherd ancestry and an unidentified alien breed. The genetics had also left my hairy partner with a rogue attitude and a healthy dose of sexual wanderlust—just your typical guy.

As I surveyed the perimeter of the apartment complex, my phone rang. The voice on the line was vaguely familiar.

"Thanks for saving my ass, Kate, and tell the captain to calm down. He's liable to have a stroke in this heat."

"Jack," I said, doing a 360 and mentally picturing the Wilshire Division detective who had slipped away from us. Bautista was in his mid-thirties, with black hair and whiskey brown eyes. An easy smile and cool disposition made him a favorite among everyone but the LAPD brass. Before he became the prime suspect in a murder case, the detective had been a smooth talking cop with a reputation to match. "Where are you?"

"Close enough to see your black skirt, white blouse, and lovely breasts."

Breast man. No surprise. The thought of Jack Bautista seeing me in my ruined outfit made me cringe. I hated being underdressed in any situation, even this one.

"Been awhile, Kate. Too long," Jack went on. "Don't suppose you remember that Christmas party a few years back."

"Hard to forget you wanting to play tonsil hockey with me while my husband was at the bar."

"You always seemed the athletic type. Besides, old Dougie never did appreciate you. I saw the video."

"Yeah, it made the rounds."

I scanned the neighborhood beyond the apartment complex, trying to suppress images of my ex, an assistant D.A. who got caught on videotape in an interrogation room screwing his secretary. One year later, I was left with the memory of an ugly divorce, ruined credit, and the vision of Phyllis—The Squealer—Culpepper playing Doug's flute for most of the department's entertainment.

I glanced back at the boarded-up apartment complex. My partner, Charlie Winkler, had arrived and was doing the turkey trot with Drake. Bernie also looked in their direction and shook himself, maybe reacting to the fat bird still in full rant.

“Let’s change the subject, Jack,” I said, turning away from the captain. “If you won’t tell me where you are, let’s talk about Cassie Reynolds.”

When Bautista came back on the line, the bluster was gone. We both knew what was at stake.

“Cassie and I knew each other from my days in vice. Nice kid who was lost; working for a pimp named Maurice Simpson in West Hollywood. I got a call from Cassie last Saturday night. She was anxious to get together, said she had some information about an old case and wanted to talk. When I pressed her for details, she told me that she found out what happened to her father, a guy named John Carmichael. He disappeared almost thirty years ago; the case had gone unsolved. I made arrangements to meet her at the Argyle on Sunset later that night.”

“Don’t tell me...Cassie was dead when you got there.”

“Unconscious, face down on the bed. I was about to call for an R.A. unit when I was hit from behind and knocked out.”

“Explains your fingerprints at the crime scene. What about your gun?”

“When I came to, the hotel maid was in the room screaming hysterically. Cassie was dead, shot through the head, and my gun was missing. I decided I needed to get away and think things through.”

I did another turn, walking Bernie in a circle and scanning the buildings beyond the apartment complex. The afternoon air stirred, picking up the scent of fertilizer. Maybe Drake’s deodorant had stopped working.

“Leaving the scene...probably not the best move in retrospect,” I said. “According to the reports, the maid kicked your gun when she went psycho. They found it under the bed. Ballistics matched it as the murder weapon.”

I heard Bautista take a breath, lower his voice. “All I know is, while I was unconscious, someone used my gun and murdered Cassie, framing me. It was a setup.”

The wanted detective continued with his story while I walked to my car and retrieved Bernie’s water bowl. As my partner slurped away like a drunk at closing time, I remembered something else from the police reports on the Reynolds case.

“I’ve read the reports, Jack. RHD interviewed the girls who work for

Simpson. They all say you and Cassie were in a heated argument the week before she died. The speculation was that you two had less than a professional relationship.”

“I was trying to get Cassie to give up the streets. She didn’t have any other means of support; didn’t see how she could survive on her own.” There was a pause before his voice kicked up a notch, something catching in his throat. “You’ve gotta believe me, Kate. There was never anything else going on.”

“Cassie’s pimp,” I said, sensing his desperation, “do you think he could’ve had something to do with her murder?”

“It’s possible. When we track him down and get a handle on what Cassie knew about her father’s disappearance, maybe we’ll find out who killed her and set me up.”

“We? I’d say you have a little problem called a murder warrant. Why don’t you tell me where you are? I’ll bring you in...”

“Not gonna happen, Kate. I’ll work things from this end, but I’ve obviously got to keep a low profile. That’s why I need your help.”

Charlie was walking in my direction mouthing the words, “OIS needs your statement.”

Nodding to my partner, I said into the phone, “I’ll see what I can do. You’ve got my number. Stay in touch.”

I was about to hang up when I saw that the turkey on the sidewalk was still ranting. “A couple more things, Jack. How’d you end up at the Pinewood?”

“An old friend I helped out with a beef once is taking advantage of the free rent before the demolition. He let me stay with him for a few days.”

“What about a gun—you carrying?”

“Never leave home without it.”

“Did you have it out when Drake started shooting?”

“Kate, I was mentally preparing chicken ratatouille and had my hands full of groceries.”

I took a deep breath. “Thanks. I’ll be in touch.”

After giving my statement to OIS and assuring the detectives I would put it all in my report, I repeated it for Stan Baker and Alex Kennedy, the RHD detectives assigned to the Reynolds case. They said they’d come by the station tomorrow if they had any further questions.

After the debriefings, I met up with Charlie Winkler on the sidewalk. I noticed that my partner was rubbing his jaw. “How’s the tooth?”

“Gotta go back for more work next week. The guy’s a terrorist with a drill.”

Charlie brushed back thinning dark hair sprinkled with silver. His brown eyes were fixed on me. My partner has only two expressions: a blank stare and something I once thought was brought on by constipation. Over the years, however, I've learned otherwise. I call it the "daddy death stare."

My partner lowered his head and hooded brow, taking on the measured look of a disapproving parent. "Drake is trying to make a federal case outta this, Kate. He's saying Bautista was armed and..."

"Save it. I just talked to Jack. He had a bag of groceries in his hands. Drake wouldn't know reasonable force if it bit his fat ass." More daddy death stare. "He called my cell phone, Charlie."

I found a clip in my purse and did a twist and tuck of my unmanageable brown hair. I looked down at my partner, who at five foot seven was a couple inches shorter than me and was still giving me the death stare. "Bautista's probably several blocks away by now. Says he wants to prove he's innocent before he'll turn himself in."

Charlie continued to stare at me. He rubbed his chin and asked, "Why didn't you guys call the unit? The Warrant Task Force was created for this kind of situation."

The task force was formed three years earlier thanks to an *L.A. Times* article fuelling political and public outrage over hundreds of felons wanted on warrants, still walking the streets and victimizing the city. Charlie and I were assigned to the unit two years ago and Bernie came along as my partner when I made detective.

I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to relieve the tension, and glanced down. My nylons were ruined, my skirt had a stain to match my blouse, and bits of Bernie's brown and black fur were clinging to me.

"Damn it, my whole outfit is trashed," I said out of frustration. It was one of the few good outfits I had left after my divorce.

My partner started to go on about the taskforce, but I cut him off. "Don't, Charlie." My anger was on the rise again as I heard Drake light into one of the OIS detectives somewhere behind us.

I felt compelled to explain the afternoon's events to Charlie. "When I left the courthouse after testifying on a case this afternoon, I ran into Jerry Eckstein in the corridor. Remember him?"

"Snitch from that big drug case a couple years back?"

I nodded. "We chatted for a few minutes. As I was leaving, I saw that the captain's car was broke down. I was about to drive past Drake when he waved

me down. Recognized me from that police officer memorial ceremony we all attended last spring.

I picked bits of Bernie's fur off my blouse as I went on. "I told the captain that Eckstein had given me a tip that Bautista might be at the Pinewood Apartments. I said I needed to call the taskforce for back-up. Drake wouldn't have any part of it. He insisted that we see if there was any sign of Bautista first. Next thing I know we roll in here and the tub of lard goes Terminator on the neighborhood."

"OIS has already canvassed the area—no witnesses," Charlie said. He lit a cigarette and shook his head.

From behind us we heard Drake yelling, "He had a gun and I'll have her up on charges for interfering with the arrest of a wanted felon."

The big turkey had just put all his weight on my impulse control button. I've never been big on diplomacy, but a year spent recovering from a cheating husband and financial ruin had left my tolerance tank on empty. Bernie and I walked over to the strutting loon.

I said it again, this time loud enough for every cop at the Pinewood to hear me. "There was no gun. There was no reasonable force. There was only a big-mouthed idiot acting outside of policy."

The crazed turkey came close enough to peck me. "I'll have your badge for this, Sexton."

From somewhere below me I heard a low growl. I should have reacted to it, but I was too busy fending off the big pecker. Why is it that peckers demand so much attention?

I put my hands on my hips and leaned into Drake. "The only thing you'll have is a hard time covering your ass for violating department procedures."

It was too late. The growl became a deep roar. Fangs bared, Bernie lunged at Drake, all 110 pounds of muscle, teeth, and attitude.

"Get that fucking dog under control or..."

It was too late. The turkey teetered, fell over like a limp-dick rooster in a hen house, and began writhing on the ground, kicking at my dog.

"Stop kicking or I'll have you up on animal cruelty charges," I said. I wasn't really worried about Bernie getting hurt, but I wanted Drake to get the message.

I heard the sound of fabric ripping as I yanked on Bernie's leash and yelled, "Aus," a German command that means, *stop biting the fat asshole*.

By the time I had Bernie under control, Drake was lying on the ground and his pants were ripped, exposing a nasty little pair of white briefs.

Five minutes later, Charlie, Bernie, and I were back on the sidewalk. My

rotund partner looked at me like I was his daughter and had just been expelled from school.

Charlie crushed out his cigarette and rubbed his jaw. "How about we call it a day, go to the Saddle Ranch, get a beer and a burger?"

I smiled. When times were tough you could always count on Charlie to think about food and booze. It wasn't a bad idea, but as I again glanced down at my trashed outfit, I decided against it. Besides, I had a bad feeling about what Drake had told OIS, and it wasn't giving me much of an appetite. I brushed a hand across my damp forehead.

"Another time, Charlie," I said, tugging on Bernie's leash. "Why not walk me to my car? A girl's probably not safe in a neighborhood like this."

We both turned in time to see one of the uniforms hand Drake a blanket as Charlie's phone rang.

"Yeah," Charlie said to me while reaching for his phone. "Hollywood ain't safe until Drake is back in his office and no one ever again has to see those tighty-whities."

When he finished his call, I saw that the color had drained from my partner's usually florid complexion.

"What is it, Charlie?"

"Dorothy Velasquez, an old friend who works in the Tower."

Charlie always refers to the police administration building as the Tower. My partner had been separated for the past three years and I thought maybe his old friend wanted to get together with him.

"Don't tell me she wants a date?"

He shook his head, his jowls jiggling like Jello above his gray, bushy moustache. "Dorothy says Drake has already notified IAD. He's opening a case on you with internal affairs."

Chapter Two

Charlie and I spent the next day serving warrants. The Warrant Task Force could sometimes be exciting, maybe even a little dangerous. But, then, there were days like this one. Lots of knock and talk without much success.

I spent the last few minutes of the shift at my desk across from Charlie with Bernie curled at my feet. I tried to push yesterday's events at the Pinewood out of my mind. I had moderate success while thumbing through the Dolce and Gabbana winter collection, even though I couldn't afford even one of their scarves. Then the intercom buzzed.

I looked up in time to see Charlie gulping down the last of half-dozen powdered sugar mini donuts left over from a staff meeting. He motioned for me to answer.

After taking the call, I tossed my partner a napkin. "You look like you swallowed a bag of coke." While he cleaned up I said, "RHD is here to talk to me about yesterday's events."

I tugged on Bernie's leash and said to him, "Let's get out of here before Charlie finishes cleaning out the break room fridge."

I got the daddy death stare. A face wipe followed. He only succeeded in spreading the sugar to his cheeks.

"Geeze. Go clean up, Charlie."

Bernie and I walked through the squad room. Lots of cubies; rows of desks—an open setting with no privacy. The bullpen was emptying out; cops heading for the local watering holes.

I met with Stan Baker and Alex Kennedy in one of the interview rooms usually reserved for suspects. Bernie settled in a corner. A tape recorder came out. Kennedy, a big guy in his forties with a moustache that hid his upper lip, took a moment to check the batteries.

I was sure that the detectives knew about Drake's allegations since the captain had broadcast it to half the city. They began with an ice-breaker; small talk about my dog.

"Bernie came over with me from traffic when I got promoted," I explained. "Lots of attitude. Comes in handy when we do a serve and the subject wants to run. Yesterday was the exception, thanks to a fence around the projects."

Kennedy made a polite sound, something like "un-huh" but it came off like he was suppressing gas pains. His partner was smiling, probably thinking about my ex's theatrical performance. I had no doubt that every cop in the department had

checked out the DVD.

I recapped yesterday's events; told them again about the snitch who gave me the tip on Bautista. Then Baker took over. A question later, I knew that the much shorter and younger of the two detectives wanted to bust some chops on his way up the promotion ladder. He was an up-and-comer in a tailored Armani suit.

"Just to be clear on a couple of matters, Detective Sexton..." Baker began, his eyes lingering on my breasts. I'm tall with olive skin and decent features, but I'm also a 36B, so there isn't much to eyeball in that vicinity. No matter. It didn't take a genius to know that the nerve endings in a man's retina run directly to his penis. Baker continued, "When Detective Bautista called you, did he call on your work or personal cell phone?"

"My personal phone. I tried to redial and trace the number. It was a disconnect. He probably removed the SIM card—did a talk and toss."

I'd given them the number Bautista had used yesterday and was sure that they already knew what I'd just told them. They'd also probably already traced the number through the phone company and reached a dead end.

Baker raised recently threaded eyebrows. "How did he get your personal number, Detective?"

"My number, as I'm sure you know, is part of the LAPD phone tree, used for emergencies. Every officer is required to provide both work and private phone numbers in case of a crisis or natural disaster. I can only assume Bautista had access to the tree."

"Of course." The detectives nodded in unison. They exchanged a look, something that reminded me of Jack Webb and his partner in that old TV show, *Dragnet*.

Baker cleared his throat. "How well did you know Detective Bautista prior to his phone call?"

"Met him twice, once at a gang taskforce meeting a few years back and then at a Christmas party a couple of years ago."

"Any other contact?" Kennedy chimed in.

"No." I wasn't happy about the implication, but proud of my newly acquired impulse control.

Baker leaned over the table. When he spoke, the diminutive detective's voice was lower. Maybe he practiced his interrogation technique in the shower. "Detective Sexton, are you trying to tell us that you and Jack Bautista had only two prior contacts, despite the fact that a cop wanted for murder and on the run had your personal cell number with him and made a point of calling you?"

I would have lowered my voice in response, but the only thing I practice in the shower is trying to sing like Beyoncé. “Listen to me, Detective Baker. I’ll say this again but only one more time. I met the suspect twice before the phone call. I don’t really know him and don’t know why he called me. There’s only one thing I do know for sure.”

Baker blinked, smiled, and splayed his hands in a gesture that was meant to be disarming. I took it as surrender. “What’s that, Detective?”

I stood up, stretching out my five foot nine inch frame. I stared down at the arrogant detective and said, “This interview is over.” Impulse control—yes.

After filling Daddy Charlie in on my interrogation with junior Jack Webb and his partner, I headed for home. A block from the station, my phone rang.

My car, a green Ford Escort named Olive, lurched and whined, as I answered. I heard my friend Natalie’s sometimes less than proper English accent. “I’m in a bit of a fix, Kate. Fraid I flunked me frigg’n drivin’ test. I could really use a lift.”

I turned onto Fountain Avenue, the sun glimmering off the Hollywood sign. I lowered the visor in my car, downshifted into the rush hour traffic, and said, “Meet you at the DMV in ten.”

Olive did her usual smoke and grind as I turned the corner onto Formosa Avenue. I paid cash for the old girl and usually drive her instead of a pool car so I can get the department’s mileage reimbursement.

After my divorce, I couldn’t get a loan for a newer car thanks to Doug maxing out every credit card we owned, including one from Victoria’s Secret. He probably used the card to keep The Screamer in lace undies. But I try not to be bitter.

I found Natalie Bump at the DMV surrounded by a gaggle of admirers, perverts, and a couple of pimps who were circling for the kill.

Natalie emerged from the testosterone cloud, got in, slammed Olive’s door, and began fuming. “The ruddy wazzock who gave me the drivin’ test wanted me to park between a Mercedes and a Buick. Not bad enough, I gotta drive on the wrong side of the road. I also gotta park in a space only big enough for a Mini Cooper? The whole thing was a load of cack.”

Charlie once described Natalie as a verbal earthquake whose beauty is off the Richter scale. Blonde and hazel with legs that men drool over and turn women green, my friend caused a scene wherever she went. Almost ten years younger than me, she’s the little sister I never had, unless, like my mother, you believe in

soul sisters and shared karma.

I tried a little sympathy, but the interview with the Dragnet knuckledraggers was still on my mind. “Sorry. I take it you didn’t pass the test?”

“I slammed on me anchors right there. Left Clyde’s Cadillac in the roadway.” A beat later. “Fraid they towed it away.”

“I’m sure Clyde will understand.”

Natalie rolled her hazel eyes; a seductive orbit. “I’ll just give the old boy’s banger a ride tonight. He’ll forget all about the Caddie.” I laughed as she added, “Did I tell you Clyde’s a double V?”

Maybe her octogenarian husband had some anatomical abnormality? “I’m afraid to ask.”

“Clyde’s a Viagra Virgin. Didn’t do the shuffle and thrust for a decade before he got his script when we got together.” Natalie giggled. “I re-popped the old boy’s cherry.”

Ewww! Clyde Bump on the hump with his twenty-two year old wife. I tried to kill the visual. Natalie had told me in confidence that she married Clyde while attending an international college exchange program through UCLA. Clyde provided her with legal immigration status and Natalie provided...The visual came back. Think Katy Perry does Jimmy Carter.

Natalie turned to Bernie. He was snorting wind through the open back window. She playfully twisted my partner’s floppy ears and kissed his nose. “Hello sweet pea. Did ya shag a poodle today?”

“Bernie’s been too busy recovering from a tangle with a fat cop to look for love,” I said.

My friend knew all about my canine partner’s predilection to do the *jump and hump*, as Natalie called it. The wife of Bernie’s trainer told me in confidence that my dog should have been named Murphy because he was a four-legged example of Murphy’s Law in action.

Bernie’s trainer had had used more professional terms in his final report: *The canine occasionally exhibits a failure to stay on task which can lead to unintended consequences*. After working with Bernie for almost four years, I knew Natalie’s description better suited my partner.

I surrendered to the need to unload about my rotten day, and spent the next five minutes filling Natalie in on the details of my run-in with the RHD detectives over yesterday’s events with Marvin Drake.

Natalie’s eyebrows lifted. “I’d love to help you out with the investigation. Got a pretty fair dose of snoop in me—a good memory for details, too. I can still

remember the wart on Hilda Cottingham's nose in the fifth grade. Looked a bit like Winston Churchill."

"I'll keep it in mind, Natalie." Marvin Drake as a human wart popped into my mind.

"What about this Jack fellow? Any chance you two might wanna play hide the salami?"

I laughed; almost hit a curb.

"Come on now," Natalie said. "You've been on the split-up for almost a year. You must be in need of a shaggin' now and then."

I found some composure. "You're probably right about that, but somehow I can't see me and Jack...shagging." Fits of laughter hit me again, but I kept both hands on the wheel.

Natalie's lecture on the benefits of having the *lady garden* occasionally watered continued until we passed Grauman's Theater. She looked over at the parade of costumed characters on the sidewalk. "Looky there, Batman is out of his cave, along with Spiderman, Dorothy, and Freddie Krueger."

"Better tip 'em ten bucks if you want a picture or they'll steal your purse."

Natalie changed the subject. "You mentioned awhile back that you went to Hollywood High?"

"Class of 2000, Sheik Territory." I noticed Natalie's brow knit and explained, "An old movie star named Rudolph Valentino starred in a movie called, *The Sheik*. His mural's on the school gym."

"Thank goodness. I thought for a moment when you said Sheik you were talkin' about a picture of a condom on the gym."

"That might have been a good idea, too."

"So what was it like growing up in Hollywood? Did ya know anyone famous, like maybe Robert Downey, Jr.?"

I shook my head as Olive lurched up La Brea. "Charlie has a saying that Hollywood is really just one big village because all the other villages in the world have sent their idiots to live here."

"Makes it kinda interesting."

"And dangerous. My dad worked LAPD as a beat cop when I was a kid, until someone shot and killed him in a local park. The crime was never solved."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Kate. Musta been tough times."

"Got through it. I'm told that my dad was a big fan of old Hollywood. He borrowed my middle name from the actress, Hedy Lamarr." I glanced at Natalie. "I was christened, Kate Hedwig Sexton."

“Yikes.”

“Hedwig is German—Hedy Lamarr’s given name. Made for a few scenes in school when bullies got wind of it.”

“What was your dad like?”

“He was glue—held the family together. Died when I was four and then Mom went off the deep end.” A hundred images of my New Age guru mother shot through my mind. I looked at Natalie. “She’s a local gadfly and part-time psychic.”

“My mum was a different sort,” Natalie said. “She was a model in Paris when she was younger. Left me dad for a rich Italian who owned a shipping company. Never really knew her very well.”

“And your father, what did he do?”

“Drove a truck. Took me with him when I was just a kid. Left me with a load of memories.”

I had the feeling that Natalie got her mother’s beauty and her father’s sense of adventure, along with a colorful vocabulary that defied the typical British reserve.

“You can just drop me at the appliance store,” Natalie said. “I’m thinkin’ ‘bout making a few changes—shaking things up a bit. Thought I’d talk to the salesmen.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask,” I said, wondering what Clyde’s beautiful bride had in mind for Clyde’s Appliance Universe.

I live above the store, Natalie offering me the loft after my divorce when she and her new husband moved to the Hollywood Hills. The rent is reasonable and, if I ever need a Maytag repairman, he’s right down the stairway.

Clyde Bump used to own a string of similar stores. Years ago he was a celeb on local television channels, standing there with his thumb out asking viewers to *Give Clyde a Ride* to his appliance universe. A recession or two and the universe shrank. Clyde now owned the one remaining store.

As we pulled to the curb in front of the store Natalie said, “What would you think about a combination appliance and lingerie store if I can convince old cheap as chips Clyde? Maybe call it, Laundry ‘n Lace.”

The elderly salesmen high-tailed it to the windows when they saw Natalie swing her long silky legs out of Olive. The glass steamed over as we walked into the store. A gaggle of drooling salesmen came over, asking if they could help my friend with anything.

“You might wanna see if Clyde’s salesmen are willing to model the lingerie,” I

said as the sales force lined up in front of us. “I think these guys might have a thing for garters and panties.”

Bernie and I left Natalie to explain her Laundry ‘n Lace concept to her admirers and went upstairs to our apartment. I was tossing overdue bills into a wicker basket, when my phone rang. The voice on the line brought back yesterday’s anxiety.

“Saw you and your lovely friend on the way home and thought I’d touch base,” Jack Bautista said. “By the way, beautiful women like you two deserve a better mode of transportation.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Are you stalking me?”

“Just in the neighborhood, looking for a washing machine.”

“Clever. Listen, Jack. I’ve been thinking...”

“I want you off the case, Kate. My problem, not yours. I shouldn’t have called you yesterday. I’m sorry.”

His contrition seemed genuine, but I had a hunch where this was coming from. “Don’t tell me. You talked to Charlie?”

A chuckle. “He got my number from a mutual friend. Said the big dogs are on the prowl. We agreed not to proceed.”

Daddy Charlie was running interference, telling Jack to call me off the case. *We agreed not to proceed.* Damn him.

“Listen to me,” I said. “I don’t give a damn what you agreed to. You, Charlie, and Marvin Drake can all kiss my ass.”

“We would be lucky to pucker up to a fine ass like yours.”

A decision had been forming in my mind all day. I knew it was the right thing to do, the brass be damned. “I’m going to help you clear your name, Jack.”

“I can’t let you be involved.”

“Not your decision. It’s mine.”

“No thanks, Kate. Take care of yourself and Bernie.”

“Jack!” The line was dead.

Five minutes later, I curled up on the sofa next to Bernie with a glass of wine and a bag of junk food. There’s nothing better than chardonnay and a carb-bomb to drown your sorrows. Bernie raised his head, giving me one of his looks. My partner has a sixth sense, knows when trouble’s brewing.

“Think you’re up for this, buddy?”

A whimper. Maybe it was the wine, but I imagined being at the movies watching one of those old black-and-white flicks from the forties. The scene opened to the back of a subject in a trench coat. The camera panned out and the

subject took on a familiar profile.

In my mind I watched as Bernie removed his sun glasses, tipped his hat, and grinned as his image filled the screen. When he spoke, it was in the voice of Sean Connery, cool and sophisticated. “Round up the usual suspects, Kate. We’re on a mission from God.

Chapter Three

Nathan Kane shuffles into the prison medical ward. An orderly holds onto his trembling arm, making sure that he doesn't fall and cause the institution any liability for mistreatment.

The convicted killer knows that, in California, medical care in prisons is all about the money. Everything is done under close, scripted supervision so that lawyers for the inmates have no grounds to sue.

When they finally arrive at the psychiatrist's office, the aide settles the prisoner in a chair and says, "All yours Doc. Call me when you're finished."

Dr. Marsha Wentworth nods and studies Kane after the orderly leaves. The inmate, now in his late fifties, shows all the classic symptoms of Parkinson's Dementia. His hands shake and his arms tremble.

The psychiatrist has also seen his loss of balance and coordination, his shuffling gait, and his difficulties with speaking and swallowing. His face and jaw have a rigid, mask-like appearance. The prisoner is incontinent and wears an adult diaper under his prison-issued uniform.

"I'll be doing an assessment of your condition for your upcoming parole hearing," Dr. Wentworth says. "The authorities are considering what's called a medically incapacitated parole due to your deteriorating health."

The lack of response is consistent with the inmate's past performances.

"How are you feeling today, Mr. Kane?"

Nathan Kane's brooding caramel eyes don't make contact with the psychiatrist. Spittle slips down his chin. He watches with amused detachment as the young woman takes a tissue and wipes his face like a mother would clean up after a child.

The scent of the doctor's perfume drifts through the office, displacing the usual stench of stale food, body odor, and cleaning fluids that make the prison smell like rotting, rancid fruit. Kane's eyes hold on the psychiatrist's diamond ring, before sliding away. He takes in her slender, attractive legs.

What would it be like? He sees himself pushing the woman up on her desk, pulling her legs apart. He fucks her as she flails around and tries to hit the panic alarm. The bitch wouldn't have a chance. After he takes his time with her, he imagines smashing her face into her desk until not even her mother would recognize her.

Kane senses that the psychiatrist is studying him as the violent thoughts swirl through his mind like a drug he craves. His gaze drifts to the floor. He

consciously makes his arms and hands shake, just as he has practiced for months. He has the act down so well that he sometimes exhibits the symptoms even when no one is around.

“I want you to know something,” the psychiatrist says, scribbling away in the patient’s chart. Her tone has changed. It is controlled; coldly professional. There isn’t a hint of the compassion he’s felt on other visits. She stops writing. Her frame pitches forward and she makes a futile effort at eye contact. “I’m considering recommending against your parole, Mr. Kane.”

He wants to reach up, grab the shrink by the throat, clamp his arms around her neck and slowly squeeze the life out of her. He imagines toying with the bitch, letting her regain consciousness over and over before her life force finally slips away.

It takes every effort he has to remain silent, watching in a controlled, detached way, as he continues demonstrating the symptoms he’s mastered.

“I believe your medical condition is being exaggerated,” the psychiatrist continues. “I’ve studied your charts; the reports of the doctors over the years. The most recent report from your private physician doesn’t support the level of cognitive impairment that would normally be expected at this stage in the development of the disease.” The psychiatrist leans in closer, tries again to meet the dark eyes beneath his heavy brow. “I think you’re exaggerating your symptoms, Mr. Kane.”

Fucking bitch! How does she know? How could this woman, who is young enough to be his daughter, know when he’s convinced all the others?

Despite his best efforts, he can’t keep his eyes from sliding up to her for the briefest instant. He wonders if she has any idea who she is dealing with; how many people he has murdered. He knows a half dozen ways to kill her before she has a chance to call for help.

His gaze drifts back to the floor and he buries his feelings. It’s not the time. Not when he is so close. There has to be a way to get the woman to cooperate.

The psychiatrist turns her back to him, writes in his medical chart. “I’ll do one more assessment in a couple of days and then make my final decision.”

Half an hour later, after more tests, and more one-way discussion about his level of impairment, the orderly walks Nathan Kane back to his cell.

Kane is fortunate. The medical ward is undergoing expansion and renovation. Most of the other inmates have been moved out of the wing. He’s been temporarily given a room by himself.

At eighteen hundred hours, the shift at the prison changes. Kane waits until

after midnight when Bobby Jenkins comes on duty and makes his rounds.

Jenkins is in his early thirties with a receding hairline and a series of needle marks around the cubital vein of his arm. The orderly had tried to cover the marks by wearing long sleeves. But in the summer, the prison was hot and the flesh-toned makeup he used to conceal the needle tracks failed him.

Secrets were eventually exchanged. Heroin was delivered to a post office box. The use of a late night cell phone was bartered.

Everything in prison can be bought. Kane knows how to play the game. Over a dozen years in lockup has given him an expertise at manipulation.

“You’ve got ten minutes,” Jenkins says, slipping the phone into the prisoner’s large paw. “This time I need two hundred and the smack delivered to my PO Box no later than next Wednesday.”

Kane wants to reach over and wring the skinny little bastard’s neck. Who does he think he is, trying to extort money from him?

He swallows his anger and nods, sealing the deal. This isn’t the time to try to negotiate anything. His release, planned for years, is in jeopardy. Nothing can stand in the way of him getting out of the fucking shit hole.

Five minutes later, Kane has his connection on the line. “There’s something I need from you. The shrink needs a little convincing.”

The voice he hears is all business. “Tell me what it is and I’ll see that you get it.”

After his demands are agreed to, Kane lowers his voice. His dark eyes reflect the moonlight from the window above his bed. He picks up the exercise ball from the physical therapy unit and squeezes it so hard that it’s flattened as he speaks. “Just tell me one thing. Is Jack Bautista dead?”

Chapter Four

Two uneventful days after my run-in with Baker and Kennedy, I was beginning to think the talk of an internal affairs investigation was just that—talk. There was no word from IAD and the Dragnet twins were invisible.

The RHD detectives had probably caught a new case and moved on. A two-week-old prostitution murder likely was low on their pecking order, unless they happened to collar the cop wanted for the crime.

Bautista was also off the radar, lying low, maybe hoping something would turn up to clear him. If that was the case, it was wishful thinking. The evidence against him was solid and to my knowledge no other leads had been developed.

On my way to my brother Robin's hair salon that evening I ran into Natalie preparing for a sale at the appliance store. I made an impulsive decision to put my snoop sister on the case. I knew I could trust Natalie, despite her youthful enthusiasm over all things involving law enforcement.

"Let's have a cuppa on the veranda," Natalie suggested, referring to a small enclosed patio in the alleyway behind the store. We pulled up chairs. Natalie poured. I asked why Clyde wasn't at the store.

"Old boy took a nap and woke up with a morning glory. He was a little out of breath when we finished. He'll need a couple a hours to recover."

Natalie was probably referring to some kind of bedroom calisthenics. I moved on before she gave me the details, telling her I wanted her help on the Bautista case.

"I'll be your secret Dibble," she offered clapping her hands. "You wanna swear me in; give me a badge and a gun?"

Natalie Bump with a gun? The thought scared the hell out of me. "That won't be necessary, but I do need you to keep this to yourself. You can't even tell Clyde. I don't want anyone knowing we're looking into things."

"My lips are sealed tighter than a virgin's muff. I'm sworn to silence. Now tell me what kinda snoopin' you want me to do. I could go undercover if you'd like. I've got this red wig and a push-up bra. I could..."

"No disguises, for now. As I mentioned before, Jack Bautista is wanted for the murder of a prostitute, Cassie Reynolds. Before she was killed, Cassie told Jack that she had information about her father, John Carmichael, who disappeared almost thirty years ago. I need you to research Carmichael. Find out anything you can about his old friends, former business dealings..."

"I'll dig for the dirt."

I handed her a slip of paper with Carmichael's full name and birth date. "He was last seen in Santa Monica on September 16th, 1984."

Natalie tucked the note in her bra. "That's positively prehistoric, but you can count on me to ride the radish till the dog barks."

Huh? I didn't ask.

The evening had turned warm as I drove with Bernie to Robin's salon, thanks to the Santa Ana winds that blew ozone offshore, heated the city, and sometimes tried to burn it down.

Before running into Natalie I'd spent half an hour trying on outfits until I'd settled on a blue Lacoste butterfly dress and brown ankle-strap sandals. I had no particular reason to dress up. But, who needs a reason?

I parked Olive in front of Sinclair's, a trendy salon near Melrose and La Brea owned by one of Robin's best friends. A green door with the establishment's name in white neon lettering opened to a long corridor that ended at the modern parlor and day spa.

As I entered the reception area something heavenly hit me that was reminiscent of lavender and cinnamon. It was after hours and there was no one around so I rapped on the closed interior door. A bald Jennifer Lopez answered.

Jennifer, the stage persona of Barry Sinclair and owner of the salon, met me and Bernie with open arms. "Kate dearest, you are so scrumptious I'm tempted to turn in my evening dress, put on a pair of Levis, and try walking like Channing Tatum."

Barry did a pirouette, modeling the sequined gown. Bernie turned around in a full circle and whined, maybe giving tacit approval to the performance.

"You will be absolutely stunning, Jennifer," I said, "Just as soon as you grow some hair."

Seconds later Beyoncé, Cher, and Lady Gaga all appeared from the back room in varied states of semi-dress. The male hairdressers surrounded me, hair and make-up a work in progress. I got a once-over and critique of my outfit. It was generally positive.

Only Robin, the typical brother, was a bit critical. "Love the dress, but those sandals... Let's just say, they're a bit too earthy. Looks like you're having a shoe drought. Next time, I'd consider a pair of Manolos with spiked heels."

"Just as soon as I win the lottery," I said. My brother was wearing a pair of

dark stockings and a red D-cup bustier. A top-hat, crowned by something vaguely reminiscent of an antennae, completed the Gaga-on-steroids ensemble.

Robin's partner, Clark, wore Givenchy. He looked up at me while running a comb through his black wig. "Just ignore him, Kate. You look divine. He studied me for a moment and then said, "But next time why not try a retro-sixties vibe?" Cher's trademark hair flip and pouty lip routine followed.

"I'll bet Sonny is around here somewhere," I said.

"Get real," Tyler Palmer said, coming out of the back room dressed like Beyoncé. He slapped a palm against his ample derriere. "I'm a single lady."

"You're simply stunning," I said to Tyler. "But I'm not in the market for a single lady."

I soon came to realize that I'd stumbled on a dress rehearsal of The Divas. My brother and his friends had part-time gigs as the singing group at local nightclubs.

Robin clapped his hands together. "Let's finish the hair and make-up, ladies. I'll give my sis a trim and comb-out and then we'll rehearse."

After my brother's friends made a noisy retreat to the rear of the salon, I let Bernie off his leash and took a seat in Robin's chair. My brother can sometimes work hair magic, but my brown do has a mind of its own, and runs from frizzy, to electric, to generally unmanageable. Thanks Mom.

As he shampooed my hair, Robin must have read my anxiety. "You seem a little down, Sis. Man troubles?"

"All troubles begin with men." I gave him a brief run-down of my week as Bernie eyeballed the other men sashaying at the back of the salon.

"Maybe it's time you began circulating. Stop replaying the reruns of Doug's performance, and start dating again."

"I only saw the video once and it was enough to last me a lifetime." Robin had his scissors out. I told him, "Not too much. I don't know what I'd do without my frizzies."

My brother put one hand on his hip and did a mid-air scissor clip with the other. "Do I tell you how to shoot your gun?"

"Point taken."

"Maybe we should try a Brazilian Blowout one of these days."

"Fraid I'm still recuperating from the blow-out to my credit." I rolled my shoulders, trying to toss off the day's stress. "Guess I'm still in recovery mode. The last year's been an emotional and financial roller coaster."

"Anything I can do to help?"

“I’m getting by. Figure as long as I don’t have to move in with Mom, I’m doing okay.”

“Thank God for small favors. Maybe you do need someone new in your life. Nothing mends a broken heart faster than a love transplant.”

“Don’t suppose you have anyone in mind?”

“Remember Sara Johnson? You met her at the salon’s grand opening last year. She owns that little boutique over on Beverly.”

“Love that place, but I don’t think Sara’s my type.”

He chuckled as he rinsed my hair. “Sara’s recently divorced. I did her hair last week and she told me something about starting a dating group. Why don’t I have her call you?”

Images of George Clooney on my doorstep ran through my mind before he morphed into Danny DeVito. “Let me think it over.” I caught Robin moving in on my bangs again. “Enough!” I yelled.

He surrendered and got out the blow dryer.

“How are things with Clark?” I asked. “You two seem to be hitting it off well.”

I could see my brother’s blue eyes soften in the mirror. “It’s going so well we’re thinking about making an announcement—we’re planning to get married next spring.”

“Really?” I noticed Robin’s eyes beginning to mist. “That’s terrific. I’m so happy for you.”

“We’re just so right for each other. Clark thinks it’s because I’ve supported him with his recovery. He’s been drug-free for almost a year now.” His voice lowered. “Do you think Mom and Amanda would attend the ceremony?”

Our sister, Amanda, routinely disapproved of all things my brother and I had ever done, especially Robin’s decision to come out three years ago.

Despite my misgivings, I said, “I’ll have lunch with them and ask.” There’s nothing I won’t do for my brother. There was a tear in Robin’s eye as he thanked me.

After some conditioner and a blow dry, my hair had gone from a bird’s nest to something that was still a few strands short of fabulous. But I was happy with the result.

Clark walked up behind me and removed his black wig. Robin’s partner was handsome with deep blue eyes and thick brown hair that seemed permanently tousled in a way that most women would die for. I might even consider homicide for that hair.

Clark apparently had overheard our conversation. “Your brother and I thought we should *Cher* a little of our joy with the rest of the family.”

I groaned. “Should be quite the ceremony if you two dress like this.”

Clark grabbed his wig, tossed it half way on and put his arm around Robin. “I got you, babe.”

Robin laughed. “Maybe you should warn Mom and Sis that the ceremony could be unforgettable.”

“Speaking of ceremonies,” Clark interjected, “did you tell Kate about the premiere?”

Robin shook his head. Clark went on, “Your brother and I just happen to be attending the world premiere of the new Wolf Donovan film, *Tidal Wave*, tomorrow night at Grauman’s.”

Despite my delusion of always appearing cool, my jaw fell. “Wolf Donovan. How did you pull that off?”

Clark tossed a hand through the wig. Cher surfaced. “I just happen to have a few connections to the Oscar award winner.”

“Award winning fat ass is more like it,” Robin said. “Guy hasn’t made a decent film in ten years.”

Clark scoffed. “Sometimes your brother can be such a negative ninny. Donovan is still one of the most popular actors in Hollywood, besides being rich and famous.”

“I saw him on the TV show *Hollywood Confidential* a few weeks ago,” I said. “The interviewer asked him if he was planning on making a comeback. Donovan got angry, said he’d never gone away. He cursed and stormed off the set.”

“Can you say egomaniac?” Robin said. “From what I hear he’s got such an over- the-top lifestyle he’ll take any role that comes his way for the right payday. His estate is supposed to be worth over thirty million.”

“So how’d you two get the invite?”

Clark’s beautiful blue eyes glowed. “I met Donovan’s son, Bon Bon, at Club Plum last week. He called me later, said he reserved us seats at the premiere. Also invited us to the after-party at his father’s estate.”

Robin frowned. “Bon Bon was probably looking at Clark like he should be on the dessert menu.”

Clark tossed his fingers through the wig. “Can I help it if I’m pretty?”

“It’s getting deep in here,” I said. Then I spoke in a more serious tone, “Robin’s just being protective.”

Clark shrugged. “Maybe Bon Bon’s attracted to my intellectual prowess.”

Robin stowed his supplies. “From what I hear, Bon Bon is even more of a party animal than his father was in his younger days.”

I made eye contact with my brother. “You two be careful of the drugs. I’ve heard anything goes with Donovan.” I then turned to Clark. “Bon Bon—an interesting choice of names.”

“Word has it that Bon Bon’s sexual appetite involves chocolate.”

I held up a hand. “I don’t think I want to know. Got a visual of my landlord and his wife recently that I’m still trying to forget.”

Clark couldn’t resist. “I’ve heard they call Bon Bon the chocolate rocket. Dips the old fuselage in fudge before blasting off.”

“Pleassssse!” I shook my head as Clark retreated.

I studied myself in the mirror, deciding the cut framed my face better. Maybe I should splurge for the blow-out. I wrote Robin a check. My heart said yes. My bank account said no way in hell.

As I was saying my goodbyes, I realized that Bernie wasn’t in the room. I called out. My big dog came trotting from the back of the salon with Tyler and Barry.

My jaw dropped and I blurted out, “What have you done to my dog?” My tough-as-nails, sexually assertive canine partner was wearing a giant pink bow.

“We’re doing a take-off on that old TV show—calling it, *Queer Eye for the Canine Guy*,” Tyler explained with a smile.

“A vast improvement over that brown collar with the badge attached to it,” Barry added, waving his hand in the air.

I tethered Bernie and promptly removed the bow. “It’ll take more than a wardrobe malfunction to turn Mr. Love-on-a-leash around.”

As I gathered my purse, Robin said, “The Divas are performing at Club SUK Thursday night. We’ll leave a ticket at the door for you.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” I kissed him on the cheek just before Bernie yanked me out the door. Maybe he was worried about getting a blow dry and pedicure.

I was out on the sidewalk heading for my car when I looked up and saw the mess. Olive’s rear passenger side window was broken; shattered glass everywhere. Upon closer examination, I was convinced that nothing was taken, but everything had been tossed.

I turned to Bernie who was whining softly and said, “My car? Really?”

I knew it would be a waste of time to call it in, so I cleaned up the mess and then secured my partner in the backseat. I was thinking maybe the break-in was an attempt at identity theft. It’s a big problem everywhere.

But as I pulled away from the curb something else occurred to me. Could what happened have some connection to Jack Bautista?

Chapter Five

“Charlie, cuff his other wrist!” I yelled.

I was spinning around Mayagi’s Restaurant like something out of a carnival nightmare, riding on the back of a wanted felon named Harold Wiener. Yes, that’s Harold, as in Harry. And that’s Wiener, as in... You get the picture.

All the local cops know Harry Wiener. He’s a tweaker. They usually address the meth-head formally, referring to him as, Mr. Wiener. Probably a futile attempt to offer a shred of dignity where there wasn’t any.

Bernie had his teeth clamped onto Mr. Wiener’s red plaid shirt. Charlie had managed to cuff only one of the felon’s wrists before we started doing the piggy-back waltz.

“He’s spinning like a damn top,” Charlie said. “Can’t get the other arm.”

I yelled at our suspect, “Don’t make this worse than it already is.”

Maybe the name Harry Wiener predestines you to a life of crime. Why not Harvey? Harvey Wiener you might be able to live with, but Harry? How could you survive with a name like that? What were his parents thinking?

Charlie dove for the cuffs and came up short again. “He’s too fast, Kate.” My partner was out of shape, trying to catch his breath. Frustration surfaced. “Maybe I should just shoot him.”

“Fass! Fass!” I yelled at Bernie, the German command for *attack*. Maybe I should have learned the foreign command for, “Bite the Wiener.” My dog couldn’t get a grip on anything other than Mr. Wiener’s baggy shirt. Why was it so hard to bite a Wiener?

The wanted felon bounced across the nearly empty restaurant that had just opened for the day. Tables were tossed, as the woman, dog, and Wiener pirouette continued.

Charlie finally gave up on the handcuff dive and took a more direct approach. His head lowered and my partner ran full force into the spinning felon. A bull run.

“UUGGGGGHHHH!” Mr. Wiener bellowed like he’d been mortally wounded.

The head butt was a direct hit on Mr. Wiener’s most sensitive anatomical feature. My partner later gave the tactical maneuver a name: giving head to a Wiener.

Our suspect began to gyrate, the three of us doing a sushi samba across the restaurant known for the world’s largest sushi bar. The samba ended with a thud

as we did a fish flop into the buffet. The slime-fest arrest ended as Charlie slapped the cuffs on Mr. Wiener's other wrist.

I called Bernie off and came out of the fish pile, spitting rice and breathing fire. "You ripped my best pair of London Jeans, you A-hole!"

Charlie lifted Mr. Wiener to his feet. The prisoner looked at me and spat, "You were on my back, bitch." He did a pelvic thrust, his fishy trousers riding low on his waist. "Next time you want a little Wiener action, just ask. We can get a room."

"Like anyone would ever be that desperate."

Charlie was at my side, one hand on Mr. Wiener and the other holding me back. Mr. Wiener responded by making an obscene gesture with his tongue.

"Save it for the next sushi buffet," I said, fuming.

"Come on," Charlie said, gasping for air and steering the suspect toward his car.

I was still fumbling with the ripped seam in my jeans as the car door shut on the felon.

"I cashed in my uniform allowance for these jeans," I said to Charlie, motioning to the mushy mess covering me. "I'll have to toss them out."

Charlie was still in recovery mode, grabbing knees and gulping air. He had no sympathy, but offered a new perspective: "More in style... My kid's got a pair... ripped up like that. Cost me a hundred bucks."

"These cost me more than that." I glanced down and noticed a stain on my blue poplin blouse. "Dammit! Why don't I just give it up and wear a pair of mechanics overalls?"

Bernie and I followed Charlie in Olive as he drove our suspect to the station. The afternoon was cooler than the day before, but the air was humid. Not the best conditions for wearing sushi bar cologne.

Olive was doing her usual sputter and lurch as I parked next to Charlie. He already had the prisoner out of the car.

Harold Wiener laughed as my car belched out a final protest and rattled to a stop. "Nice set of wheels." I realized it was possible for a Wiener to have a shit-eating grin.

As we walked into the station, our arrestee's demeanor abruptly changed. Laughter dissolved into tears and the wanted felon began sobbing hysterically. Charlie looked at me, his brow knitting. "What the hell?"

I shrugged. "Maybe it's some kind of weird Wiener depression."

The blubbing continued. Harold Wiener was bawling like a wet baby as we

walked him into the station. The usual noise and banter in the squad room fell silent. All eyes turned toward us as we moved through the detective bureau, a fish-soaked, ripped-up, tail-wagging, Wiener-sobbing quartet of misery.

The chuckles began. Polite, at first. Then the laughter fed on itself like a shark at a sushi bar. Dispatch must have tipped everyone off about the morning's events.

Pete Hailey, a ruddy, fast-talking detective who didn't know when to shut up, motioned to our wailing prisoner. "Something's fishy here. I heard you guys spent the afternoon riding the baloney pony."

Charlie pushed past the detective as Carl Winters chimed in, "Looks to me like a banana followed by a couple of nuts." The detective laughed at his own joke. Our prisoner wailed louder.

"Clever," I said over the laughter and blubbing. "I hear Jimmy Kimmel needs a writer."

Jessica Barlow joined the fray. She cocked her head and smiled in a too perky way that made me want to bludgeon her. "Hey everybody, make way for the station's new unit. It's called the pecker patrol."

I swung an imaginary axe. Jessica screeched. Her eyes bugged out and her tongue fell out of her mouth. The detective's perfectly coiffed head rolled across the station floor.

I hate Jessica Barlow. I went to high school with the serpent. She decided to slither into my life after graduation and become a cop. My nemesis goes out of her way to try proving herself better and smarter than me. Jessica also has another problem—she sheds her skin every couple of weeks. Versace has a clothing line for serpents.

I cut my eyes to the still sobbing Harold Wiener. "Quiet."

Shock. Our prisoner stopped crying. The station fell silent.

I turned and locked eyes with the serpent. "Jessica, why don't you cut us some slack? Take a moment, reflect on your life, and go slash your wrists in the break room?"

The serpent turned, gave the room a death stare, and slithered away.

The laughter returned as the officers watched a Wiener, a dog, and two fish-soaked cops saunter toward the booking area. I sighed. Why hadn't I chosen a respectable career, like working for the sewer department?

Charlie and I pushed our blithering suspect into a holding cell.

"I wanna make a deal," Mr. Wiener squealed through his tears.

I was at the end of my rope. "I'll make you a deal. Rot in jail."

The felon dipped his head, wiping snot on his shirt, and tried to control his sobbing. “They pick on me in jail and the food is rotten.”

Charlie couldn’t take any more, either. “Gee, maybe that’s why they call it a jail.”

“I heard they’ve got a Harry Wiener wing,” I added. “Comes with its own barber—a guy named Bubba the Love Machine.”

More Wiener tears. His voice lowered. “The last time I got arrested I was molested.” I ushered our prisoner into the holding cell as he made a final plea. “I’m willing to give up a drug dealer—a big operator if you cut me a break. Pleassssseeee. At least have them put me in PC.”

Mr. Wiener had been in jail enough times to know that protective custody would keep him out of the general population of inmates, possibly garner him some additional favors.

I tossed the key to the booking officer. “Put him in PC,” I said. “The Preferred Cock section.”

Never mess with a girl in a ruined outfit.

I showered and put on the t-shirt and pair of sweats I usually wear to the shooting range. I found Charlie and Bernie back in the squad room. My partner had worked up an appetite during the morning arrest and was scarfing down a slice of leftover pizza.

“Want some?” Charlie popped open a low calorie drink and offered up the remaining pizza slice.

I grimaced. “Pepperoni chased by a strawberry Slim Quick?”

“Evens out the calories.” He rubbed his stomach. “Lost two pounds in the past week.”

I declined the offer of food and went to work on the Harold Wiener booking paperwork. Charlie ate and studied the sports section of the *Times*.

“Talked to Dorothy Velasquez a few minutes ago,” Charlie said, without looking up. “Drake is still pretty worked up.”

“So am I.”

“She thinks Drake is out for revenge. He hates Bautista.”

“Doesn’t surprise me.”

He went on with his mouth full, “Drake was getting some award from the Community Advisory Board a few years back and Jack showed up drunk. The captain was being honored for arresting a rapist on the west side.” My partner swigged his Slim Quick. “As Drake was accepting the award, Jack stood up and said Barry Peterson was the guy they should be honoring. He’s the one who

broke the case and Drake took the credit.”

“No surprise.” I looked up from my report. “I’m going to check into the Cassie Reynolds case. See what I can turn up in my spare time.”

Charlie put down his paper; gave me the daddy death stare. I was still angry about him talking to Bautista. I cut his protest off before it started. “Save it. I know you talked to Jack.”

“He called you?”

“Do me a favor. Let me make my own decisions.”

Charlie’s gaze slid back to the *Times*. “Just don’t want to see you in any more trouble.” I tried not to show my annoyance as he went on. “Sources tell me Cassie Reynolds never met her father. Disappeared before she was born.”

“Sources, huh?”

Charlie chugged the last of the diet drink and then massaged his jaw. “Also heard that the records on the case are missing.”

I glanced up from the booking paperwork, my brows lifting. “That’s interesting.”

“Not really. Thirty-year-old case. Records get misplaced. Hollywood Division wasn’t even here back then.”

There was another possibility he didn’t mention. The records could have been purposely destroyed—a cover-up.

My partner’s cell phone rang. His voice softened as he answered it. “I want you to do your homework, honey.” He paused, shook his head. “Okay, I’m not gonna argue, but be home by nine. I should be on time tonight. I’ll make dinner and keep it warm for you.”

Charlie ended the call and looked over at me. “Kid’s sixteen going on twenty-five.” He tossed his cell phone on his desk. “I even bought us both these fancy new idiot phones, thinking it would help with our communication.”

Charlie showed me the latest version of the iPhone, his peace offering to an out of control teenager. I felt sorry for him being a single parent and trying to raise a daughter without any help.

“It’s a difficult age,” I said. “Irma’s a nice enough kid.”

“Wants a tattoo.”

I dragged a hand through my damp hair. So much for Robin’s work.

Charlie continued, “I Win.”

“What?”

“Irma Winkler—I Win. That’s the tattoo she wants.” Charlie went on about his daughter. Whatever their problems, at least Irma had a father who was there for

her, unlike Cassie Reynolds. Her dad had been missing, maybe murdered, for almost thirty years.

My own father had been killed when I was only four years old. I often thought about our relationship; what it would have been like if he'd lived. I was too young when he died to really remember him, but I had the impression that my father was the only stabilizing influence in our family, balancing out my mother's eccentricities. I also harbored illusions, maybe like Cassie, that I'd someday find out who murdered him and bring the killer to justice.

After Charlie finished his Irma rant, I changed the subject. "I wonder if there are any old timers from the force that were around when Cassie Reynolds's father went missing?"

From somewhere behind me I heard laughter. Charlie scratched his head and said, "Before my time."

The laughter grew louder. There was movement toward the windows overlooking the parking lot.

"There is a guy..." Charlie said as we began moving toward the crowd of cops gathering at the windows, "first black cop to work Hollywood. I went to his retirement party a few years back. Took me a week to recover."

Someone at the window said, "He's not gonna be able to keep 'em up."

"Guy's name is Pearl Kramer." Charlie's words drifted away as we reached the window.

I now saw what the commotion was all about. "Oh, my God."

The transportation officers were trying to keep Harold Wiener's pants from slipping down below his waist as he was escorted to the jail transport wagon. They were unsuccessful. To make matters worse, when he'd chosen his ensemble for the day, Mr. Wiener had decided to go commando.

Charlie summed up the scene for all of us, "I guess Harry Wiener came by his name honestly."

Chapter Six

A black Mercedes came within inches of Olive's bumper, engine roaring. I hit the brakes and downshifted into a four wheel skid. We hit a berm, saving us from flying off into a canyon. A one-finger L.A. salute followed and the car was gone, racing around a curve.

Natalie returned the gesture from the passenger seat, yelling, "You're as mad as a bag of ferrets, you moron!" She turned to me. "He nearly killed us."

I exhaled and released the white knuckle grip. "How come there's never a cop around when you need one?"

Bernie had been tossed into the back of Natalie's seat. He seemed none the worse for the experience.

We were on a narrow, winding lane in the Hollywood Hills. Great views if you lived. I had the morning off and we were on our way to see Pearl Kramer. I'd gotten the former detective's address from the city's retirement division.

After recovering from our near accident, we moved on. Bernie sniffed the morning air, his muzzle sticking through Olive's new rear window that, of course, wasn't covered by my insurance policy.

We found Pearl Kramer's residence, a French country estate that crested on a hill. The compound was surrounded by stone walls and sculptured gardens scattered over several acres of land.

"Copper work must earn a pretty penny," Natalie said, as I pressed the gate intercom.

"Yeah, just look at what *I'm* driving."

After announcing ourselves, a baritone voice said, "Please stay to the right, off the main drive. Mr. Kramer's residence is about a quarter mile up the lane."

We followed the directions, stopping in front of a small stone cottage. The bungalow had probably been built for the caretaker of the estate. The little house had a view of the sprawling mansion in the distance.

We were knocking on the front door when an elderly woman with white hair and a flowing silver gown tapped on my shoulder. I turned at the same time Natalie saw the face floating up to us like a ghost.

"Flaming mother of God," Natalie screamed, clutching my arm. Bernie, apparently also surprised, growled.

"Everyone's dead," the woman said.

"Who's dead?" I asked.

"Gable, Lombard, Hepburn." The woman's head lowered. She wept. "Jean

Claude murdered them all.”

“Excuse me.” The calling voice belonged to a man walking from the backyard of the cottage. Late sixties. Tall. Black skin against a full head of silver hair. Eyes like soft leather. He turned to the strange woman. “It’s all right, Olivia. They’re just here to visit.” He motioned to someone coming up the driveway in a golf cart. “Margaret will see that you get back to the house safely.”

The woman’s head bobbed about her neck and shoulders. “But what about Peter? We’ve got to help him.”

The man put his arm around her. “Peter is in God’s hands, Olivia. He’s safe and protected there.”

After the woman was gone, Pearl Kramer introduced himself. He walked us around the cottage to a patio shaded by an ancient oak tree and explained.

“Olivia Wesley Swanson owns these grounds. Her late husband, Peter, was murdered by his brother here in the eighties. Dispute over the family fortune. Maybe you heard about the case.”

“Sorry, before I was born,” I said.

“Wasn’t even a twinkle in the tinkle,” Natalie added.

“Peter Swanson was a well-known philanthropist—entertained many of the old stars of Hollywood at the estate. I helped out on the case. Mrs. Swanson was kind enough to allow me to live here when I retired. I do a little caretaking and security work. The years have taken their toll on her.”

Kramer poured us some iced tea, and set a bowl of water out for Bernie. After taking a seat in one of the wicker chairs, I motioned to the canvas and oil paints set up at the corner of the patio. The faint outline of something had been sketched.

“I see you’re an artist,” I said.

“More of a finder,” Kramer said, settling into a chair across from us. “I wait until an image finds me. Then I try to be true to it. It’s not unlike being a cop in some ways. You wait for a crime to find you and try to be true to the people involved.” Kramer looked across the rolling grounds, maybe reflecting on something.

“As I mentioned when I called,” I said after a beat, “Charlie Winkler thought you might remember something about the disappearance of a man named John Carmichael back in the 1980s.”

Kramer sipped his tea. “Tell me, how is Charlie?”

“Surviving. I worry about his health. Doesn’t eat right. He’s also trying to raise his teenage daughter by himself. A bit of a stress case.”

“Charlie’s a good man. Tries to do right by people.” Kramer took another sip of tea. “John Carmichael was murdered, if you want my opinion. Went missing back in 1984. I was a rookie cop at the time, but as I recall there was some speculation that foul play was involved. I think he had something to do with the movie industry.”

“A wannabe filmmaker,” Natalie chimed in. She turned to me. “Sorry, I’ve been like a horse with a bit since you asked for me help.”

“Our interest in this is confidential, not official,” I told Kramer. I nodded toward my friend. “Natalie’s done a little research.”

“John Carmichael owned a small studio,” Natalie said. “As far as I can determine, he worked on some advertisements for the telly but wanted to eventually make flicks. He made the rent by doing some fighting work.”

“Fighting?”

“You know those big guys that wear undies and prance around.”

I drew a blank.

“You mean wrestling?” Kramer asked.

“That’s it. Throw each other around and scream. It’s mostly actin’ if you want me two cents.”

“All the world’s a stage,” Kramer said.

I had the impression the retired detective already liked Natalie. But who doesn’t?

Natalie went on, “Carmichael was the guy behind the fighters who set up the shows.”

“A promoter,” I said.

“Yes, but strictly small time. I spoke to a lad who knew him back then. Said Carmichael was a lager boy, always looking for a good time. Looks like he musta poked the privates, but there’s no record of a marriage to Cassie’s mother or that he even paid child support.”

“Any idea if her mother’s still alive?” I asked.

Natalie shook her head. “Her birth mum was a lady named Gloria Stallings. I’m doing some more snoopin’, trying to find out if she’s around. Not gettin’ anywhere on the wires.”

“The Internet,” I explained for Kramer’s benefit.

“That’s a good start,” I said. “Thanks Nat.” I turned to Kramer. “So you remember the Carmichael case. I’m surprised.”

“Before I made detective, I made it a point to keep up on things. A guy in my shoes had to prove himself.”

“Charlie told me that I’d be talking to a living legend.”

Kramer waved a hand. “Just a survivor, lucky enough to have gotten a few promotions in between the riots, assassinations, homicides, and the general pillaging and plundering that goes on in society.”

During the next few minutes, Natalie and I were enthralled by the story of Pearl Kramer’s thirty years with the LAPD, how he’d worked his way up from a beat cop in the early eighties to chief of the Hollywood Division Detective Bureau where he retired.

“Lots of history in the city, even before I became a cop,” Pearl said. “Worked with some old-timers who had stories about the Marilyn Monroe suicide, the Watts riots, the Bobby Kennedy assassination, even a guy named Charlie Manson. It was never boring.”

“Blimey,” Natalie said. “I’d like to hear about Marilyn sometime. I heard the president once did the wick dip with the old girl.”

I said to Kramer, “Do you have any idea whatever came of the investigation into John Carmichael’s death?”

Kramer set his drink down. “The detectives working the case closed it a few weeks after his disappearance. I made a point of asking about it and was told to butt out.”

“You think there was some kind of cover up?”

“I think that, without a body, it made it easy to close a case that was only a missing person investigation.” He stroked his chin. “There was also a different standard in those days.”

“You said earlier that you think Carmichael was murdered.”

“Guy disappears under suspicious circumstances. Case gets closed without much of an investigation. Thirty years later his daughter calls a cop, says she knows what happened. She ends up dead. Cop she called gets framed.” The retired detective looked from me to Natalie. “What do you ladies think?”

Natalie clapped her hands. “I think we’ve gotta mega-mystery.”

Kramer somehow knew all about our case. “You must have talked to Charlie.”

He exposed a gap in his front teeth when he smiled. “Jack. He called a few minutes after you did. Said he doesn’t want you involved.”

“Jack and Charlie are a royal pain.” I removed a photograph from my purse and handed it to Kramer. “This isn’t just about Jack Bautista, Mr. Kramer.”

“Pearl,” he said, taking the photograph of Cassie Reynolds.

“It’s from one of those websites that offers classmate photographs. It was taken during Cassie’s senior year in high school.”

Natalie stood up and examined the photograph over Pearl's shoulder. There was something sad and haunting in the image. Cassie's smile seemed posed, in the manner of a child who turns up her lips without the smile ever reaching her eyes.

"It's about what you told us earlier," I said. "Sometimes a crime finds you and you try to be true to the people involved."

Pearl handed back the photograph. "Cassie Reynolds was a beautiful young girl." He checked his watch. "Afraid I have to be somewhere twenty minutes ago."

We followed him back to my car. After I let Bernie into the backseat, Pearl opened the doors for us. "I'll call you tomorrow, Detective."

He turned to Natalie who was still beaming with enthusiasm. "This crime has waited thirty years to find all of us. Now, it's our turn to be true to the people left behind."

"Brilliant," Natalie said. "I'm ready to go Miss Marple on the maggot who murdered Cassie Reynolds."

Chapter Seven

Nathan Kane sits in a chair across from the psychiatrist. The blue-and-white office furnishings compliment the red border on the wall in Marsha Wentworth's office.

It looks like the state hired an interior decorator. Everything matches. Maybe he's supposed to appreciate the patriotic décor, join the fucking army when he gets out and fight for the country that locked him up.

Wentworth has been careful. No photographs of her husband or daughter are on the shelves. There isn't anything that reveals a hobby or interest on her desk. Nothing shows that the psychiatrist has a life outside the prison walls. Kane knows that isn't true. He's seen her diamond ring, knows she's married and has a daughter.

It's been forty-eight hours since he last received an update on Jack Bautista. The wanted detective is still on the run. If Cassie Reynolds talked to the cop, things could begin to unravel. When he gets out of prison, there will be no choice but to take matters into his own hands—if the detective is still alive.

There's also the matter of the female cop who's been interfering. He knows Bautista called her. Sexton has to be watched closely; kept out of the way.

There's no way he's going to let a thirty-year-old secret put his freedom in jeopardy. But first there's another issue on his agenda.

Kane shifts in his chair. The psychiatrist looks up, observing his symptoms: constant impaired swallowing, choking on excess saliva, uncontrolled sweating, tremors in his hands and feet. There's also his soft whispery voice that sometimes answers her questions in a confused, incoherent manner.

After observing twenty minutes of the charade, Dr. Wentworth runs a hand through her long brown hair and shakes her head.

"I'm afraid I'm just not convinced, Mr. Kane." She pauses and then turns a page in the thick file next to his medical records. "And there's also the matter of your criminal record. The law requires that I balance the risk of your release against your medical incapacitation." She closes the file. "It isn't your adult record that bothers me so much, although your crime was serious and violent. It's your delinquency record as a child that I'm concerned about."

Kane almost laughs out loud. He's in his late fifties and the shrink is concerned about something that happened when he was a kid? How much do they pay these idiots?

"When you were thirteen," Wentworth continues, "your parents were killed by

an intruder. You went to live with your aunt and uncle. They had a dog.”

Something inside the convicted killer stirs—a memory almost forgotten. He suppresses a smile.

“According to the reports, you were involved in some cruelty resulting in the dog’s death.”

Fucking animal lover. That’s all he needs.

“Your aunt and uncle informed the police that they came home one evening and found that their golden retriever’s fur had been shaved off.”

The suggestion of a smile forms on the patient’s lips. His dark features are dim, his breath coming in short hard gasps as the memory surfaces.

“When they found the dog, they realized that you had also removed the animal’s skin.” The psychiatrist pitches forward, tries to make eye contact. “You skinned the dog while he was alive and then removed his sexual organs.”

Kane’s eyes sweep over her, glimpsing the horror in her eyes.

“That act was followed by several others over the years, just as inhumane and deviant.”

He considers this with detached amusement, remembering what had begun with animals until he graduated to neighborhood kids and a couple of strangers. He feels himself getting hard.

“It’s been my experience, Mr. Kane, that acts involving sexual violence are never easily treated. They require years of professional help. Your files show that you received only minimal interventions and incarceration for your actions.”

The psychiatrist studies him again. “In my professional opinion, given your history, you may still be a threat to the community if you are not incarcerated. I’m also not convinced your medical symptoms are consistent with a severe enough incapacitation to merit release. I’m going to recommend your parole be denied.”

What has been only a hint of a smile widens. It begins to spread to Kane’s dark features. His granite eyes blink, the pupils narrowing as his gaze comes up to hers. When he speaks, his husky, labored voice is barely audible.

“In the drawer...behind you.”

The psychiatrist is startled by his sudden statement. “I’m afraid I don’t understand?”

He loves the confusion, the dawning realization that she’s been right about him. Would it later be any consolation? Probably not.

Kane raises his voice a notch, the heavy, labored tone that he’s practiced for months now clearing. “In the cabinet, Dr. Wentworth. Bottom drawer on the

right.”

He sees the anxiety rising behind her eyes. Will she go for the panic alarm around her neck? No. He sees that she has the need to know.

The psychiatrist swivels in her chair and opens the filing cabinet. A horrified gasp follows as she pushes her chair away and moves her hand up to set off the alarm.

It's too late.

“Finally,” Kane says, rising and grabbing her arm, twisting it away from the alarm button. “I think we’re beginning to make some progress, Doctor.”

Behind the attractive psychiatrist, the drawer in the blue lacquered filing cabinet is still open. Kane knows she recognizes the dress and lacy white panties. The good doctor probably made the purchases as part of her daughter’s school clothes wardrobe.

Dr. Wentworth looks into her patient’s eyes as he pins her to the wall, her voice now shrill and pleading, “Tell me what you want. I’ll do anything.”

He takes the panic alarm from around her neck and places it on the desk. He pulls her over to the cabinet, reaches down and removes the child’s clothing, turning the blue-and-white checkered dress over.

The killer puts a hand up, covering Marsha Wentworth’s mouth and stifling a scream. Her daughter’s dress is covered with blood.

Chapter Eight

The next day I took a late morning break and stopped by the Records and Identification Bureau. My mouth gaped open when Wilma Bibby came to the counter.

“What happened to your hair, Wilma?” Behind her there was a bureaucratic buzz, phones rang and files were being sifted and sorted.

The middle-aged records clerk said, “I finally got the nerve to ask George over for dinner.” Her hair was a mess. No contacts. Glasses again framed dull gray eyes. “He turned me down.” She moved a stack of files on her desk from one place to another with no apparent purpose.

I reached across the counter, touching Wilma’s shoulder. Her flower print dress was cut all wrong for her, did nothing to hide her gently rounded figure.

Three weeks earlier, a makeover, a Channel black jacket dress, and an afternoon at Sinclair’s Salon had given Wilma a confidence that was now shattered. I wanted to bust George’s balls.

“He’s just one man, Wilma. Maybe he’s already got a girlfriend. Or a boyfriend.”

Wilma shook her head. Her eyes lowered, then her voice. “I heard through the grapevine that he’s single and looking—just not for me.”

I did an eye roll and pushed up the sleeves of my fitted pink cardigan sweater. “Maybe the grapevine is wrong. Maybe he *is* gay.” My voice lowered, just above Wilma’s earlier whisper. “Maybe Georgie boy just missed out on terrific food, wonderful conversation, and great sex.”

Wilma giggled, cut her eyes to the clerks working beside her. She put a finger to her lips. “I don’t even remember what sex is.”

I scratched my head, trying to dredge up a memory. “I’ve heard it involves two or more people getting naked. They sometimes end up in bed, although it can happen in other locations.” My voice dropped another notch. “I’ve even been told there can be something called foreplay involved, although I’ve never personally encountered it.”

“Stop it.” Wilma chuckled, gesturing to the other clerks again.

“Then there’s the act itself. If it’s done right, I’ve heard it can be like being pushed over Niagara Falls in a barrel with someone you try to imagine is Brad Pitt.”

“Kate!”

“Okay, I’ll stop. But I’m going to make you another hair appointment.” I

leaned forward. “Wilma, you just lost round one. Time to come out swinging.”

I pointed to the endless rows of filing cabinets and boxes behind her. “Don’t suppose you had any luck with the Carmichael records I called about.”

She shook her head. “The file would be in pre-imaging so it takes a hand search, especially for something that old.” She must have seen my blank expression. “The department is digitally storing the archived records. It should eventually save us a lot of space. Everything from the mid-nineties forward has been converted to the computerized storage system. All the records prior to that time are still in a hard copy format.”

The computer project probably meant job security for Wilma, but it wasn’t helping me out. “Aren’t the files organized by year? The file I’m looking for would include an initial Missing Persons Report from September 1984 and follow-up reports.”

“I’m still searching. The older records are a mess. Sometimes the files from different investigations and different years have been merged. So far, the records from 1984 haven’t turned up anything on your case, but I haven’t given up. I’ve got a couple of other clerks also checking.”

There was no way I could let Baker and Kennedy, or for that matter IAD, get wind of my inquiry.

“I’d prefer that you do the search on your own. This is on the down low.” She nodded. “And call me right away if anything turns up.” Pushing away from the counter, I added, “I’ll call you later about that hair appointment.”

It was early afternoon as I drove back to Hollywood Station. Olive’s wipers, a metronome on the windshield, announced that October’s heat had faded into the fog of fall. I encountered drizzle and wet pavement as I parked.

Bernie and I found Charlie in the squad room eating a burrito while finishing up reports on the morning arrests. He motioned to the burrito plate he’d ordered for me as I settled in. A familiar voice killed my appetite.

A hello growled in the corridor. I turned and saw Marvin Drake with Jessica Barlow. She followed behind, making small talk with the captain. They left the station, walking through the parking lot together. What was the captain of Wilshire Division doing in my territory?

“If Drake suddenly stops, Jessica would have to be surgically removed from the captain’s anus,” I said to Charlie.

“Not a pretty picture.”

“Might explain her shit-eating grin.”

“Woman’s a piranha in a push-up bra.”

“Didn’t think you noticed.”

“Guy can’t help seeing what’s in front of him.”

Charlie tossed his paper plate in the trash can. The radio was playing, the station slightly off dial. Frank Sinatra did a fuzzy version of “Stardust.” Maybe my partner had never heard of iPods? Then I remembered he did have an iPhone.

“Drake was meeting with Jankowitz,” Charlie said, sucking a tooth. “Probably letting him know one of his officers is under investigation.”

I ran a fork through the rice on my burrito plate. My working relationship with Captain Jankowitz was probably history. Jank was a good guy, one of the few. He’d been supervising the unit while we waited for a promotion. A couple of more bites and I pushed the plate over to Charlie.

“Pearl Kramer agreed to help out,” I said quietly.

His mouth-loader, a fork full of cheese and beans, stopped in midair. Daddy death said, “Don’t suppose I can talk you out of this?”

“No, and by the way, thanks for talking to Bautista. He called Kramer.”

“Didn’t think it would do any harm to let him know what’s happening.”

The mouth-loader dumped. Charlie ran a hand across his day-old stubble. It looked like he was wearing the same shirt he’d changed into after the Harry Wiener shuffle a couple of days ago.

“You need to think this through again, Kate. You know as well as I do the kind of shit you’re gonna be in if IAD finds out.”

“There’s only one kind of shit, Charlie. The kind that stinks until you wash it off.” I blotted my lips with a paper napkin. “I can’t stand by and let an innocent cop be set up.”

More burrito and a head shake, then a pink message slip came across the desk. “Kramer called for you an hour ago. He wants you to meet him at the Marquee Manor at nine tonight.” He set his fork down, looked me in the eyes and said, “Do me a favor and be careful.”

I put the message in my purse. “Save your worrying for your teenage daughter, Charlie. I’m all grown up, remember?”

It was just after nine when Natalie and I pulled to the curb a block up from the Marquee Manor. Mom gave me a Hollywood history book for Christmas once, so I knew that the hotel was built in the former strawberry fields of West

Hollywood in the late twenties. It housed east coast stars who worked under contract on the first talkies of the era.

The stars and talent agents were long gone. Another kind of contract was now being negotiated at the Manor.

Pearl got out of his Forerunner and greeted us, commenting on Natalie's attire.

"Thought I should try to fit in," Natalie offered. "Wouldn't wanna look like a radish in a meat market."

I'd done a pre-Manor lecture with Natalie, ending in, "We're only going to the hotel to ask a few questions."

It fell on deaf ears. My youthful snoop sister was wearing an ultra-tight semi-transparent blouse tied at the midriff, a chartreuse micro-mini skirt, and a pair of knee-high Pajar boots. Her clothes and makeup screamed, *Fuck Me*. No chance this girl would be mistaken for a vegetable.

As I was trying to make sure Bernie was comfortable in Olive, he bolted. Fur and lust ran down the street and hopped over a fence. I gave chase and found my hairy partner in a backyard doing a Jessica Barlow-Marvin Drake nose bob with a border collie. Like a parent with an out of control teenager, I marched him back to the car. After a proper scolding, I put him in the backseat and locked the door.

"He's hornier than a dog with two dicks," Natalie said.

"Must come with the territory," I said, referencing the parade of johns and working girls.

Pearl lifted his gaze up the street to the dimly lit gray-and-brown Spanish colonial hotel. "Worked this area with vice back in the nineties. The place hasn't changed much from what I understand. Some of the rooms still rent by the hour."

"Do you think the killer's here?" Natalie asked. "Maybe I shoulda brought Clyde's pistol. I shot it once by accident, almost parted Clyde's hair. Blew out a window."

Pearl shook his head. "I don't think we'll find any killers tonight." He smiled at me. All I could do was shrug.

"According to what Bautista told you," Pearl said to me, "we know Cassie Reynolds was working for a pimp named Maurice Simpson. From what I've learned, Simpson and his girls spend time here as business warrants. If his girls are working out of the Manor, we can ask them about Cassie."

We walked up the street, stopping about thirty yards from the hotel. The walkway leading to the manor was bordered by palms and dead grass. Several ducks floated in a pond near the entrance.

Pearl removed his overcoat and said, “A couple of Simpson’s girls are meeting us in room 213. Give me ten minutes, then come on up.”

We tried to keep our distance as the skin parade circled the hotel. I’d tossed on a pair of old jeans and a sweater before leaving home, a concession to the cool, foggy evening. Natalie, on the other hand, stuck out like a red flag at a bullfight.

In no time, a matador rolled up; his window came down. He asked for something other than a bull. Natalie, mustered all her tact and said, “Take your limp pecker over to the pond and hump a duck.”

Another customer followed. I held Natalie back and walked up to his open window with my badge. “Drive yourself over to the Hollywood Station and turn yourself in to the desk sergeant for soliciting prostitution from an undercover cop.”

Our john was in his early thirties, well-dressed. His voice cracked, “What is this, some kind of setup?”

“You’re on the LAPD sex cam.” I pointed to a white van parked up the street. “The camera is in the van over at the curb. They’ve got everything on video, including your license number. An undercover officer will follow you to the station.”

He pulled away from the curb and made a U-turn, slowing down as he passed the white van.

“Maybe we could do one of those reality TV shows,” Natalie suggested as we walked into the hotel lobby. “Call it, Peek-a-boo-Pecker.”

Figuring enough time had gone by, we moved up a stairway that encircled the mezzanine, and had two more offers before we got to room 213.

The room Pearl rented was small and furnished with the latest in Goodwill castoffs. A single table, laminated dark mahogany, held a lamp that cast a dull glow across the room. The shades were drawn beneath dirty blue tie-back curtains. The bed was a Spartan affair with a dark-brown cover. No headboard. If it had one there would have been a two-word advertising slogan: *Jiffy Fuck*.

Pearl was in a chair across from two women who were in pre-attack mode. He offered money for information. As it turned out, information was harder to come by than sex. The older of the two women, heavysset, black, and in gold spandex, came off the bed.

“Mo,” Pearl said by way of introduction just before the prostitute turned on the retired detective.

“I knew this was some kinda bullshit setup the minute I laid eyes on you.” Mo waved a hand toward Natalie and me. “Looks like they can keep you busy

without our help.”

The other girl, named Hoover, took up where Mo left off. “They’re fucking cops.” She stood, walked around the room, simultaneously throwing her arms and obscenities into the air. The prostitute was dressed in a plaid schoolgirl outfit, but I doubted this girl had ever made the honor role.

“Just so you know,” Hoover went on, “I don’t fuck no senior citizens, I don’t fuck no cops, but...” She stopped, walked over to Natalie, hands on her hips. “... if you want the lesbo virgin to fuck me I might consider doing a freebie.”

Natalie smiled in her disarming way, politely saying, “I don’t mean to lace into ya or anythin’, but just so you know, I’m not a virgin. Dropped me cherry in a schoolyard—not the best experience, by the way.” Pearl and I covered smiles as she added, “And while I don’t wanna go bustin’ a payday and I don’t got nuthin’ against it, just for your information, I don’t lick the lettuce.”

I gave Natalie a head shake. She clamped her lips shut as Pearl said, “We just want to ask you both a few questions. Only take a couple of minutes.”

Mo sat back on the bed, but Hoover wasn’t having any part of it. She tried to push past me to the door. “Outta my way, I gotta make rent.”

I blocked the exit, my irritation rising. My hands came up and I pushed her back, just above two very large breasts; silicone desperately seeking air.

“I know a place where the rent is free,” I said. “It’s over on Wilcox Street. Maybe you’ve seen it. There’s a bunch of black-and-white cars in the parking lot.”

Pearl stood and spoke up again, “I’ve got a hundred dollar bill, ladies. All I need is ten minutes and some information.”

Mo was off the bed faster than a cat under a rocking chair. “Hundred bucks get you five minutes. That’s all.” She motioned to Hoover. “Let her go and we’ll have a little chit chat.”

A protest followed, Hoover probably thinking that she’d just missed out on the easiest payday of her life. It was too late.

Natalie already had the door open. “Have a great evening, pet. Sorry ‘bout getting you all into a paddy over nuthin’.”

The young prostitute turned back to Pearl before she left. “Hundred bucks—that booshit.” She cut her eyes back to Natalie and ran a tongue over her ruby lips. “I can make that in less than five minutes.”

“Fraid the poor girl’s full of the malarkey,” Natalie said after she was gone.

Mo sat down and stuffed the bill into her bra. Her voice was softer than before. “Hoover’s a good kid with a bad attitude. But she’s right about the five

minutes. The girl can suck the chrome off a Buick.”

Pearl sat back down. His chair came closer to the bed. “We just need a little information, Mo.”

“You pay, I talk.”

It was a 360 attitude shift. Maybe the anger had been an act for the younger prostitute.

I handed Mo the photograph of our victim while Pearl explained why we were there. “We know you work for Maurice Simpson. The girl’s name was Cassie Reynolds. She also worked for him.” The heavyset prostitute studied the photo then handed it back to me. Pearl continued, “We have reason to believe that Cassie was killed because of information she had about the murder of her father.”

“Heard it was a cop that blew her away.”

“The investigation’s ongoing. We need to know if Cassie ever confided in you or any of the girls she worked with, maybe told them what she knew about her father’s death?”

Mo picked at a red nail, glanced at her watch. “Your five minutes is up. Don’t know nuthin’ bout her.”

Pearl tossed two twenties on the bed. “Five more minutes. Save yourself a long night in a holding cell.”

Mo wadded up the bills. “Cassie was hanging with some guy named Roger. Don’t know his last name, but Maurice didn’t like him.”

“You think Maurice had something to do with Cassie’s death?” I asked.

The prostitute shook her head. “Maurice take care of business, but he ain’t no killer.”

“Where can we find Maurice?” Pearl asked. “We need to ask him a couple of questions.”

“Maurice around, but he finds you if he want somethin’.” Mo inhaled, Spandex straining. “But I can guarantee he don’t want nuthin’ from you two.”

“What can you tell us about Roger?” I asked.

“Cassie wanted into the Hollywood scene. Thought Roger could help her get into the movies.”

“Did Roger have connections to the movie industry?”

Mo shrugged. “He was in one of them soap operas. Cassie wanted him to get her a part.”

Natalie chimed in, “Was it that one about the girl who always wants to drop the doctors’ knickers? I like that episode where they’re in the operatin’ room

after hours and...”

“Natalie.” I gave her a look. She made a zipping motion on her lips.

“I think it’s on channel three,” Mo said. “*Beautiful Lies* or some shit like that. Roger had a small part off and on. Saw it once. He sucked.”

“Did he get Cassie a part in the show?” Pearl asked.

“Roger said he would only get Cassie a part if she agreed to be in a movie he was producing over in the valley.”

“They make X-rated films in the San Fernando Valley,” Pearl said. “Is that what you’re talking about?”

Mo gave a little snort, her tone grew impatient. “Listen, Cassie thought Roger might be her ticket to a new life by getting her into the movies. As it turned out, he had only a certain kind of movie in mind for her.”

“Do you think Roger had something to do with Cassie’s murder?” I asked.

The prostitute’s heavy shoulders shrugged. “All I know is that if they gave out an Oscar for the biggest dick in Hollywood, Roger would win. And, believe me, I seen a lot of dicks.”

Back on the street, Pearl told us he would see if he could rundown the cast of *Beautiful Lies*...try to get a lead on Roger. Natalie offered to track down Maurice Simpson. We tried to dissuade her, but my snoop sister was insistent.

I dropped Natalie at home after giving her a lecture about the Hollywood street scene and being careful. As she opened the car door I said, “What do you think Clyde will say when he sees your outfit?”

“Clyde goes to bed at 8:30, but I might just wake him up and play a round of gobble the geezer.”

“You’re going to give Clyde a stroke one of these days.”

Natalie tapped a finger to her temple as she closed the door. “Life insurance is a wonderful thing.”

When I got home it was a glass of wine for me and *The Dog Whisperer* for Bernie. The episode where Cesar Millan gets bit by a little mutt is Bernie’s favorite. As the show was ending, my phone rang. It was the night watch commander, Sam Ballick.

“Kate, we’ve got a customer down here who says you sent him our way.” I was drawing a blank when Ballick said, “The guy says he spent the evening starring on LAPD’s sex cam.”

I laughed, said to Ballick, “Send him home to his wife. Tell him he has to let

her know what happened because we'll be sending her the video."

Before we called it a night I said to Bernie, "Ever wonder what kind of trouble guys would get into if they didn't have a penis?"

I got the silent treatment. I guess there are some things guys just won't talk about.

Chapter Nine

“Hi, my name is Roger.” The man pulled up a chair and sat down at my table. Could this be the part-time soap star—the Roger who was involved with Cassie Reynolds?

A second glance told me this Roger was no actor. He was a drink-drooler, a beanpole who looked to be about thirty-five with greasy hair and bad teeth. Got Meth?

After a day of training that ended at the shooting range, I’d left Bernie at home and gone to Club SUK to watch The Divas. Now there was Roger trying to make butthole-brown bloodshot eyes look sexy.

“So what’s your name?” Roger asked.

Clever. Why me? There were other single women in the club. I was enjoying The Divas. They were a big hit with the crowd. A flash of inspiration. Natalie would be proud.

“Bob Fredericks,” I said, motioning to the stage. I tried to make my voice sound like Barry White. “Got a cold. Can’t perform tonight.”

A testosterone-neuron vapor lock left Roger speechless. His mouth fell open long enough to catch a fly. Maybe he was a frog and...no way.

Roger finally vibrated his vocal cords, “Damn, you’re a fine looking woman.” His eyes lingered on my white open collar blouse. You’d think I was dressed like Natalie.

Roger fished a baggie of white powder from his pocket and placed it on the table. At least it wasn’t a condom. He picked up the baggie and dangled it in front of me.

“I don’t think you’re a guy, but I do think you’re in need of a good time.”

I rechanneled Barry White, “Believe me. I’m all makeup and hair. Get lost.”

Roger put the baggie away and smiled. The teeth were worse than my initial impression, a bad Jack-O-Lantern carving—typical tweaker dentition.

“I’ll get us a room. We can party all night.”

Now I had two problems. I was getting aggravated and my throat was hurting from doing the Walrus of Love growl.

“Sorry,” I barked. “I don’t believe in cross-species dating. Do the world a favor, take your dumb ass back to Big Ugly, Mars where you were born.” Ouch! I sipped water. I mean, I took a gulp. Man-talk ain’t easy.

“Fuck you,” Roger snapped. His face turned Martian red.

Guess I’d hit a nerve. Maybe a more cerebral approach was in order.

“Since I’m a man,” I woofed, “that wouldn’t be possible, at least not in the conventional sense.” I smiled in a manly way. “Then again, maybe you’re gay.”

“I’m not a queer and you’re not a guy.” Roger was a persistent, if bigoted, asshole. He went on, “Let’s get a room. You can show me your package, if you’ve got one. If you’re a guy we can make a call, get some chicks. Party.”

I started to flip out my badge, ending the charade. I hesitated. Maybe Roger did deserve a package.

“Okay, meet me in the parking lot in ten,” I said.

A snaggletooth grin followed. “Don’t be late or I’ll come looking for you.”

I dialed my phone while The Divas ended the performance by showcasing their ample derrieres and singing “Bootylicious.” There were big cheers—a standing ovation.

“Thanks, John, I appreciate it,” I said, ending my conversation as Robin and Clark stopped by my table.

Wigs came off. Martinis were ordered all around. Even in their evening attire and theatrical makeup, Robin and his boyfriend made a handsome couple. Clark’s blue eyes and brown skin were striking against his white sequined evening gown. He’d also bronzed his skin. Why didn’t I bronze? Then remembered, I’m broke.

“No Bernie tonight?” Robin asked.

“Home dreaming about chasing border collies.”

“Bet it’s a doggie-style dream,” Clark said.

I smiled, then turned back to Robin. “I talked to Mom yesterday. I’m having lunch with her and Sis day after tomorrow.”

“Lord help you.”

“I just love a good family drama,” Clark offered.

There was a commotion near the stage. A muscular young man with a shaved head, except for a long black ponytail, made an entrance. A heavysset guy wearing a robe then walked in, Mr. Ponytail acting as his body guard.

“Bon Bon,” Clark said. He rushed over to the celeb who looked like he’d just walked out of the shower and thrown on a robe. He was probably too big for regular clothes.

Other patrons moved his way, creating a mini-stampede to meet Wolf Donovan’s son. As far as I knew, Bon Bon was famous for appearing on a reality TV show. His contribution—sitting around and eating the other contestants’ food.

“Hope I can deal with this,” Robin said to me. “The premiere of *Tidal Wave* is

tomorrow night. We're still on for the after-party."

"Looks like Clark's leading the parade." An entourage had formed. The Bon Bon line snaked through the club.

"He gets a little star struck. I just hope I can keep him out of The Cavern."

"Cavern?"

"Donovan's estate has a swimming pool that runs underground—lots of music, dancing, and naked bodies writhing around." A thin smile. "Just your typical backyard barbeque."

I was warning Robin about keeping Clark away from drugs when two uniforms entered the nightclub. I excused myself and met up with them at the club's entrance.

After a few moments I returned to the table and told Robin, "This should be interesting."

"What's going on?"

"Just delivering a package to a guy named Roger."

We sipped our drinks and chatted for a few minutes until the officers reentered the club with their suspect in handcuffs. I walked over and inspected the package that the younger of the two cops held up.

"Test was positive for meth," the officer said.

Roger gave me his best angry, sultry look.

I couldn't resist rubbing it in. "In case you get lonely tonight, ask if you can room with a Mr. Wiener. If you get lucky maybe he'll show you *his* package."

I returned to my table and finished my drink. After more chit-chat I told Robin I had to call it a night. As I was leaving, he mentioned that Sara Johnson would be calling me about her mystery dating event.

"Maybe I'll meet another guy named Roger," I said.

I drove home and parked in front of the closed appliance store. Natalie waved to me from inside. She was with her elderly husband, Clyde. As I walked toward the store,

Natalie opened the door, greeting me, "Hey sweet pea."

Clyde was on a ladder tying balloons to a post. He said, "Big sale starts tomorrow. Everything is twenty percent off. Let me know if you need a new washer."

He teetered, reminding me of a chubby teddy bear up a tree.

Natalie steadied the ladder. "Always the salesman. How was your evening?" Before I could tell her about Roger, she added, "I've been meaning to ask you if I could go on one of them follow-arounds with you."

“Come again?”

“You know, follow you around at work. I’m thinkin’ I might wanna do some real detective work someday. Need to get more of a feel for it. See if I’ve got enough snoop in me.”

“I don’t do that sort of thing, but you can call the station. They’ve got a ride-a-long program. You could go with a uniformed officer for a shift.”

“That’s it, a ride-a-long.” Natalie leaned over and whispered, “Do you think you could recommend an officer that looks like Johnny Depp?”

“Sure.” I lied. Most of the cops I knew looked more like Charlie. “Why don’t you come up for a nightcap? I’ve got a little story for you.”

Natalie turned to Clyde. “Back in a few, sweetie.”

“But we’ve got the sale tomorrow,” Clyde protested, again teetering.

Natalie held his ladder a moment longer. “Keep it up, Clyde, and you’ll be selling Maytag’s to Saint Peter.”

Up in my apartment, Natalie and I shared a glass of riesling while I told her about my evening.

“Wish I was there.” Natalie lowered her tone. “Coulda used me King Henry voice and convinced Roger I was your partner.”

“I seriously doubt you could convince anyone you’re a guy.” My phone rang. It was Pearl Kramer.

“Kate, I’ve located our soap star. His name is Roger Diamond. He’s a small time porn producer who filled in on *Beautiful Lies* a couple of times. Got an address and phone number.”

Pearl gave me the number. I told him I’d call him back. A couple of minutes later, I had Roger Diamond on the line.

“We’re looking into the death of a woman you knew named Cassie Reynolds, Mr. Diamond. I’d like to come by and ask you a few questions.” I waited, expecting he wouldn’t cooperate.

“I...I think that’s a good...idea. There’s...s...some things...I need to ttt...talk about...”

“Mr. Diamond, is everything okay? I can come over this evening if you’d like.”

When he came back on the line his voice was heavy, barely audible. “Tomorrow night...best...come round...tt...ten.” The line clicked dead.

I called Pearl back, told him Diamond sounded drunk, but that he’d agreed to meet with us the following night. When I hung up, Natalie was clapping her hands.

“Hooray, more snoop work. Do you think I should wear a trench coat and bring Clyde’s pistol?”

“No guns, Natalie. Promise me.”

“Oh, all right. But, I do have a coat I think would be just the ticket.”

I had a vision of her dressed like Sherlock Holmes.

Natalie made a slicing motion with her hand. “Maybe I should bring a knife. I’m pretty good with a knife. I once got a little tiddly and cut a trog named Johnny Utley’s ball bag after he tried to get me to play burp the worm, but...”

“Natalie, no guns, no knives, and no slicing up anyone’s testicles!”

I made her do a pinky swear before we said goodnight.

Roger Diamond was on my mind as Bernie and I got ready for bed. He’d been drunk, but his voice also had another quality. I’ve encountered it before when suspects are desperate and running from something or someone.

Chapter Ten

"Let me get this straight," Kane says into the cell phone. "You have no idea where Bautista's hiding and we still have to deal with the female cop."

It's after midnight. The orderly has left him alone in his room with the phone after extracting a commitment for more drugs and money. Down the dimly lit hallway there's a drone of hospital equipment and the muffled voices of overnight staff.

The man on the line hesitates, says, "We think he's still in the area. As for Sexton, she would have come forward by now if she had any information. She's also under investigation for interfering with the arrest."

"You *think* he's still in the area." Kane's hushed voice shakes with anger. "I want him dead, now. No loose ends."

"Okay, relax...we're doing everything we can. We already took care of that other matter we discussed."

"And the female cop?"

"She'll get the message."

"And if she doesn't?"

"A fatal accident will be arranged."

Before ending the call, Kane makes sure that he has his own message across. Bautista is to be dead within forty-eight hours or he will take the matter into his own hands when he's released.

After returning the phone, Kane sleeps until six. He breakfasts in the inmate cafeteria where he displays all the practiced symptoms of Parkinson's dementia. Two hours later, the morning shift orderly walks him to the psychiatrist's office and leaves.

Dr. Marsha Wentworth rises, closes the door behind the orderly, and returns to her desk. There's no eye contact. Her hands shake as she sifts through his file. How ironic.

It's been two days since the psychiatrist agreed to cooperate. The terror of finding her daughter's bloody clothing was all she needed. Fear is a powerful motivator. Wentworth agreed to say nothing and meet him again prior to the parole hearing.

"I have your report almost ready," the doctor says, continuing to look down.

"Almost is not good enough, Marsha."

Her green eyes come up to meet his. She's been crying. Is she truly convinced there's no option other than to cooperate? There's no room for error now.

Perhaps a little more persuasion is in order.

“Let’s talk about your daughter,” Kane begins. He leans over her desk. His voice is now clear and harsh. There’s none of the prior whispered, strained qualities he’s feigned for so long. “Marianne is seven years old. She’s in the third grade at Washington Elementary. Her favorite subjects are spelling and art. At recess she plays with her best friend, Gayle. Your daughter has asthma. If she doesn’t use her inhaler...”

“Stop, please.” Tears fill the psychiatrist’s eyes. “You already convinced me. Just give me your word you won’t harm my daughter.”

Nathan Kane reaches over and pats the psychiatrist’s knee. He smiles as she flinches. The shrink is wearing a blue skirt. His big hand lingers on her long, slender leg.

“I have my people watching Marianne as we speak. One wrong move and she dies.”

Wentworth cries out again, “Please don’t hurt her. I’ll do anything. I have money and...”

“You have my word, Marsha. I won’t harm your daughter if I’m convinced that you will cooperate.”

The psychiatrist brushes away her tears. “The report is with my supervisor. I can show it to you tomorrow.”

“Considering the stakes, I expect you will keep your word. Let’s plan on meeting at the same time tomorrow.”

The psychiatrist stands and begins to walk toward the door.

“Wait.” The prisoner’s harsh voice stops her. “I said I need to be convinced you will cooperate.”

She turns, trailing a hand that brushes tears again. “What more do you want?”

Kane stands. He walks over to Marsha Wentworth. The drawstring on his prison issued uniform is released. The trousers fall to the floor. He takes the woman into his powerful arms, pushing her down onto her knees.

“You need to be completely convincing, Marsha. Make this your best performance ever. Marianne’s life depends on it.”

Chapter Eleven

The next evening I picked up Natalie and we drove to Van Nuys for our meeting with Roger Diamond. I'd spent the day serving warrants on gang members in Huntington Park.

As Olive sputtered to a stop, I yawned. "Sure hope this meeting is productive."

"If the tosser doesn't cooperate we might have to lean on him," Natalie said.

My snoop sister, true to her word, had dressed for the part. She hit the street wearing a gray London Fog trench coat and a double-brimmed black-and-white hat. Maybe she was expecting Jack the Ripper. Maybe she'd pull out one of those curved smoking pipes. Better that than a pistol.

"Great outfit," Pearl said to Natalie when we greeted him in front of Diamond's house.

The neighborhood was a cluster of smaller older homes, probably built in the 1950s. The street was deserted. Most of the working class inhabitants were probably already in bed.

Natalie reached into her pocket. I held my breath. "Don't worry, no weapons, just brought me a lookin' glass in case there's some evidence." She held out a magnifying glass for our inspection.

I sighed. Maybe bringing Natalie into the case had been a mistake. Roger Diamond's interview could be a game changer, increasing the stakes. I would never forgive myself if anything bad happened to my youthful friend.

I heard a low-pitched whine and looked down at Bernie. My skin prickled. I bent down, my hand finding my partner's head.

"What is it, Bernie?"

He nuzzled me, offering up his wet nose. The cry persisted.

I stood back up and said to the others, "Bernie only acts like this when something bad is about to happen. He has a sixth sense of sorts."

Kramer bent down and reached out toward the dog. After some more muzzle love, Bernie settled down. "Let's hope we're not in for an earthquake. Had a dog once that started acting up back in '91, just before the big one hit."

I turned to Natalie. "I want you to wait here until everything is secured."

"Oh, stop worrying, Kate. Let's see if Mr. Big Dick answers the door. If there's any sign of shenanigans I'll hightail it back to Olive and wait unless you give me a Code Six Adam." She looked at Pearl. "Copper talk for an officer needs assistance with an investigation, in case you forgot."

Pearl tugged on an earlobe. There was a hint of a smile. “Thanks for the refresher.”

We walked up the driveway. Bernie’s whine came back, cranked up a notch.

The home was a single story, painted a drab shade of brown and gray. The lawn was dead. Unread newspapers were piled on the porch. A sign on the door read, No Solicitors. Maybe this was Diamond’s porn pad, used for filming.

Pearl rang the doorbell. We waited. There was no answer after a second ring and a knock. He moved to the side yard, returned a moment later and said, “Found a door unlocked. I knocked but still no answer. Starting to get a bad feeling, like Bernie.”

The whine persisted. Pearl pulled his gun. “I’ll go on in if you’ll watch my back.”

I gloved up, brushed back my blazer and unholstered.

Natalie’s pupils dilated, she stepped back. “I’ll stay in Olive until you give me a signal.”

I followed Kramer with Bernie on his leash.

Once inside, we worked quickly, giving the rooms a onceover before I stepped outside again. I gave Natalie the all clear signal. She walked up the driveway and met me. I tossed her a pair of latex gloves and said, “Don’t touch anything.”

The kitchen was full of dirty dishes, untouched for several days.

Natalie grimaced. “Bloke’s messier than Clyde.”

Despite the house being deserted, Bernie’s whine continued.

We found several empty beer cans on the coffee table in the living room. Photographs above the fireplace showed a man, probably Diamond, with a couple of different women, maybe actresses. The house had a musty, dirty smell that was familiar to me. Charlie had a name for the odor—felony funk.

We circled back to the master bedroom where Bernie’s whine abruptly ceased. He stopped in front of the walk-in closet we’d searched earlier and looked up to me.

I tossed the closet again. It was full of empty boxes, shoes, dirty laundry. At the back of the closet, I found something else—a dead body.

“I think we’ve found Mr. Diamond,” I said to the others, stepping back and revealing a subject that matched the man in the living room photographs.

Kramer was at my side, Natalie right behind.

I stated the obvious, “Shot through the head.”

Natalie put it another way, “The bastard’s deader than a bird in a cuckoo clock.”

Diamond's body had been wedged into the back of the closet and covered with a blanket, explaining why we had missed it in our earlier cursory search. The body had not begun to decompose but rigor had set in.

Natalie looked through her magnifying glass and referenced the entry wound, "Not much of a hole. Musta been a pea shooter. I've seen zits worse than that."

Pearl pointed to the splatter on the wall. "The exit wound is in the back of the head. That's where the damage shows."

Natalie now saw the brains and blood. "Looks a bit like the time me dad chopped off a chicken's head. Right mess it was."

Guess, my snoop sister wasn't squeamish.

I did a quick survey of the bedroom after again warning Natalie not to touch anything. The bed was unmade. There were several DVDs and video tapes next to the television, including some X-rated movies. A few classics were also in the stack. *Dancing with Wolves*. *Valentino*. Both Oscar winners. Maybe Diamond had harbored illusions about becoming a mainstream filmmaker.

I was about to leave the room when I noticed a couple of unmarked DVDs. On a hunch I decided to take them with me before motioning for the others to follow me outside.

Back on the driveway, we made plans to meet in a parking lot a couple of blocks over.

After we reassembled at a strip mall, I sucked in some air; tried to focus my thoughts. Our informal investigation into the death of Cassie Reynolds had just become complicated. We now had a dead body and no way to explain our being at the crime scene. If we called it in, I would be up to my eyeballs in more trouble with IAD. I explained my predicament to Pearl and Natalie.

"How about I call it in anonymously?" Pearl suggested. "We didn't touch anything and there's nothing that can tie us to the scene. RHD can take things from here."

Natalie rested her hand on my shoulder, agreeing. "Wouldn't want you to be in shit-soup and a pile of poop, sistah."

I smiled at her, thought about the prostitute, Mo, who had led us to Diamond. "Any luck locating Cassie's pimp, Maurice Simpson?"

Natalie shook her head. "He's more slippery than a snake in a pot of grease. Nowhere to be found, but I haven't given up."

"Guess we owe a nod to Bernie," Pearl said, running a hand through his fur. My whiney partner gave him a tail wag. Pearl looked at me. "It seems like somebody wants to keep a thirty-year-old secret real bad."

I tugged on Bernie's leash, preparing to leave. "It's time we shined a light on that dirty little secret."

Chapter Twelve

The next day, Bernie and I arrived at Yamashiro's Restaurant at noon for lunch with Mom and Sis. As Olive rattled to a stop, I glanced at my partner in the rearview mirror. I sighed and said, "Ready for battle?"

I'd spent the morning pushing paper and heard that RHD caught the Roger Diamond murder investigation. Professional hit. No suspects. No link between Diamond and Cassie Reynolds, far as I knew. Okay by me.

I checked my hair in Olive's mirror. Bernie waited. The frizzies, in all their glory, stared back at me.

"Shit. Why can't I for once have a good hair day?" I caught Bernie's reflection. "Is that too much to ask?" He was probably not the best guy for hair advice. My dog is a follicle free-for-all.

Yamashiro's was located in the Hollywood Hills above Grauman's. Because it was on a bluff, it offered great views. To the south was the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel built in the 1920s—Marilyn's haunt. I'm not sure why the ghost of the dead actress chose the Rosie. Farther west was Rodeo Drive. 90210 meant Fendi, Hermes, Versace. Eastward, the noonday sun lit up the Hollywood sign.

As I walked toward the restaurant entrance, I caught sight of myself in the windows. I'd tried on three outfits that morning, settled on a chestnut suede leather blazer, matching calf-length skirt, and tall suede boots.

A slow exhale and my shoulders sagged. Wrong choice. Dressing to impress is one thing. Dressing for your mother and disapproving little sister is another.

"The dog is not permitted," the maître d announced as we entered.

I pointed to the collar badge, showed my credentials. After a whispered discussion, we were allowed entry. Not the first time I'd done battle over my partner's pedigree.

I was shown to the table where my sister, Amanda, was already seated. We exchanged hugs, air kisses, fake smiles.

I took in my sister's pale blue Moschino suit with polished silver buttons. Gray leather pumps and a matching Gucci handbag perfectly coordinated the perfectly expensive ensemble. A three-hundred dollar haircut and what was probably a recent facial completed the look. Amanda, two years my junior, came across like something out of *Vogue*. I looked like a Wal-Mart ad.

"You look divine," Amanda lied as we eased down, my back to the wall. It's a cop thing. Keep the crowd in view. Nice place. White china. Linen and flowers. Koi ponds and gardens.

I reciprocated the compliment and asked, “Where’s Mother? Don’t tell me she’s late?” A family joke. Mom’s always late.

“She texted me a minute ago. Stuck in traffic.”

I gave Bernie the hand signal to settle in the corner. It was apparently Amanda’s signal to criticize. “I see you’re still traveling with the hairball.”

“Speaking of hairballs, how’s my worthless brother-in-law?” Okay, I didn’t say it exactly that way. I’d mustered all my tact, left out a few key words.

“Geoff’s in London again, meeting with the attorneys. We’re about to close on another apartment complex. Just another mega-deal.”

Mega-bullshit. Geoffrey Keating had spent the better part of this century squandering his inheritance. Of course, keeping your spouse in Versace and Cartier and vacationing in Aspen and Nice pinched the budget.

We glanced at menus and ordered drinks—water for me, a Juniper Crush for Amanda. My sister then played the sympathy card, “I was devastated to hear about you and Doug. He’s such an outstanding person—one of a kind. I’m so sorry it didn’t work out.”

One of a kind asshole. Why was Amanda the only person in my family who got along with my ex? Maybe assholes had some kind of weird magnetic force—anal attraction?

“Is the divorce final?” Amanda asked.

“Single, almost a year.”

My sister brought out a verbal match and held it to my impulse control fuse. “Too bad. Don’t supposed there’s anyone on the horizon?”

I was about to say, *why would you suppose that?* when our mother blew out the match. “Sorry I’m late,” Mom said, arriving at our table. “I had an appointment with Dr. Rasheed.”

My mother, or Miss Daisy, as she prefers to be called lately, wore a beltless purple and red safari skirt and Birkenstocks—think Hollywood meets Woodstock. At five feet six, Mom’s three inches shorter than me. Her brown, sometimes frizzy, hair was fading to gray. I sighed. My future?

After more air kisses, Mom turned to Amanda. “Did you tell her yet?”

The server arrived. We ordered: a sashimi salad for me; house rolls, consisting of something called a reclining Buddha for Amanda, and roasted shishito for Mom.

“Mom’s having a little work done,” Amanda said, ending the suspense.

“What?” Our mother routinely disapproved of surgery to alter what she called, “gifts of the great spirit.” She proved the point by seldom wearing makeup.

Mom's cheeks reddened. A giggle. "A little minor facial sculpting here and there. It's really just a tune up."

"Mom's worried about her appearance," Amanda explained. "She's starring in one of her performance art pieces. It's a New Year's Eve exhibition."

"I'm going to be nude," Mother said, her voice lowering.

"Spare me the details," I said. "I don't want to have to arrest my own mother for being nude in public."

"Not to worry, dear. It's going to be in New York in Central Park. We're spelling out *PIECE ON EARTH*. I get to be the letter A."

My mother—the human letter A. Help me, great spirit!

Mom went on about her upcoming performance before changing the subject, "I'm sponsoring an actor's workshop on the Westside. I'm looking for anyone who might be interested in acting and thought about Natalie."

"I'll mention it to her. Natalie's always up for a new challenge."

After lunch was served, we discussed nude art, skiing in the Alps, and local celebrity sightings, before I got down to business. "Robin and Clark are engaged. They're planning to marry next spring. They'd like you both to attend."

"Wonderful," Mom said, smiling and turning to Amanda. Instead of a reclining Buddha, my sister looked like she'd swallowed a mouthful of tacks.

Amanda said, "My brother is planning on marrying another man. Let's see, does that make him the bride?"

I didn't respond. Mother took up the cause, telling my sister that she thought Robin and Clark made a good match, before she went down in flames.

"I'm sure Geoffrey and I will be out of the country," Amanda went on. "We will be springing in Southern France."

Springing? I've heard of wintering, but springing? "Robin wants you there for support, Amanda. Being there doesn't mean you're giving your approval to anything. It's about showing your love and respect for our brother."

"I'll be unable to attend," Amanda grimaced. "I have no desire to watch two men kiss in public."

I tried one more time. "This is a matter of lending emotional support, not your personal desires or opinion."

The grimace became a snarl. "Robin needs psychiatric help."

My impulse control cork blew. "If anyone needs a psychiatrist it's you!"

Amanda's face contorted until she looked like Bernie before he bites. "I'm not the one who's in divorce court and living with a dog above an appliance store."

Like a credit card, my sister had just maxed out her verbal spending limit.

“No, you’re married to an idiotic little asshole who won’t be happy until he’s spent the last nickel he inherited. You’ve never done an honest day’s work in your life. And you’re a bigoted, egotistical bore, just like your husband.”

Amanda tossed her napkin onto the table. “I don’t have to take this shit,” she huffed, then flounced out of the restaurant.

I was upset. I must have been out of my mind. What was I thinking? I’d let my sister leave without paying her share of the bill.

Mother and I settled the tab as she tried to excuse Amanda’s outburst.

On the way to our cars, Mom said, “I’ve been having these dreams about the president, Kate.” She smiled up at me, her frizzy gray-and-brown hair swirling in the afternoon breeze. “We’ve been having sex.”

“I think he’s married, Mom.”

“No. I’m talking about one of the dead presidents.”

“Sorry. I’ve had a trying week. I’m not up for a necrophilia discussion.”

“You don’t understand...”

“Gotta run. Call you later.”

Bernie and I sprinted for Olive. My sister was a bigoted, intolerant snob. My mother was a nudist psychic, who dreamt of having sex with the dead.

I wondered if there was a state where you could put your family up for adoption.

Chapter Thirteen

As Pearl and I headed down the canyon, Olive began to lurch and backfire. “Damn, this is all I need.” I’d taken off work early after my lunch disaster and picked up the retired detective. We were headed to something called Excite Entertainment where Pearl learned Roger Diamond had worked. We planned to meet Natalie there. I hoped my snoop sister wouldn’t be dressed as a porn star.

“Rough day?” Pearl asked.

Bernie was in the backseat, lapping air.

“Had lunch with my mom and sister today. Amanda and I have issues, as in a gay brother she doesn’t approve of.”

“Have an older brother in Cleveland. Don’t talk much anymore. Funny how you can grow up with someone and then grow apart over the years.”

As we hit the freeway, Olive’s engine leveled out. I was grateful for small favors.

“Bobby and I used to be inseparable as kids,” Pearl went on. “Course, if you’ve got a kid brother named Pearl, you’re gonna take a few lumps sticking up for him.”

“I just assumed your nickname was because of your silver hair.”

Pearl smiled, exposing the gap in his front teeth. “My given name is Paul Earl. Somewhere over the years my mother decided to combine the P in Paul with Earl. When I was a kid I hated it.”

“Seems to fit you.”

“I’ve settled with my fate. But it’s like most things in life, it takes a few years and a little perspective to accept the hand that’s been dealt. Maybe in time your sister will be able to see things in a different light.”

“I’m not holding my breath.”

He smiled. “You remind me of your dad.”

It took a moment to register. “You...you knew my father?”

A nod. We were in rush hour traffic, stop and go now. “We attended a few training classes together, chatted a couple of times. Your dad was a good cop. Tried to do the right thing, even when other people didn’t.” His gaze came over in my direction. “You both have that in common. Something to keep in mind.”

My eyes misted. “Thank you for saying that.”

We spent the better part of an hour in traffic before reaching Excite Entertainment Studios in an industrial area of Van Nuys. As I parked Olive, I saw Natalie waving to us. Thank God she had all her clothes on.

“Hello, fellow snoopers,” Natalie said when we met up with her in the parking lot. I let Bernie stretch and sniff the flowers in the median. Natalie was eager to tell me, “While I was waiting I got an offer to be in a movie.”

Why wasn’t I surprised? Even in her halter top and jeans, my friend was stunning.

“I hope you didn’t accept, Natalie. You do know what kind of movies they make here?”

“Not to worry. It’s all on the up and up. I’m going to be in somethin’ called, *Holiday Stewardess*. Might even get to fly the plane. The script says it’s gonna have some mechanical problems and I gotta use me bra to keep the autopilot working.”

“What? Natalie you can’t do this.”

She gave me an impish grin. “I was just taking the mickey with ya. Don’t worry. Not ‘bout to ride some moose’s pink cigar for a little loot. I’ve got me standards.” She bent down and hugged Bernie who wagged his appreciation.

I stifled a grin. “Speaking of movies, I took a look at the DVD’s I borrowed from Roger Diamond’s house last night. He secretly videotaped himself having sex with different women.”

“Was Cassie Reynolds on any of the tapes?” Pearl asked.

I said no before securing Bernie back in Olive. I updated them on the Diamond investigation as we walked to the porn studio.

“Word has it the case is already cold. Crime scene was pretty clean. They’re questioning Diamond’s ex-wife and girlfriends, but don’t have a serious suspect.”

We stopped at the studio entrance. Pearl said, “My sources tell me Diamond was a player, used people for his own purposes.”

“So why are we here?” Natalie asked. “Do you think we’ll see some actors in the studio? Always wondered how you can lay around and let somebody dab the donut with a camera in your face.”

Pearl smiled, mouth closed. He then said to Natalie, “Most detectives follow the blood trail. But we’re here on the money trail.” Pearl looked over at me. “Are you sure you want to do this? Wouldn’t want the department causing you any more headaches.”

“Let’s hope they’re busy with the blood trail,” I said, opening the front door of Excite Entertainment. I lowered my voice. “I’ll just try to blend in; let you take the lead.”

We were greeted by a pale, overweight receptionist named Sandra. Pearl

covered up the word *retired* as he flashed his badge. “We have an appointment with Monica Benson.”

Sandra barely made eye contact, pressed her intercom.

We spent ten minutes in an office full of awards that looked like Oscars for porn before the CEO of Excite Entertainment arrived. Monica Benson appeared to be in her early sixties. She was nervous, drumming her manicured red nails on the table as we sat down.

Pearl explained why we were there. He referenced Natalie and me as associates without giving our names. “As I mentioned when I called, Ms. Benson, we’re looking into the death of Roger Diamond. I understand he was on the production staff here.”

More finger taps. Benson’s thin blonde hair and painted brows framed a long serious face. The CEO didn’t fit my mental image of someone who ran an X-rated movie studio. She wasn’t bald and smoking a cigar.

“Have you ever considered acting?” Benson’s eyes fixed on Natalie, ignoring Pearl. “With your innocent looks you could make a small fortune.”

“Thanks, but I already got me a sugar daddy,” Natalie said. “Far as acting goes, sometimes Clyde has me dress up and...”

I coughed. Natalie went mute, her head slumped.

“Too bad.” Benson swung her gaze over to Pearl. “Let me help you understand something and make it perfectly clear, Mr. Kramer. Roger Diamond was a contractor. He had no business relationship with our studio. He was an independent operator who used our facilities for a fee.”

If Benson’s condescending tone bothered Pearl, he didn’t show it. “Nevertheless, from what I’ve learned, not only were the Excite Entertainment Studios used in the making of his films, your production crews were also involved.”

“Merely a financial arrangement. We provide prepackaged services for a number of projects, but, as I stated, it’s always on a contractual basis. We have our own company that produces films independently for our own purposes. Mr. Diamond had no direct connection to Excite.”

“Ms. Benson, it’s my turn to make something perfectly clear.” Pearl pulled a folded paper from his shirt pocket and put on his reading glasses. “*Black on Velvet, Heaven Scent, Married White Female.*” He looked over the top of his glasses. “I could go on. Just a few of Mr. Diamond’s films, all made in partnership with your company.”

“As I indicated, all the films Mr. Diamond worked on were independent

productions. I think I've heard about..."

"Do the names Blue Star Productions and First World Entertainment ring a bell?"

Benson pushed back in her chair; lit a long thin cigarette. A cloud of smoke swirled around her long, thin face. "Where are you going with this, Detective?"

Pearl folded the paper and reading glasses. "Not to the feds, if you cooperate. All I want is information. I'm not interested in initiating an audit of your company's records."

"Are you insinuating there's been something illegal?"

Pearl's already sonorous voice lowered. "Ms. Benson you and I know that if the feds decide to audit this company, as with any audit, there will be issues regarding financial arrangements. I certainly wouldn't want to stir anything up; make things difficult for you."

Benson blew a stream of smoke into the air. "Of course not."

"I'm merely here to find out about Mr. Diamond's partnership arrangements. I know that Blue Star and First World are major players in the production of X-rated films. There was a relationship between Roger Diamond and Excite Entertainment, regardless of how you want to frame it. I want to know who the money was behind those companies. Once I have that information you'll never see me again."

Benson rose, walked to the window. She separated the blinds. The setting sun filtered in, motes of cigarette smoke drifted through the air. She turned back to Pearl.

"What I'm going to tell you is mostly a matter of public record. With some digging you would be able to find it out eventually." She came back to the table and sat down. "Blue Star and First World are subsidiaries of Harper International Productions."

Pearl glanced at me, then back at Benson. "Are you referring to Harper International, as in *the* Conrad Harper, Ms. Benson?"

She took a heavy pull on her cigarette and nodded.

I finally spoke up at the realization of what she was saying, "Conrad Harper is one of the major movie producers in Hollywood. Are you telling us Roger Diamond and Conrad Harper were partners in the production of adult films?"

"Yes."

Natalie turned to me. She looked like a schoolgirl who'd accidentally walked into the boy's gym. "Bloody mother of Johnny Holmes!"

We all looked at Natalie. She became small, twisted her hands in her lap.

“Clyde has this movie collection. Saw him once. The guy had a plonker the size of a fire hose.”

The tension broke when Monica Benson laughed, exposing large nicotine-stained teeth that reminded me of an old television show about a talking horse. She regained her composure and began to lecture us.

“The X-rated film industry is a multi-million dollar business. Some of the largest companies in America, including banking and insurance corporations, are involved in the productions. They all operate under the cover of subsidiary corporations created to conceal the identity of the parent companies.” More horse teeth; smoke. “Most people don’t want to believe companies that claim to be red, white, and blue, are in the business of paying America’s sons and daughters to fuck their brains out.”

“How did the business relationship between Diamond and Harper work?” Pearl asked.

“Roger provided the actors, the script, and the day-to-day production arrangements. Harper bankrolled everything.”

“Did Harper ever come to the studios?”

Benson laughed again. It came out as a sputtering cough. “I only saw him on set once. He stayed in the shadows.”

“Is that because he didn’t want to be recognized?”

“Harper’s a germ freak—wore a surgical mask and gloves. Unless you knew who he was you wouldn’t have recognized him. He was probably afraid he’d get a disease by watching people fuck.”

I removed a recent photograph of Cassie Reynolds from my purse. Charlie had given it to me. I didn’t ask how he’d gotten it. “Ms. Benson can you tell me if you ever saw this woman with Roger Diamond?”

A thin arm stretched out and she took the photograph. After studying it for a few seconds, she said, “Roger introduced her as Rhonda somebody. Don’t remember the last name. She was given a role in his last production. It was called, *Summer School*, but never got off the ground.”

“Why is that?”

“Rhonda was a bit camera shy. When it came time for her first sex scene, she ran off the set crying like a schoolgirl. She refused to continue. Roger found another actress.”

“Can you tell us who was present when she was on the set?” I asked.

“Just Roger, the production crew, and Mr. Harper.”

I exchanged glances with Pearl and said, “Cassie Reynolds was murdered two

weeks before Roger Diamond. We're trying to determine if there was any link between their deaths. Do you think Roger could have harmed her because of what happened on the set?"

Benson crushed out her cigarette. "I doubt it. Roger wasn't the type to get violent. He usually got his way using his silver tongue. He could be very persuasive."

"Do you know anyone who might have wanted to harm either of them?"

A shrug. "Who knows. In this business it could be anyone from an irate girlfriend to a crazy relative."

"Or maybe an unhappy production partner?"

"The film would have meant nothing to someone like Harper. Besides, I can't see that old fart capable of doing much harm to anyone."

Back in the parking lot Pearl said, "I'm going to see what I can find out about Conrad Harper's business dealings. Could be we've just seen the tip of an iceberg."

"I'll do a little more digging into Diamond's background," I said. I turned to Natalie. "Maurice Simpson. Anything?"

She shook her head. "Got a bad feeling 'bout the bloke. His girls won't talk. Maybe scared."

I watched as Natalie's husband, Clyde, drove up in his Cadillac. Before Natalie climbed in the passenger seat, I told her to be careful.

As we drove away, Pearl said, "Funny thing about money trails. You never know where they're going to lead."

I flicked an eyebrow, nodded. "Sometimes those trails are covered with blood."

Chapter Fourteen

Charlie and I spent the following day serving warrants with Hollenbeck Division. We often partnered with officers in other divisions, clearing the warrant backlist. During the shift, I'd filled him in on our meeting with Monica Benson. I got the daddy death stare and more warnings.

At the end of the day, Bernie settled at my feet in the squad room, while my less hairy other partner slurped up a foot-long hotdog smothered in mustard and relish. We each had a stack of messages.

"Attorney...attorney." I crumpled up the first two slips, tossed them. My equation: FTA equals jail, the crook's mouthpiece be damned.

Charlie washed the dog down with his favorite pink diet drink, then handed me a message. "Mr. Wiener sends his greetings."

I read the jail kite aloud for the entertainment value. "I need to see deetektive Kate Sexton. It is very emportent. I have enformateshun to give her."

"I guess that's what happens when you drop out of school in the ninth grade," Charlie said. "I gotta feeling when he gets out, Mr. Wiener will either be working fast food or selling drugs again."

"He's already taken the fast food route. Read in his file that he worked for Mr. Crusty's Pizza. They had him dress up as a pizza slice, stand on a street corner with a sign."

"I love their pizza."

"Just remember, that slice of pepperoni once had a Harry Wiener in it." I glanced at the kite again, deliberating. "You don't suppose there's anything to this? Wiener's been persistent."

Charlie shrugged. "Probably just lonely. Wouldn't waste my time." A jaw rub. He took a candy bar out of his drawer. I could tell from our years working together that something was bothering him. His usual blank stare bordered on resignation.

"What's going on, Charlie? You seem stressed."

"Irma's counselor called. She got suspended for cutting classes."

"It happens. I spent a few days of my senior year in high school serving detention."

"It's that B-Boy she's been seeing."

"B-Boy?"

"He's a rap singer or something. Can't understand anything he says." Charlie took a bite of his Almond Joy. "Do you know what a wet broom is?"

“Never heard the expression,” I lied.

“Guy’s always walking around singing that kinda shit.” He swallowed. Another jaw rub. “Irma’s with him all the time.” He lowered his voice. “I think B-Boy stands for Big Boy. I also think they might be having sex, Kate.”

“You need to talk to her. Make sure she’s using protection.”

“Geeze. Protection. How the hell am I supposed to ask her about that?”

I had no idea but tried to sound reassuring. “Just be direct. She needs to know you care. You need to know she’s being careful.”

I was worried. My partner had told me that his blood pressure was out of control. It couldn’t be easy trying to be both mother and father to a teenager.

His phone rang and I busied myself checking my schedule for tomorrow.

When he hung up, I got the daddy death stare. “That was Dorothy Velasquez from the Tower. She says Preston and Blaylock have been assigned the internal. Drake is moving forward.”

I felt my own blood pressure rising. “Guess I’d better contact The Protective League.” The League provided officers with legal representation during disciplinary investigations.

“They’ll probably set you up with that idiot Jimmy Chester as a rep. I’d call in my own attorney if it was me. Tim Penny said he used Whittler and somebody for that excessive force beef he was facing.”

“Whittler and Meyers.” The law firm was known for aggressively defending officers that had run afoul of the department. “I’ll consider it,” I said, easing up and putting on my coat. “Just as soon as I win the lottery.”

It was after seven by the time Bernie and I got home. I walked over to the window to pull the drapes closed while I listened to a message from Sara Johnson.

“The dating group will be meeting in the Pacific Room at the Standard Hotel,” Sara said. “Tomorrow’s event is called Dark Dating. I think you’ll love it. See you there.”

I cursed Robin for getting me into this. What the hell was Dark Dating? I began closing the drapes and noticed a man getting out of a car up the street. Dark coat. Baseball cap. Rain misted as he stood on the sidewalk. He looked directly up into my window, then reached into his pocket.

My phone rang. I heard Jack Bautista say, “How about meeting me at Graciano’s in ten minutes?” I realized the wanted detective was on the sidewalk

outside my apartment.

“You buy the drinks, I’ll bring the cuffs.”

“You always were a tease. I think it’s time we celebrated.”

“Celebrated what?”

“It’s been almost a week since we began having phone sex.”

“If that’s what you’ve been doing you’d better keep your hands where I can see them, Bautista.” He moved up the sidewalk, hands splayed at his side. “You thinking of turning yourself in?”

“Meet me in the back booth at the bar in ten minutes. Your call. I’ll go quietly if that’s your decision.” The line went dead as he turned the corner.

I found a brush in the bathroom, cursing what the rain had done to my hair while considering his offer. If I did meet Bautista and failed to arrest him, it would violate the department’s policy. If anyone found out, I would be facing certain discipline, not that I wasn’t anyway. But this was a bridge. If I crossed it, there would be no turning back.

I gave up on the hair, found a knit cap in the closet, and my coat.

I said to Bernie, “If anyone asks, I was in bed all night—alone.”

Bernie yawned and curled up in the hallway. Sometimes it’s great having a silent partner.

Graciano’s had opened about six months earlier and was still being discovered. Tuscany theme. Travertine and texture. A walk-in wine bar. Subdued lighting and Vivaldi. Great place, even if I was meeting a guy wanted for murder.

I had no trouble finding Bautista in the back of the restaurant. I eased into the booth and said, “Just so you know I haven’t made up my mind about arresting you.”

A smile. Brown eyes tinged with red. “Just so you know I look lousy in an orange jumpsuit.”

He held up his beer, pushed Zin across the table toward me. “To freedom,” he said, lifting his glass.

There was something easy, nonthreatening in his manner. Jack Bautista was attractive in a rough, undisciplined way, something most women found appealing in a man. I pushed the thought away. We clinked glasses.

“So why are we here, Jack?”

“Just want to see where things stand. I’m getting a little tired of looking over my shoulder and eating in soup kitchens.”

“I thought Charlie was your snitch.”

“I haven’t talked to him in a few days. I decided to back off, Kate, give you some room.”

“About time.” I took a few minutes to fill him in on the case. He told me he’d never heard of Excite Entertainment or Monica Benson. “Did Cassie ever mention Roger Diamond?”

“Not once, but Cassie was her own person. She was what I call a secret-keeper.”

“Come again?”

“Cassie didn’t trust easily, especially cops. I think it took a lot for her to call me about her father.”

“What about Conrad Harper? Did she ever mention him?”

“A major player like Harper would have been hard for anyone to keep quiet about, but she never brought his name up.”

“Any idea why Cassie would walk off the set of one of their dirty movies?”

He rubbed a hand across his unshaven cheek. “Hard to say. I know something was bothering her before she died. Maybe it was what she knew about her father, maybe something else.”

The waiter arrived. Jack ordered another beer. When we were alone again, he said, “If Diamond was pressuring Cassie to act in his movie, it could be that’s what was eating at her.”

I twisted the stem of my wine glass between my fingers. “According to Benson, Harper showed up and watched Cassie’s first and only day of filming. The day she walked off the set was the one and only time Harper ever came to the studio.”

Bautista seemed to mull this over as his second beer arrived. After the server was gone, he said, “Maybe Harper and Diamond paid Cassie back for wasting their time. They probably had a lot of money tied up in the production.” He tipped up his beer.

“It’s possible, but from what the studio told us, neither was prone to violence, and Harper has more money than God.”

He set his glass down, his eyes drifting away. I thought I’d lost him. “You still with me, Bautista?”

He focused. “Sorry. I was just thinking about something Cassie said when she called me the day she was murdered—something about it being right there for everyone to see.”

“What was she referring to?”

“That’s just it. I have no idea. I didn’t press her since we were planning to

meet later. But, I think she might have been talking about her father—maybe who murdered him.”

A couple of patrons walked by. After they passed, I said, “Pearl and I are going to talk to Harper tomorrow.”

His eyes softened. “I appreciate what you’re doing, Kate—everything.” He turned his hands palms up, wrists coming over to me. “Guess my time’s about up. I’m yours if you want me.”

I looked at his hands. They were the rough, working class hands of a cop who didn’t mind doing the heavy lifting in a job that was never easy. They were also the hands of someone who needed help proving his innocence. I made a decision at that moment and knew there would be no turning back.

“That line isn’t working for me, Bautista.” I took his hands and moved them back across the table. “When you think of something better, give me a call.” I eased out of the booth, looked at him. “And, just for the record, I was never here.”

Chapter Fifteen

Nathan Kane sits in the dayroom gazing out the window. The day has dawned clear and warm. The rocky backdrop of mountains and a scattering of clouds above the barren landscape beckon. Two more days and he will be free.

Sixteen years and fifty-one days in the custody of prison authorities has left him craving freedom. Setting the final pieces of his ticket to freedom in motion has stirred the desire to a fever pitch. That, and having his way with the prison psychiatrist.

He is almost certain Marsha Wentworth will cooperate. But almost certain isn't enough. He needs a guarantee.

When the attendant takes him by the arm and they walk to the psychiatrist's office, he's ready to set the guarantee in motion. One look at Wentworth as she stands and closes the door behind the orderly tells Kane that she's terrified. Perfect.

Dr. Wentworth returns to her desk and slides a copy of her psychiatric evaluation over to him. Her voice is barely audible. "The report is complete. I've recommended your parole."

Kane takes a moment, glances through the narrative, focusing on the key phrases in the summary recommendation...*severe and debilitating symptoms... progressive dementia...ineffectual treatment modalities...minimal risk...release and monitor...*

The prisoner tosses the report back to her.

"Nicely written, Doctor." He smiles as her eyes dart away. "I need you to disappear for a few minutes."

Wentworth rises to leave, but he stops her. "I need your cell phone, please."

She hands him the phone and walks out the door.

After the call is answered, Kane wastes no time getting to the point. "I want to know if he's dead."

He hears the anxious breathing and senses the tension on the line. "He's still lying low. We're doing everything..."

"That's not good enough." He wants to scream but manages to keep his voice low; controlled. "If I have to take care of things when I get out, you know what that will mean."

The man's voice pitches higher, "You've got to understand. This isn't easy. We've taken care of Diamond..."

"What about the woman, Detective Sexton?"

“Up to her eyeballs in shit with the department...she’s getting the message...I don’t think she’s a threat.”

He ends the call, cursing the incompetent idiot and saying, “See to it that she’s not. I’ll make an assessment when I get out.”

When the psychiatrist returns, he hands her the phone, then watches as she lays it on her desk and begins moving some files around.

“I have to be sure,” Kane says, almost feeling the anxiety coming off the shrink. “There can be no mistakes when you testify, Marsha. I don’t want any hesitation. If the district attorney shows up and argues against parole, you have to be firm and convincing. Everything depends on it.”

Dr. Wentworth finds a tissue. Her voice is garbled with emotion. “I will be convincing.”

Kane stares out the window, his lips turning up. “There will be an accident.”

He hears the shrill panic in her voice. “What are you saying?”

His eyes, like those of a predatory beast, swing slowly away from the window, his gaze finding her again. “If parole isn’t granted, ten minutes later Marianne will be dead.” He watches with amused detachment as the psychiatrist breaks down. “This must be the best performance of your life, Marsha.”

Dr. Wentworth brings her hands to her face. Her body convulses with sobs. “Please don’t hurt her. I’m begging you.”

Kane comes around the desk and places a heavy hand on her shoulder. The psychiatrist jumps like she’s been hit by a jolt of electricity.

“Speaking of performances, Marsha,” he says, lowering his trousers. “It’s time for an encore.”

Chapter Sixteen

I walked back to my apartment after meeting with Jack Bautista. Our discussion had reinforced my decision to help the wanted detective, despite the risks.

I'd learned something else during our encounter. Contrary to his reputation, I'd found there was a sense of vulnerability about Jack. Being vulnerable isn't permitted in a job that demands a tough, controlled reaction to events that are often unpredictable.

The problem with men who are vulnerable is that it brings out the, *I want to fix him gene*, in women. I was dealing with that emotion as I walked up the stairs to my apartment and heard the television. It wasn't on when I left.

I turned the doorknob and found it was unlocked. My hand instinctively went to my gun, but relaxed when Bernie's big wet nose greeted me. No one gets by my big dog, unless he knows them.

"Hello, Sis." My brother was off the sofa, hitting the mute button on the TV remote. "I let myself in. Hope you don't mind."

I hugged Robin. When I stepped back, I saw that his eyes were red and swollen. "What's the matter?"

We moved to the sofa as he explained, "It's Clark. We've broken up." He took a moment, composed himself. "We went to the Wolf Donovan premiere last night, then the party at his estate. Everything seemed okay. But when it was time to leave, Clark told me that he was staying." His voice trailed off, slowly came back. "I'm worried, Kate. When I asked Clark what was going on, he wouldn't answer me. I think he might be using again. I also think he and Bon Bon were planning to hook up."

I touched his shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

"I tried going back to the estate this morning, but they wouldn't let me in. There's a bodyguard I saw at Club SUK with Bon Bon. He goes by the name Zen. He said no one there would talk to me. He denied knowing anybody named Clark."

I remembered the bodyguard, but Clark was an adult and I doubted there was anything I could do. Still, I said, "Let me look into things."

Robin brushed a tear. "I don't know what will happen if Clark's using again. He didn't go to his twelve-step meeting today."

"He's a big boy, Robin. Remember when we talked about Clark's drug problems when you two first got together? You can't make choices for him."

As we talked, I found myself getting angry with Clark. If he'd hooked up with Bon Bon and was using drugs again he'd turned his back on the one person who had helped him get sober; maybe saved his life. The situation made me think about my ex who I'd helped finish law school before he cheated on me.

"Just do me one favor, Robin. If Clark's using again, cut him loose. You're too good of a person to put up with the cheating and misery his drug use will bring into your life."

Robin agreed. He sighed, maybe shrugging off some anxiety. "You should see Donovan's estate, Sis. The place is like a mad circus."

"Not surprised. What is the famous actor like?"

"Didn't get to meet him. Had an entourage wherever he went."

"What about Bon Bon?"

"Basically your four-hundred pound freak on drugs. When we got to the estate, he took us to The Cavern. It's a series of underground caves with a river running through it. The place is filled with music, flashing lights, freaks, some having sex in public. I call it Orgy River."

"Sounds disgusting."

"Makes the rest of Hollywood look pretty tame."

We shared a bottle of wine as Robin talked for more than an hour. The evening was therapeutic for him. I was glad he could process what happened.

"I guess this means you won't have to ask Mom and Amanda about coming to the wedding," Robin said.

"Too late." I finished my wine and then told him about our lunch. "Mom was fine, but our sister—let's just say when I mentioned it she said she had other plans."

"Guess I'm not surprised."

It was after midnight by the time I tossed Robin some sheets and a blanket for the sofa. Bernie was trotting behind me to the bedroom when I remembered Sara Johnson's earlier message.

"Tomorrow, little brother. You need to tell me what Dark Dating is all about."

After my late night with Robin, I was looking forward to a nice quiet day at work. Didn't happen.

Charlie and I tried serving a warrant on a suspect who threatened to jump from her second-story window. After a struggle, we managed to get her in handcuffs. Something flew out of Charlie's pocket as other officers rushed in to assist.

“This your book?” one of the officers asked, holding the paperback up to Charlie where everyone could see it.

“Give me that.” My partner snatched the book away, stuffed it back in his coat pocket. There was muffled laughter from the officers.

I was so dumbfounded by what I saw that I had trouble forming my words. “What’s...why...a sex diary?”

Charlie was still wheezing from the struggle, trying to ignore the chuckles. “It’s one of them...self-help books...for parents...” He was barely able to get the words out. “I’m gonna talk to Irma...about her boyfriend...thought it might help.”

I motioned to the officers milling about. “You might want to brief these guys. You know how things can get twisted.”

“Yeah. They might think it’s a record...of my hookups...or something.”

I stared at my partner, started to laugh. I then realized he was being serious. Hookups? Charlie probably hadn’t hooked up since his wife left him three years ago.

A half-hour later, as we pulled into the station parking lot, Charlie said, “Got another session with the terrorist.” He made a beeline for his car and I realized he was referring to his dentist. As he drove through the parking lot he honked, his window came down. He shoved a message slip into my hands at the same time my phone rang.

I heard a voice say, “Kate, it’s Wilma.”

I was unsure who was on the line, distracted as I studied the jail kite Charlie had given me.

“I just wanted you to know nothing has turned up on those Carmichael records.”

I realized it was the LAPD records clerk. “Can you keep looking?”

“My supervisor has assigned me to a special project that’s taking up most of my time.” Wilma’s voice lowered. “But I’ll keep looking in my spare time.”

I thanked her, then reminded her of the hair appointment at Sinclair’s Salon.

As I closed my phone, I thought about the jail kite Charlie had given me. It was from Mr. Wiener. I checked my watch. I had two hours before my shift ended. If traffic wasn’t bad I could make it to Men’s Central Jail and back in time to meet Pearl and Natalie after work.

An hour later, while Bernie waited in the car, I was being led into the jail by

Tom Bouchet, a custody deputy I'd known for years.

I said to Bouchet, "When you're locked up in here, do you ever feel like you're one of the prisoners?"

"Yeah, but the guys in lock up get free rent, food, and medical care." The short balding officer smiled. "You tell me who's got it better?"

I was led through a series of interior steel doors. It occurred to me that Mr. Wiener was not with the main jail population. "Don't tell me our guy is in PC?"

"In protective custody since he arrived. Considered a security risk since his attorney filed suit."

"Let me guess. Claims he was molested?"

"Bingo. He retained Paul Goodwin. I hear he's asking for several million."

In a few moments I heard the sound of doors electronically opening and closing. Harold Wiener appeared in the visiting area. He stood, shading his eyes, trying to see into the glass visiting booth that was reflecting the overhead florescent lights.

"Thanks for seeing me," Harold Wiener said, after coming over and picking up the phone.

I thought I could still smell his sushi bar cologne but knew it must be my imagination working overtime. "This better be worth my time."

"It will probably get you a promotion."

"Okay, Mr. Wiener, make my day."

A crooked smile found his lips. "Everything comes with a price, Detective."

I glanced at my watch. "I'm not going to let you waste my time. Either tell me what's on your mind or I'm out of here." I pulled the straps of my handbag over my shoulder.

The prisoner put his free hand on the glass partition. "Wait. Okay, but I want you to talk to the D.A. Let him know what I'm going to tell you, see if he'll cut me a deal—either release me on probation or give me credit for time served." The lopsided grin returned. "If you don't go to the D.A., I'm going to the press with everything."

"Is that a threat or a promise?"

"A promise."

I waited, calculating that I had another five minutes before I needed to leave.

"Joaquin Robinson," he finally said.

I gave him a blank stare. "Is that supposed to mean something?"

Wiener did an eye roll, brown eyes making a full orbit over a bulbous nose. "I'm talking about *the* Joaquin Robinson, Detective."

I shrugged, had no idea what he was talking about.

“Don’t you watch sports?”

I shook my head, but was beginning to make a connection.

“He’s only the leading scorer for the Southern California Diamonds.”

“The basketball team?”

“Of course.” Wiener lowered his voice and shifted his eyes from side to side although no one else was in the visiting room. “He’s my supplier. He’s dealing crank.”

I mulled over what he said. Robinson was well known, not only for his basketball skills, but for the many products he endorsed. He was probably worth millions. The idea that he would risk everything by dealing drugs to a guy named Harry Wiener seemed ludicrous.

“So tell me, Mr. Wiener, how did you get connected up with a big time player like Robinson? Don’t tell me he’s dealing out of an alley behind Sunset?”

“I got a friend whose brother went to school with Robinson. He gets us tickets sometimes. A couple of months ago, we began hanging around after the games, asking for autographs. A few weeks later Robinson gave us some crank, told us to be sure we kept our mouths shut about where we got it. After that, he started selling to us in the parking garage at Pro Sports Pavilion. He’s got a regular group of guys he supplies—some are players.” Wiener’s smile grew cavernous as he finished his story, exposing every tooth in his mouth. “Robinson is also a user.”

If there was any truth to the story it would be a major scandal. The investigation had to be thorough. The athlete would likely spend millions on his legal defense. “Who else have you told about this?” I asked.

“Nobody.”

I folded my arms, stared at him.

“I swear. I ain’t even told my mother.”

“So if I get the narcs down here are you willing to wear a wire?”

The grin left Wiener’s face. I guess that made him a serious dick.

“I’ll do whatever’s necessary to get out of here,” he said.

I gathered up my purse. “I’ll have someone here tomorrow. In the meantime do everyone, including yourself, a favor. Keep your big mouth shut.”

As I was about to hang up the phone, he said, “How about we meet for a drink after I’m outa here?”

Before I slammed down the receiver, I said, “Not even if you were the last wiener on the planet.”

Chapter Seventeen

After leaving the jail, I called Jimmy Chester, my assigned union representative. I told him about the possible investigation, but said I thought the OIS shooting report would clear me of any wrongdoing during the failed Bautista arrest.

A visual of Jimmy *The Rat* Chester came to mind. Overbite. Dark, pebble-like eyes. Cheese-sniffing, twitching gray moustache. Pinned back ears.

The rat lived up to his name, telling me that we would just have to see how things developed. Chester did nothing to bolster my spirits.

I was fifteen minutes late for my meeting with Pearl and Natalie at Conrad Harper's mansion in Holmby Hills, an area of hillside estates west of Hollywood. I spotted my friends as I pulled into a parking lot that had a sign announcing it was reserved for guests of the estate.

Natalie waved her arms as I walked up to her and Pearl, motioning to the grounds. "This place is bigger than Fuckingham Palace. We're going to need a map to get around."

"Shouldn't be necessary," Pearl said. "Every king has his bodyguards. They usually know the lay of the land."

As we walked toward the sprawling mansion's impressive front gates, we noticed a smaller secondary entrance for service staff. That's where Pearl introduced us to Peter Jacobs, the head of security.

"Peter and I worked together on the force a few years back before he resigned and became head of all this," Pearl said, motioning to the grounds.

Jacobs shook our hands, lingering a moment before releasing Natalie's. "Pearl always did have the best-looking partners."

The head of security was fortyish, tall, well-built with brown hair that was fading to red at the temples, thanks to a bad dye job. There was a name for guys like Jacobs who were a testosterone and aftershave cocktail—*land shark*.

As we walked, the shark's gaze slid over to Natalie. She was wearing a short blue skirt and a matching knit blouse that showed off her perfect assets. I, on the other hand, was wearing black slacks and a jacket that showed I was a perfectly underdressed cop.

We were each given a plastic security badge, including one for Bernie's collar, as the land shark did commentary, "Eastlake, as Mr. Harper refers to the property, is the largest private residence west of the Mississippi. The home is over 68,000 square feet and sits on eight acres of some of the most expensive

residential real estate in the world. You've probably seen the property before on television and in the movies."

We turned a corner and the Georgian-style estate came into full view.

Natalie summed it up, "I think I just stepped back in time. Looks like somethin' out of *Gone with the Wind*."

Jacobs came over to her side. I think he was inhaling her perfume. "You're not too far off, Natalie. Mr. Harper borrowed from several east coast residences in the design of the estate."

Eastlake was fashioned around a huge lake with flowing fountains. There was an island in the center of the water feature with a gazebo and courtyard that I thought I'd seen in pictures of some celebrity weddings. A red brick driveway encircled the lake, winding around the residence. The driveway was flanked by columns that supported trellises of flowering vines. Beyond that, carefully manicured hedges offered a stair-stepped wall of privacy to the home.

When we reached another checkpoint, Jacobs spoke to Pearl, "Mr. Harper is planning to retire for the evening shortly. He's been in poor health in recent years and has become a bit reclusive."

Jacob's then turned, his eyes lingering on Natalie for a moment, before he spoke to all of us. "I've explained your presence in general terms. Needless to say, Mr. Harper was less than thrilled about your visit but he does understand that you're looking into the background of a former employee. Please try to keep your visit brief."

As we walked into the main portion of the residence, we were awestruck. A corridor, one of many, opened onto several living areas, each with a central fireplace and lavish furnishings.

Each room seemed dwarfed by the previous, until we moved through what we were told was Eastlake's grand ballroom. The room had a thirty-foot coiffure ceiling, inlaid with carved crests in gold leaf. Each crest contained the name of one of the many films Harper had produced, with a hand-painted scene from each movie.

I read some of the names to Pearl and Natalie as we walked behind Jacobs. "*Stolen Moments...War and Love...Valentino...The Glory Makers...Memories of Rotterdam*."

"Impressive," Pearl said.

Natalie had been rendered speechless until she finally whispered, "I think I just stepped through the looking glass, Alice."

After moving past dozens of rooms, including a room that held some of the

many awards Conrad Harper had received, Jacobs stopped at a door that appeared more functional than formal. “Mr. Harper’s private residence,” he said as he opened the door.

Inside, we found a more austere, functional series of rooms with modular furniture and stainless steel serving carts. The lighting was harsh. An antiseptic, hospital smell hit us.

Before opening another door at the end of the corridor, Jacobs again lectured us. “You will find Mr. Harper in the living area. He is expecting you. Please be sure that you remain several feet away from his person at all times.”

Jacobs reached into a desk drawer, handed us surgical masks. “You need to wear these. Mr. Harper is very health conscious.”

I held up the mask and motioned to my partner. “Don’t think this will work for Bernie.”

“The dog remains here.” Jacobs motioned to a servant. I handed the leash over then bent down and gave Bernie the settle command. He licked my hand and complied.

As we left Peter Jacobs and Bernie behind and moved through the door, all color was drained from the world. The walls, flooring, and ceilings were white. The staff was dressed in white scrubs. All the furnishings were white, modular, and functional. There was an odor of cleaning solvents mixed with something that had probably been served for dinner.

I turned to the others. “I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.”

Natalie’s hazel eyes shined over her mask. “I think we’re about to meet the bleeping wizard.”

We found Conrad Harper sitting on a sofa staring at us as we approached. The diminutive figure wore a beret and a pair of white satin pajamas.

The famous producer was wrapped loosely at the waist in a white blanket that almost matched the color of his skin. He looked nothing like the photographs I had seen of him. Instead of the Wizard, we’d found Yoda.

Despite his diminished state, Harper had a quality that countered his physical appearance—his eyes were unblinking, colorless, predatory.

“Stop.” Harper’s tone was brittle.

Natalie was so startled by the command that she stopped and almost fell over, grabbing my arm for support. “Geeze, almost spackled me panties.”

We were a dozen feet from Harper as Pearl greeted the famous producer. “Thank you for seeing us.” He took a moment to introduce Natalie and me, only referencing us as associates.

“Stay where you are and don’t bother sitting,” Harper spat out.

“Natalie whispered to me, “Maybe the wizard has a giant pebble in his undies.”

That was the understatement of the year.

The producer’s empty eyes shifted, his gaze finding my youthful friend. “What did you say little girl?”

Natalie cast her eyes downward. “Just said your place is right nice—a real cozy home and all.”

“British,” Harper said, spitting the word out like an insult.

Pearl interrupted, getting right to the point. “Mr. Harper we’re here because we are looking into the death of a woman named Cassie Reynolds. She was murdered approximately two weeks ago.”

“I thought you were here about a former employee. Never heard of her.”

“She was involved with a man who worked with you on a number of films. Roger Diamond.”

“Don’t know him.”

“He’s dead also—murdered two days ago.”

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?”

“According to Excite Entertainment, you were involved in some financial arrangements with Mr. Diamond, filming movies at their studios. The films were produced under the names Blue Star Productions and First World Entertainment.”

“I’ve got dozens of companies. Those names mean nothing to me.” Harper took a sip of water, let it swish around in his mouth before spitting it into a bowl. “As I said, I don’t know these people or the companies you’re referring to. I think you’ve wasted enough of my time.”

I hugged my sides, biting my tongue. From what I knew about Harper he had no respect for women and I didn’t want to inflame things further.

“I don’t mean to take exception to what you’ve told us,” Pearl went on, “but the CEO of Excite Entertainment, Monica Benson...”

Harper's laughter cut Pearl off. While the emaciated producer chortled uncontrollably, we all looked at one another.

Natalie gave a little shrug. “Maybe his happy sack is swollen. I have an aunt who told me before her husband died it was like carryin’ ‘round two bowlin’ balls.”

Thankfully, the famous producer was laughing so hard that he didn’t hear her.

“Benson used to work for me,” Harper finally said. “She left my employment

on less than amicable terms. The bitch would say anything to get back at me. She's a whore."

The irritation in Pearl's voice was evident as he continued, "Nevertheless, Ms. Benson told us that you had an arrangement with Mr. Diamond. He supplied the scripts, the cast, and all the support services for the films, and you supplied the money. According to some figures I pulled together, four of the movies you produced in the past three years have grossed in excess of ten million dollars."

Harper's voice became shrill and angry. "I don't know where you get your figures, but if a couple of companies earned a few dollars then so be it."

"Your companies," I said, unable to keep quiet one minute longer.

"Watch your mouth," Harper snarled.

That was no longer possible. "Approximately six weeks ago Cassie Reynolds worked on the movie, *Summer School*, at Excite Entertainment studios. Were you there?"

His eyes bore into me. "I don't have to account for my whereabouts to you or anyone else. Do you have any idea who you're dealing with?"

"I'm beginning to get a good idea," I said. "Tell me something, do you have any idea who Cassie Reynolds was, or what happened to her father thirty years ago?"

A thin smile parted the producer's lips. "There are many things that I know. His smile grew wider. "Secrets that you could never imagine."

It was clear we weren't getting anywhere, so I decided to prod the nasty little producer and see if he'd give up anything. "Were you and Roger Diamond involved in the murder of Cassie Reynolds?"

Harper's voice became an icy scream, "Sometimes people go away. You could go away."

"Is that a threat, Mr. Harper? Because threatening a police officer is a crime."

Pearl tried to deflect the confrontation. "Kate, I don't think..."

Behind us, doors were flung open and people came running. Harper must have set off an alarm. I ripped off my surgical mask. "Tell me, Mr. Harper, why were you on the set of Cassie Reynolds's movie?"

Harper was on his feet, screaming obscenities. Behind me, I heard someone yell, "Don't let him in there."

I continued. "Did you have something to do with the murder of Cassie Reynolds and Roger Diamond?"

The producer's voice became a shrill scream.

"Or do you just go to dirty movies to watch people fuck?"

Harper had his hands balled into fists. He began swinging his arms wildly through the air, at the same time gasping for breath.

Harper screamed, "I'll have you licking the piss off my bathroom floor."

Natalie ripped off her mask and said, "You're crazier than a shithouse rat."

Something or someone rushed past me. Voices shouted. I turned back to Harper in time to see Bernie land on the screaming little man, pushing him down to the sofa. There was a garbled cry for help as Bernie stood over Harper, his muzzle poised on the famous producer's throat.

Peter Jacobs was at my side, drawing his gun. It was aimed at Bernie. I pushed Jacobs away and sprang forward, calling Bernie off. My partner snarled, but came to my side. I took his leash, controlling him.

A few minutes later, Harper had been led away, screaming. Pearl, Natalie and I were unceremoniously ushered off the grounds of Eastlake by Jacobs and four other armed men. Despite the debacle, the land shark stopped at the gate and asked Natalie for a date.

Natalie wagged a finger and rebuffed Jacobs as only she can, "If you ever wave that peashooter at my friend's dog again, I'll kick your ass from here to Malibu. Go wipe the old coffin dodger's chocolate box before you have to find a way to earn an honest living."

We stopped on the sidewalk near our cars. I turned to my friends and said, "Well, I think that went pretty well."

Pearl smiled and nuzzled Bernie. "Tell me something. Does trouble just naturally find you two?"

I checked my clothing before answering and was happy to discover that nothing was ripped during the fiasco. "It is a talent. I'm just not sure where this trouble leaves us."

I glanced back at the grounds of the estate. Conrad Harper was probably already on the phone with the department lodging a complaint. If that happened, my problems with IAD would only intensify. I remembered what Harper had said when he lost control. I looked back at Pearl.

"What's your take on his statement about secrets we could never imagine?"

"When we find that out," Pearl said, "it just might help us solve a murder or two."

Chapter Eighteen

"We need to discuss a few issues in preparation for the parole hearing," Melvin Coben says to his client. The overhead lights are harsh, shining like a

beacon on the attorney's bald head. "There are some things we need to take care of so there are no mistakes."

"Mistakes are not an option." Nathan Kane studies the wiry little lawyer he pays a small fortune to keep on retainer.

They are meeting in the medical wing of the prison infirmary. The parole hearing is less than forty-eight hours away. The attorney-client privilege keeps any information discussed confidential. Kane speaks freely, without displaying any of the symptoms of the disease that he hopes will facilitate his bid for freedom.

Coben thumbs through the paperwork in front of him. "We have a solid history documenting your medical condition, including the report from your private physician. The prison psychiatrist, a Dr. Wentworth, is also recommending release based upon a finding of medical incapacitation. Her report minimizes any risk you might present to the community."

Kane's dark eyes are fixed on the attorney. "None of that's a surprise. So what's the problem?"

The elderly attorney hesitates, twisting his reading glasses between his fingers. A vein pulses in his forehead.

"There's been an arrest," Coben says. "The man's name is Bobby Jenson. He works here in the medical wing as an orderly. I'm sure you know who I'm talking about."

Anger surges through the prisoner. Why did he trust the little bastard? "Yeah, he's helped me with a couple of small favors." There's little question about what the drug addict has been arrested for, but he asks anyway.

"Drug possession. There was a traffic stop. The arresting officer found a large amount of heroin in the car." Coben puts on his reading glasses, skims the file in front of him. "Jenson is trying to cut a deal for his release. The only reason I know about this is because I've got a friend in the local public defender's office." The attorney's gaze lifts. "He wants to give you up as his connection."

Kane unleashes a torrent of obscenities. He pushes away from the table, at the same time feeling the freedom he's anticipated slipping away.

Coben continues, "The prison authorities don't know anything about this—yet."

"Then we've got to keep them out of it."

"That may not be possible. There's a girlfriend who's quite vocal. She's telling Jenson's attorney that she's coming straight here to give you up unless a deal is cut for her boyfriend's release."

Kane slams a fist on the table. "Take care of it. I need you to buy me forty-eight hours, then I will personally deal with Mr. Jenson and his girlfriend."

Coben swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down in his skinny neck. "You want me to pay her off?"

"I want you to buy them both off. I don't care what it costs. Just see to it that they keep their mouths shut until I'm released."

The attorney is silent. His vision is fixed on the file in front of him.

"What is it?" Kane demands.

"Even if you are released, if the authorities learn about any of this, your parole will be revoked." Coben flinches as he gazes up at his client. "You will be rearrested and required to serve the remainder of your sentence."

Kane smiles, exposing teeth that are long and sharp. "That will never happen."

When Melvin Coben is gone, Kane is escorted back to his room. That night he lies awake, unable to sleep. Anger flows through his veins like liquid fire.

Bobby Jenson and his stupid girlfriend will die. There's no doubt about that. He curses in the darkness, wondering what, if anything, is happening with Jack Bautista and the cop who let him escape. He has no way of making contact with anyone now. Everything will have to wait.

The prisoner looks up at the clock above the doorway in his room. He slams a fist into the wall, breaking the skin on his knuckles. While he's trying to stop the bleeding, an orderly comes into the room and sees the blood.

"What's going on here?" the attendant asks.

The prisoner's muscles twitch and his hands shake. He utters a few words that make no sense. All the symptoms of his disease are on display for the orderly.

Beneath those symptoms lies a more subtle condition, burning like hot coals. Nathan Kane is consumed with rage.

Chapter Nineteen

The morning after our run-in with Conrad Harper, I decided to pay a visit to the Narcotics Enforcement Unit about Mr. Wiener. As I was putting my purse in my desk drawer, Charlie arrived from the break room sipping a diet soda through a straw.

“You look like you’ve been up all night,” I said, noticing he hadn’t shaved and his clothes were more rumpled than usual.

Charlie moaned, rubbed his jaw. “You oughta be a detective.

“How’s the tooth?”

“Haven’t seen it in twenty-four hours. The terrorist took it home to show his wife and kids what a torture device looks like.”

“I don’t understand, if he pulled the tooth, you should be feeling better.”

Charlie sucked air at the bottom of his soda, tossed the can in the trash. “It’s the tooth next to the one he pulled that’s killing me. I’m gonna wrap up a couple of things and then go home, Kate.”

“Take two Vicodin and call me in the morning.”

After Bernie and I strolled across the parking lot, I met up with Chewie Smith and Jimmie Riggs in the Narcotics Enforcement Unit. Their office was located in a portable trailer adjacent to the main building.

Rumor had it that their odd behavior and unsavory associates, rather than the need for additional space, were the department’s reasons for putting them in the portable building. Smith and Riggs liked the arrangement and sometimes referred to themselves as *trailer trash*.

“It appears Mr. Wiener wasn’t just stiffing you,” Smith said after I took a seat next to his messy desk. Bernie settled next to me.

“Yeah, he wasn’t just going off half-cocked,” Riggs agreed. His work station was a table a few feet from Smith’s. It was covered with files and lined with several editions of the state penal code.

After I endured more puns, I said, “So there’s some truth to what he said about Joaquin Robinson?”

Riggs, who once played linebacker for the Rams, took the lead, “So far his story seems legit. We’ve heard rumors about Robinson before, so we’re not entirely surprised. We talked to the D.A. He’s willing to cut Mr. Wiener a deal if we present a solid case.”

“That’s a big if,” I said. “Robinson will get the best lawyers money can buy.”

Chewie Smith walked over to a filing cabinet. “That’s why we’re breaking out

the little guns.”

The heavysset detective had almost as much hair as his Star Wars namesake. He brought a small box over to Riggs’s desk and opened it, showing me what appeared to be a white button that might ordinarily be sewn into a shirt.

Smith got a nod from his partner who was working on his laptop. He held the button between his fingers. “Smile you’re on Butt Cam.”

I watched as Riggs turned the laptop screen in my direction. I heard myself over the computer speakers, saying, “It’s a miniature camera?”

“The technical term is NSD or Neutral Surveillance Device,” Riggs said as Smith turned the Butt Cam in my direction. I saw my image on the laptop.

Riggs disagreed. “The code name for this operation will be the Wiener Cam.

“The company makes different versions, all designed to be sewn or affixed to clothing,” Smith said. He tossed me a lapel flag pin from another container. “Our compliments, although the flag pin is only for sound recordings. All the NSD devices are configured to download to a secure, wireless Internet site.”

Riggs laid out their intention, “The plan is to sew the Wiener Cam into our favorite felon’s shirt before he meets with his basketball buddy this Thursday night after the big game. We’ll get to see the whole deal go down live and record everything to a flash drive.”

“The game’s at seven-thirty, so we figure the postgame action should heat up around eleven,” Smith said. “You’re welcome to watch the proceedings live and in person right here, if you’re so inclined.”

“I’ll be here.”

There were more Wiener puns on the way out the door. Boys will be boys.

When I got back to my desk, I was told I had an emergency phone call. I prayed it wasn’t from IAD or even someone higher up in the chain of command telling me that Conrad Harper had lodged a complaint about last night’s fiasco.

When I took the call, a pleasant voice said, “Ms. Sexton, this is Coventry Surgical Spa. Your mother is ready for discharge. She asked that we contact you.”

I hadn’t talked to my mother since the lunch disaster. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t informed I would be the one to pick her up.”

“Our records indicate that an Amanda Keating was to be the responsible party,” the woman said. “We’ve been trying to locate Ms. Keating but haven’t been successful. Your mother asked us to call you.”

Twenty minutes later, my anger had turned into acceptance, after contemplating various methods of sisterly homicide. Rhonda Blake, the woman

who had called me, escorted Bernie and me through the grounds of Coventry Surgical Spa, past cottages with the names Carmel, Aspen, and Santa Fe. I found my mother in a wheelchair sitting in front of the Monterey Cottage. She looked like a burn victim.

"The surgical dressings will need to remain on for a few days," Blake explained. "It helps reduce the swelling and recovery time."

"How are you feeling, Mother?" Her gray eyes moved behind the thin layer of gauze. She appeared heavily medicated.

"It hurts," Mom said. "They kidnapped me and I was tortured."

Before I could ask, Rhonda Blake explained, "Your mother's got quite the imagination. She's also been having a reaction to the medication. She just needs some rest."

After loading Mom and Bernie into Olive, I got her suitcase, walked around and opened the trunk. The parking lot was nearly deserted. Suddenly, from somewhere behind me I heard tires squealing.

As I turned, a Mercedes with tinted windows skidded around a corner. The engine revved. The car was heading directly for me. I had only seconds to react.

I slammed down the trunk lid and jumped up on my car. The Mercedes screeched past, coming within inches of Olive's bumper.

As quickly as it appeared, the car roared through the parking lot disappearing onto the highway. I cursed myself for panicking, not getting a plate number.

"What's going on?" Mom asked, trying to make eye contact through the swath of bandages and drug haze as I opened Olive's door and got in.

"Damn it." I pulled the door closed, seeing the rip in my white silk blouse. I remembered what I'd paid for the top as I answered her. "I guess somebody just dropped off his wife for a little work and was in a hurry to get home."

My anger over the ripped blouse subsided as Olive popped and rattled through the tree-lined streets of Beverly Hills. It was my second near miss with a black Mercedes in days. The first incident involved the same kind of car nearly running me and Natalie off a cliff in the Hollywood Hills. It was pure speculation, but I wondered if Conrad Harper could somehow be behind both events.

A woman who was having an executive level affair extinguished the thought.

"My name is Margaret Butler," Mom said.

"What? Mom you're hallucinating. It's the drugs."

"We've been having sex. Dick and I are doing the dirty deed."

For some reason, an image of my mother and Harold Wiener in bed flashed

through my mind. I felt a wave of nausea. “Who is Dick?”

“He’s the president.” I think she was smiling through her bandages. “We’ve been screwing in the Lincoln Bedroom.”

I suddenly made the connection. “Nixon?” The thought was almost as revolting as Mom and Mr. Wiener. “You think you’ve been having sex with Richard Nixon?”

Mom giggled. “He’s quite vigorous. I like it when he talks dirty—”

“STOP!”

I pulled the car to the curb. An image of Cher in that old movie *Moonstruck* came to mind. In this version of the classic film, instead of Cher slapping Nicholas Cage, it was me imagining myself trying to knock some sense into my mother.

“Listen to me. You are not living in the 1970s. You are not Margaret Butler. And you are not having sex with Richard Nixon. You are my mother and you just had a face lift. Get a grip!”

Mom’s eyes tried to focus beneath the gauzy veil, raising hope that I’d gotten through. She giggled. “Dick likes to wear his socks with the presidential seal when we make love.”

“God help me!”

I drove on, tuning out the sexual play-by-play as Margaret Butler described the intimate details of a love affair that was beyond bizarre. When I finally got her home and into bed, I said, “Maybe you can sleep off the last forty years, then rejoin the human race.”

I spent most of the afternoon getting Mom settled. I arranged for her best friend, Janet Logan, to take over for me. Janet said that she could stay for most of the week, even after I explained about Mom’s presidential fantasies. A true friend.

I called Captain Jankowitz and explained about my mother, leaving out the presidential calisthenics. Jank was understanding. He allowed me to take the rest of the afternoon off. I spent the time scraping together enough money to buy a new outfit for the night’s Dark Dating event.

At home, I modeled the chocolate brown skirt and jacket for Bernie who gave it a dismissive sniff. He convinced me that the outfit was too conservative.

I ended up squeezing into a black dress that I saved for special occasions. I was suffering from five-pound-weight-gain depression when Robin called and asked me to meet him for a drink.

I left Bernie at home and met my brother at Mulligan’s on Highland, a noisy

little bar filled with golfing memorabilia and great beer.

“I went to Donovan’s estate yesterday, tried to get some answers,” Robin said after we settled in at a table away from the bar. “His bodyguard, Zen, wouldn’t even listen to my questions. He also threatened me.”

“What did he say?”

“He waved a gun around, said he didn’t want to see me there again.” Robin ran a hand through his spiked hair. “Kate, I think something might have happened to Clark—something bad.”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at?”

“When I was at the estate before, Zen told me that he didn’t know who Clark was. But this time he said that if Clark wanted to find me he would. He’s covering something up.” Robin took a moment to compose himself. “Were you able to find out anything through your contacts with the department?”

I felt guilty. I’d been so busy that I hadn’t asked anyone about Wolf Donovan’s bodyguard. I doubted it would change things anyway. Clark was free to make his own decisions, even if they were all the wrong choices.

“I’m still doing some checking,” I said. “Try not to worry. I’m sure Clark can take care of himself.”

“Easier said than done.”

I checked my watch, realizing I had ten minutes to make the dating event. I made my excuses and pecked Robin on the cheek. I turned back to him before leaving. “By the way, what the hell is Dark Dating?”

He shrugged. “Beats me.” He then offered to go by and check on Mom.

I told him a quick version of the Margaret and Dick story, ending it with a warning, “Just try to keep the visuals out of your head.”

I found a line of women in the lobby at the Standard Hotel on Sunset. After waiting my turn, I was greeted by Sara Johnson. My friend was about forty-five with a frank, chubby face. Frizzy brown hair curled over her ears. Was I going to be another Sara a few years down the road? I stifled a wave of depression.

Sara took my hands in hers. “I’m so glad you could come. I think this will be one of our best extreme dating events.”

She was wearing a casual blazer and slacks. I felt overdressed. “I’ve been dying to find out what Dark Dating is all about.”

Sara motioned to the meeting room. “The men enter from the southwest entrance so we can’t see them. The room is completely dark. There will be

guides that lead you to your chairs. After that, it's drinks and conversation." A sly smile. "We just see what develops."

I frowned. "So you're telling me I could end up with a three hundred pound wrestler?"

"Or, a dreamy architect with a home in Malibu overlooking the ocean. The great thing about Dark Dating is that you just never know."

After waiting my turn, I was met by a woman named Alice with a *Dating Guide* nametag. She wore what looked like a cross between 3-D movie glasses and those night vision goggles that soldiers wear.

Alice was businesslike as she gave me instructions. "Please stay at my side until we get you seated. We're going to be moving slowly for your safety."

After I stumbled through the blacked-out room, Alice settled me at a table. I felt disoriented—a little panicky in the darkness as I listened to the thump and jostle of bodies finding their way to tables around me.

After a few minutes, the room quieted. A rustling sound came out of the darkness. I heard Alice's voice, "Kate, I'd like you to meet, Sean."

I put my hand out and Sara guided it to Sean's. His hand was large, a bit rough. Not the hands of an architect.

"Nice to meet you," I said.

"I hope this is a very memorable evening." His voice was friendly, causal. I had the impression he might be older than me, maybe around forty.

We chatted about the darkness and our invisible surroundings, until a server brought us cocktails that glowed in the dark. As we sipped our drinks, I tried to make out my dating partner's features, but it was impossible.

"So what do you do for a living, Sean?"

"I'm an attorney."

The dreamy architect vision popped. Just my luck. The only thing I hate more than lawyers is...there is nothing I hate more than lawyers. Attorneys are Satan's progeny.

"Where do you practice?" I asked.

A hesitation. "South Pasadena. We're a small but respectable firm."

After a few more questions, red flags went up. Sean couldn't tell me where he went to law school, except to say back east, or the kind of cases he represented.

"And what about you?" Sean asked, sounding eager to change the subject. "No, let me guess what you do for a living."

"Fire away."

"An interesting choice of words. I'm betting you're in law enforcement—

maybe a police officer.”

“Wow, that’s amazing.” Red flags were waving somewhere in the darkness.

Sean’s voice came back, softer, “Cops sometimes go looking into things they shouldn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some things are better left alone, especially things that happened long ago.”

My heart raced. I cursed the darkness. “What are you trying to tell me?”

“You need to listen carefully, Detective Sexton. Stay out of things that don’t concern you or you will regret it. You won’t get another warning.”

I stood up. “Who are you?”

“Just a friend.”

“Tell me what’s going on,” I demanded, raising my voice. There was no reply. I heard a rustling sound, the movement of a body. “Where are you?” I yelled.

I sensed Sean was moving away from me. I tried to follow him, bumped against a table and fell hard. A woman screamed.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m trying to find a man.”

A woman’s angry voice came out of the darkness, “We’re all trying to find a man. Get off me.”

I pushed myself up to my feet, trying to get my bearings, but it was impossible.

“Help,” the woman screamed. “Somebody help me.”

There was lots of jostling around me; people asking what was happening. A couple of voices sounded panicky. The lights finally came up. When my eyes adjusted to the brightness, I realized I’d fallen onto the floor on top of a very unhappy, very overweight woman.

“I’m calling the police!” the woman yelled. Her dress had hiked up. Her legs were flailing around. I looked at her stunned date, deciding he would probably be too traumatized to ever date again.

After scanning the room, I was sure Sean was long gone. I turned back to the heavyset woman who was still thrashing around like a beached whale. She yelled, “Somebody needs to call the police, now!”

I lost it. “Shut up!” The room fell silent. “I am the police. Do us all a favor. Put your legs together, pull down your dress, and get up off the floor.”

I walked away, following the woman’s date who was sprinting for the door. I found Sara in the hallway. I asked about Sean.

“I think he was about six feet, a little on the heavy side, but nice looking. He was wearing a baseball cap so I didn’t get a very good look at him.”

“Did he ask for me by name?”

Alice nodded. “He said something about this being a prearranged surprise—kind of like that TV show, *Punked*. He said that you two had dated before and were getting back together. I thought it was unusual, but I didn’t want to spoil a surprise.”

After I finished questioning her I walked away, deciding that I’d probably never date again and end up like Sara Johnson. Dark dating! What the hell was I thinking?

Then I saw it. There was a tear in the seam of my little black dress. I lost it, groaning, “Why is this happening?”

I walked away, cursing the darkness, cursing my date, and cursing my fate.

Chapter Twenty

Dirty Ray's Coffee Shop was located near Highland and Beverly in Hollywood. The shop's deceased original proprietor, Ray, might have been dirty, but he knew how to advertise. Coffee. Cinnamon. Vanilla. Dozens of other scents permeated the air as I walked down the sidewalk with Bernie.

I found Pearl and Natalie on the outdoor deck after getting my Latte and cinnamon roll. It was midmorning, the day after my Dark Dating disaster. The restaurant wasn't crowded. Most of the early morning patrons probably already had their fix of sugar and caffeine and had gone about their business.

I joined my friends at their table, recapping yesterday's events, including almost being run down by the Mercedes and my dating event.

Natalie sipped her tea. "Had me a few dates that were bloody awful like that Dark Dating stuff. Finding a good man like Clyde is as rare as rockin' horse shit."

I smiled, sipped my drink, thinking maybe I should follow Natalie's lead and start canvassing the local convalescent homes for a man.

Pearl set his coffee down. The furrows in the leathery skin above his brows deepened. "You seem to have gotten someone's attention. Any fallout with the department after our evening with Mr. Harper?"

I shook my head. "So far no one seems to know about what happened."

"Maybe Mr. Harper doesn't want to draw any more attention to himself," Pearl speculated.

Natalie nibbled her muffin and then said, "The old arsewipe is lucky Bernie didn't bob for his kabob—turn him into a Sheila."

My canine partner looked up when he heard his name, then rested his head back on my shoe.

Pearl removed some papers from a satchel, handed them across the table. Natalie and I studied what I realized were telephone billing statements. I then saw the name at the top of the invoice.

"Conrad Harper." I looked at Pearl. "I'm not going to ask how you got these."

"I'd appreciate that." He nodded at the invoices that I soon realized contained detailed information about the producer's calling history. "There's a pattern to what you'll find there."

Natalie had scanned ahead. "He keeps calling the same city—Avenal. Isn't that a town on an island off the coast?"

"Wrong direction," Pearl said. "Little place in central California. Middle of

nowhere.”

I looked up from the invoices. “Don’t tell me our favorite producer has a prison pen pal?”

“He’s been calling Avenal State Prison, usually once a week, sometimes more often,” Pearl said.

“Maybe he’s got a secret lover,” Natalie suggested. “I once saw this television show where a gal was doing the banana roundup in the pen with some baghead she married.”

“I’ll make a few inquiries with the prison,” I said. “They should have a record of who he’s contacting.” I held up the invoices to Pearl. “Anything else of interest in here?”

“Harper’s in contact with the major players in the movie industry. Calls all the big directors and stars on a regular basis, but that’s no surprise.”

“What about Roger Diamond?”

Pearl smiled, raised his silver brows. “He was making calls to him a couple of times a week until Diamond’s death. Some of the calls lasted for twenty minutes, a few more than half an hour.”

“So much for Harper’s denials,” I said. The calls to the porn producer triggered a memory about Mo, the prostitute who had put us onto Diamond’s trail. I turned to Natalie. “Any luck in finding Cassie Reynolds’s pimp?”

Natalie set down her tea. “You’re both gonna think I’m a barmcake or somethin’, but I’m startin’ to think Mr. Simpson isn’t a mister.”

I checked my watch, realizing I was late for work as Natalie went on, “I ran down an address one of the girls finally gave up. Simpson had moved out of the apartment, but the landlady told me he thought he was a she—a woman that sometimes dressed like a man.”

I stood up, tugging on Bernie’s leash and said, “A cross-dressing pimp. This is Hollywood—anything’s possible.” As I headed for the sidewalk I said, “I’ll call you both tonight, let you know what I find out from Avenal.”

When I got to the station, Charlie and I went over the afternoon’s warrant serves while Bernie settled in a corner. I asked if he’d heard any scuttlebutt on the Harper free-for-all.

“Nothing. Let’s hope your luck holds.”

I frowned. “Yeah, luck seems to be following me around, even in the dark.” I told him about my Dark Dating event and my run-in with the Mercedes. I then changed the subject to his daughter, “How did it go with the birds and bees talk?”

Charlie took a string of Oreos out of his drawer, lined them up on his desk.

“Tooth must be better,” I said.

“Yeah three hours in the chair and four hundred bucks later I oughta have a gold grill.” He popped a cookie. “Irma told me I’m not her mother, to mind my own business.”

“She was probably just being defensive.”

“Angry is more like it. So, I bring out the sex diary, show her a couple of sections I marked. You know, about taking precautions and that abstinence is the best choice to avoid pregnancy.”

I waited as he popped another Oreo.

“Irma says, and I quote, ‘All my friends are having sex. It’s my life and I’ll do what I want.’ So that’s when I start getting a little upset and say, ‘Not while you’re living in my house.’”

“This doesn’t sound good.”

“So she says, ‘Then I won’t live in your house. If you try and tell me what to do, I’ll move in with B-Boy.’” Charlie popped open a can of diet drink. “B-Boy. Shit.” He guzzled. “So I’m sitting there, steam coming outta my ears. I think to myself, should I even ask her what the B stands for?”

“It’s okay, I don’t need to know.”

Charlie went on anyway, “Irma got this big grin on her face and said, ‘The B stands for Big.’” He wolfed more diet drink. “I think she meant B-Boy got his nickname because he’s hung like a stallion.”

Charlie turned bright red, started to shake. I worried about his blood pressure but wasn’t sure how to help.

“We’ve all made bad choices in relationships. Irma’s still a kid. She’ll grow out of it.”

“Not under my roof.”

“Don’t tell me she’s moving out?”

“Up to her. Long as she’s seeing Bobby Big Dick she’s not living with me.”

I decided it was best to drop the subject. I pushed paperwork around the desk until I got a call from Jimmy Chester. He was at police administration and wanted to meet for lunch. Why not, I thought. Lunch in the Tower with a little rat. My life’s a disaster anyway.

LAPD’s Police Administration Building was built at a cost of over 400 million bucks. It had ten floors, a public park, a 400-seat auditorium, a rooftop garden, a

café, and a fitness center.

The complex also featured a reflection garden and memorial monument honoring the badges of officers killed in the line of duty. My father's badge wasn't included in the display. The official explanation: his unsolved homicide occurred off duty. Every time I thought about the omission, my stomach churned.

After parking in the underground garage, Bernie and I were on our way into the café when I saw Marvin Drake with Carl Brasher, a deputy chief, coming out of an elevator. The two men saw me and abruptly turned, heading for a doorway.

Drake and Brasher went together like two schoolyard bullies. Both men had reputations for being cunning and ruthless. I was sure Brasher, who worked directly under the chief of police, had no impartiality about Bautista's failed arrest. I'd lost my appetite by the time I sat down for lunch with Jimmy the rat Chester.

My union attorney came up from his spaghetti bowl and greeted me. Thin gray moustache. Exuberant front teeth. Aquiline nose. Tiny dark eyes. He came by the nickname honestly.

I got a salad from the deli case and joined him at his table. His moustache twitching, eyes darting, Chester got right to business.

"Don't be surprised if you get notice of an interrogation, Detective Sexton."

"Interrogation?" I picked at my salad. Bernie was resting at my feet, but raised his head, probably sensing my anxiety. "Maybe they'll also try waterboarding, bring out the thumb screws."

"It's the legal term for officers under disciplinary investigation. It allows you a bill of rights, so that any questioning follows a formal procedure, giving you the right to representation."

I took a fork full of salad, thought about my little black dress ripping at the seam, but dipped the lettuce into ranch dressing anyway. "You do know this is all a load of bullshit so that Drake can save face over trying to shoot an unarmed man?"

A moustache twitch followed, like Chester was sniffing for cheese. "They're going to say Jack Bautista was armed and the captain used reasonable force while you interfered."

My blood pressure spiked. "Whose side are you on, Mr. Chester? Do I need to remind you that reasonable force does not mean you try to shoot a man carrying a bag of groceries in the back?"

The rat set his fork down, blotted the spaghetti sauce off his moustache. He

splayed his arms. “I’m on your side, Detective. I’m just telling you how I think this will play out.”

I took a deep breath, trying to settle my nerves. “The OIS report should clear me of any wrongdoing.”

The rat was heading back to the spaghetti bowl and said, “Haven’t seen it, but I hope so.”

“You haven’t seen it?” I stood and tossed my salad in the nearest receptacle. My gaze met the rodent’s beady eyes as they came back up from the bowl. “Doesn’t the bill of rights allow me to see evidence that might be presented at my so called interrogation?”

Chester stood. “Calm down, Detective. We’ll get access to the report, but they don’t have to provide it until the interrogation. Then we’ll see if they have any kind of case.”

I ran a hand through my damp hair. “See you at the inquisition.” I pivoted away from the rat, pulling Bernie with me as I left the café.

Charlie and I spent the afternoon chasing bad guys through an apartment complex not too far from the Pinewood. As Bernie and I were heading home, Wilma Bibby called to let me know she’d found the Carmichael reports. A short drive later, I was standing in the Records Identification Bureau with my mouth open.

“Wilma, what happened?”

The records clerk did a little pirouette, showing off a hairstyle that was something out of the Miley Cyrus punk school of cosmetic catastrophes. Her hair was bright red, spiked, cut within two inches of her scalp. Flaming red lipstick and magenta shadow completed the makeover meltdown.

“I have a friend in beauty school,” Wilma explained. “What do you think?”

I think you lost your mind, Wilma. The hair is a disaster. You look like a chunky radish. It’s not Halloween.

“It’s very trendy. You’ll probably get noticed more.” I’m a very polite liar, sometimes.

“It’s easy to get ready in the morning,” Wilma said, handing over the Carmichael reports. “This was misfiled—wrong month and year.”

I was surprised that the file only contained three sheets of paper. The report said John Carmichael was last seen at his place of business on September 16, 1984. It had been filed by a Lydia Grayson, the secretary for the missing

filmmaker. Grayson reported that Carmichael had not been seen for two days and calls to his home had gone unanswered. The woman wasn't aware of anyone who might want to harm him and she didn't think he was despondent at the time he disappeared.

I looked up at Wilma. She had a compact mirror out and was primping. "Are you sure there aren't more reports? This is the initial Missing Persons Report. There should be a supplemental report, at the very least, indicating that the investigation was closed."

"I'm still looking, but so far nothing's turned up."

I thanked her and pushed away from the counter. "I hope George likes the new do."

"There's a church social this Friday. George should be there. I'll let you know."

I hoped George was on medication.

I was on Melrose passing Highland Avenue on my way home when my headlights swept over a hitchhiker on the side of the road. As I passed him, the man's cap rose and a smile parted his lips. Was I imagining things or had I just passed by Jack Bautista?

I pulled to the curb. The hitchhiker was several yards behind me, walking in my direction. Maybe it wasn't Bautista. Picking up a hitchhiker in Hollywood was like playing Russian Roulette. I locked Olive's doors, resting my hand on the gun in my purse. I said to Bernie, "Heads up."

Bernie whined as a hand knocked against the window. The wanted detective bent down and smiled at me. I exhaled, unlocked the door, and told Bernie to settle.

"Just so you know, I don't usually pick up hitchhikers."

He smiled, but I saw the fatigue in his face. "Just so you know, I never take rides from strangers."

I pulled away from the curb as he buckled in, said hi to Bernie. "You look a little beat down, Jack."

"Not much fun sleeping in the park." He found a smile again. "I could use a shower, maybe a warm bed if someone made me an offer."

"Get a room."

He managed a chuckle. "So tell me about your visit with Harper."

I filled him in on everything. We then discussed the producer's connection to

Roger Diamond.

“As I said before, Cassie never mentioned him but she wasn’t one to drop names. Maybe Harper has a secret life. I’ve heard rumors about him being a sex addict.”

I told him I was planning to call Avenal State Prison in the morning. “Once we see who Harper’s in contact with, we may have another lead.” I then told him about finding the initial missing persons report on John Carmichael. I saw that he was glancing in Olive’s side mirror.

“I think we may have some company,” he said.

I now saw the headlights, less than a block behind us.

“Turn at the next street,” Jack said. “Circle the block and let’s see if he follows.”

I did as suggested. We saw the lights disappear and then reappear, this time a little farther back.

“We definitely have someone’s attention.”

“Maybe you should drive to the station?”

I considered the suggestion, but said, “I think I’ll go to the mall. It’s close by, well-lighted. I’ll turn some light on the cockroach.”

“It could be someone looking for me.” He hesitated. “Will you be okay on your own?”

“I’ll circle around through the alley, drop you in the middle of the next block.”

The street was deserted when Bautista got out of the car. He bent down to me.

I couldn’t see his face but sensed he was smiling. “I still haven’t given up on that shower and bed.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

I sped away and turned onto Highland, again seeing the headlights following at a distance. A few minutes later, I parked Olive at the La Brea Mall. I wanted to see who was following me and thought Bernie might give somebody second thoughts. I secured him in Olive, and walked inside.

I lingered near the entryway before strolling along a row of shops. When I got to a Victoria’s Secret store, a display caught my attention. I had less than twenty dollars in my purse, but that didn’t stop me. I smiled at the realization I was shopping while being stalked—a sure sign of a serious shopping addiction.

I came across a lavender chemise on clearance that I couldn’t resist. I decided if I could scrape together enough for the tax, I might be able to afford it. As I was mining for quarters, I saw a familiar face in the corner of my eye.

The IAD detective was lingering near the store entrance, checking prices in

the bra and panty section. I recognized Bill Preston from a training session the brass had put on a couple of years ago. He had a dopey expression on his round face as he waved away a sales clerk.

Inspiration struck. I couldn't pass up an opportunity like this. I wished that my snoop sister was here to enjoy the proceedings.

I walked directly toward Preston, gathering up several panties and a couple of bras from the display table. I stopped less than five feet from the detective who was turned away from me. I cleared my throat, speaking loud enough so that anyone within ten feet could hear.

"It's okay Margaret, there's no need to be shy. Lots of people have sex change operations."

No response. Preston twisted his big head slightly in my direction, but was still turned away. I walked around the table, facing him directly.

I looked up into the fleshy folds of his face and said, "I know it's the first time you've been shopping since your penis was removed, but try to relax. I've brought you some panties and a bra to try on. Once we get you a good foundation, we'll look for a dress."

Preston's pasty complexion turned scarlet. Laughter bubbled up among the patrons around us. The burly cop stammered, "I don't know what you think you're trying to do, but you'd better stop."

I turned to the salesclerk who was also trying to suppress her laughter. "He's going through such a difficult time. It's not easy when people still call you a big dick after you've been castrated."

Preston swiveled around and rushed out of the store. I nearly fell into a display rack laughing. I held up a pair of panties and a bra and said to the salesclerk, "Don't you think Margaret would look great in these?"

The clerk had a big grin and shook her head. "I think maybe he needs something that's a little less revealing."

Chapter Twenty-One

The prisoner is wheeled into the Avenal State Prison administrative hearing room. All eyes turn to Nathan Kane.

The inmate has purposely worn a medical gown to the proceedings to emphasize his disability. He sits low in his wheelchair, making his physical presence small and nonthreatening, like an invalid that has been delivered to the proceedings from a convalescent hospital.

Kane puts on his performance, exhibiting all the classic symptoms of Parkinson's Dementia. As the minutes pass, his gaze eventually drifts over to his attorney who sits next to him. A whispered inquiry about Bobby Jenson and his girlfriend is made. Melvin Coben nods his head and smiles. Their silence has been purchased.

There are two commissioners on the parole panel. Kane knows all about them. Their parole decisions are a matter of public record. He's studied their past determinations. Nothing is a sure bet, but he likes his odds with these liberal jurists.

The district attorney's office has been notified of the hearing as required. Kane is pleased when the commissioners state on the record that no one from the prosecutor's office is present. His conviction for manslaughter with the possibility of parole is formally read into the record before Melvin Coben rises and calls Dr. Henry Bailey to the stand.

The middle-aged physician with thick gray hair and silver wire-rimmed glasses makes his living testifying in court proceedings. Dr. Bailey spends ten minutes covering his medical expertise before getting to the prisoner's medical condition and related symptoms.

Coben takes his time questioning the witness, making sure the jurists have a complete picture of his client's impaired mental functioning. By the time the doctor is through, Kane's attorney almost believes Dr. Bailey's testimony. The physician has earned his substantial fee.

Dr. Marsha Wentworth takes the stand next. Coben takes a few minutes going over the psychiatrist's impressive credentials. He then gets right to the point.

"Dr. Wentworth, in your expert opinion as a psychiatrist for the State of California, is there any risk Mr. Kane poses if he is released to the community?"

The psychiatrist's tone is professional, without a hint of emotion. Her eyes are fixed on the attorney, never once drifting over to his client. "There is virtually no risk, given his deteriorating medical condition. He will likely spend his

remaining days under strict medical supervision.”

“Any chance Mr. Kane’s condition might spontaneously improve?”

“As Dr. Bailey has already testified, Parkinson’s Dementia is a progressive disorder of the central nervous system involving the loss of memory and the impairment of cognitive functions. There are medications that can help with some of the symptoms, but they have not been effective in Mr. Kane’s case.”

Coben folds his arms and asks Wentworth to summarize the patient’s prognosis.

“While there is no imminent danger of death, it is likely Mr. Kane will continue to exhibit a progressive deterioration of his cognitive abilities. Based upon those factors, I would categorize his prognosis as extremely poor.”

“Thank you, Dr. Wentworth.” Coben turns away from the witness, his vision sweeping over the prisoner for a moment. Kane thinks his attorney is about to dismiss the psychiatrist, but Coben turns back to her and says, “On a scale of one to ten, Doctor, with ten being the highest degree of risk, what number on this scale would you assign to Mr. Kane?”

Marsha Wentworth doesn’t hesitate. “Zero. There is no risk.”

Kane is pleased. The good doctor, true to her word, has performed admirably. Amazing what a little fear and intimidation will do.

After some housekeeping duties, the commissioners begin their summary findings. Ben Walker, the elderly jurist who Kane knows was appointed by the governor nearly a decade earlier, goes first.

“I have concluded, based upon the expert testimony presented today, there is no basis to consider the prisoner an imminent danger to the community if released.” Walker looks at his counterpart. “Any disagreement?”

Commissioner Ann Warren, a retired parole agent, takes a sip of water. She leans back in her chair. Her eyes linger on the prisoner before she speaks.

“While there is no doubt Mr. Kane exhibits signs of mental deterioration, I do have concerns about the serious nature of his offense, which involved the death of another human being.” Warren’s eyes cut to Kane’s attorney. “Despite the testimony presented today, I’m not completely convinced there is no risk to the community.”

Melvin Coben is on his feet, shouting in rebuttal, “Commissioner Warren, my client can barely speak or walk. He has the mental capacity of a five-year-old child and wears a diaper. The issue before this panel is not his crime, but rather his risk to the community given the severity of his medical incapacitation. Mr. Kane is not on trial here and...”

Ben Walker raises a hand and then his voice, silencing Coben's outburst. "Let's all calm down. I'd like to adjourn these proceedings and take some additional time to review the records in this case with my associate commissioner." The jurist checks with the administrative clerk for a date to resume the hearing. "We are continuing this matter for forty-eight hours."

The commissioners abruptly leave the hearing room.

Melvin Coben collapses back into his chair and sighs. He hesitates, before turning slowly to his client. Nathan Kane's rage-filled eyes are already locked on the attorney.

His client's voice is barely controlled—a venomous hiss of rage, "This had better go as we've planned or your head will roll."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The morning after my run-in with Bill Preston, I spent an hour waiting around the Highland Center Mall parking garage to serve a warrant on Stanley Miller. The convicted sex offender had a 290 PC warrant for failure to register his address with the local police. I used the down time to call Avenal State Prison.

"Inmates are allowed to make and receive calls without being monitored," Patty Washington explained. The clerk sounded more like a reservationist at an upscale hotel than a prison records clerk. "Unless there's some unusual circumstance, involving a court order, we don't keep a log of those calls."

As I made notes, I heard Charlie say, "Miller's been spotted moving toward us, Kate."

I nodded and said into the phone, "I'm trying to establish a link to someone who would have started making calls to an inmate around May of 2012. Can you check your admission records and tell me who might have been sentenced or transferred to your institution around that time?"

"I'd be happy to just as soon as we come back on line. Computer problems. If you'd like I can fax or e-mail the information."

I gave her my e-mail address just as Charlie and I got the go signal over the radio. Chuck Loman, an officer assigned to the taskforce for the day, was on the radio.

"Take down...take down...I'm in pursuit...suspect is running north through the parking garage."

"Let's move to the entrance," Charlie said. "We'll see if baby boy runs to daylight."

We took up positions at the parking attendant's booth with guns drawn, listening to the radio calls.

"He's moving down...level three is clear...last seen in Section 2-B..."

A delivery truck roared out of the garage. After it passed, I saw that Charlie was motioning to me and counting. "One...two..."

On the count of three, we ran into the garage at the same time we heard footsteps coming around the corner from the upper level. Stanley Miller stopped in his tracks, staring down the barrels of our guns. The wanted man, who was wearing nothing but a diaper, put his hands up.

"Don't shoot," Miller screamed, spitting out a pacifier and hitting the pavement at the same time we heard a low rumbling sound.

Charlie cuffed the suspect and jumped back, waving a hand. "I think he just

did the dirty squirty, Kate.”

I backed up, trying to keep my distance from the chubby sex offender.

Loman came around the corner. He stopped, trying to catch his breath.

“You’re doing the transport,” Charlie said to Loman. He turned to Miller. “You are one sick fuck.”

It was out of character for Charlie to curse at a suspect. He almost never loses his cool, but Stanley Miller had pushed him to the limit. There’s just something about a grown man who has a fetish that involves hiring underage girls to burp him and change his diapers that pushes all the wrong buttons.

Charlie motioned to the suspect and told Loman, “You can keep the handcuffs as a souvenir. I’d hose the bastard down.”

As we walked back to the cars, we took several deep breaths, trying to clear our senses of Stinky Stanley. I’d held Bernie back, keeping him in Olive due to a sore right leg that I’d noticed last evening. My hairy partner had hurt himself running off and trying to jump a fence to get at an Irish setter.

I told Charlie I was going to check on my mother and come back to the station later that night to watch the Harold Wiener show.

I found Mom at home, propped up on several pillows. She was still swathed in bandages. Her face was badly swollen, eyes and lips grotesquely protruding through the openings in the surgical dressings.

Robin was in a chair next to her bed and said, “Makes me think twice about that chin implant I was considering.”

“Mother, can you hear me?” I touched her hand. There was no response. I turned to Janet Logan who was hovering at the foot of her bed. “Has the doctor been by to check on her?”

“The nurse from the clinic came by early this morning. They increased her medication. I was told the swelling should start to go down by tomorrow.” Janet shook her head. “I’m a little worried. She’s been hallucinating.”

“Margaret Butler’s been with the president again,” Robin explained.

I did an eye roll. “Of all the men down through history that she could fantasize about—Richard Nixon?”

Mother moaned in a slow, guttural way and said, “Now I know why they call you Tricky Dick.”

I turned to Robin. “Medication can be a horrible thing.”

As we began to leave the room, Mom started to moan again and again and again.

Robin looked at me. “I think she’s having an orgasm.”

“God help us,” I said. “We’re scarred for life.” I turned to Janet. “She’s all yours.”

Robin and I found a bottle of Chianti in the fridge. It was only noon. I had to go back to work later, but watching your mother have an orgasm will drive a person to drink.

We settled on the couch as Robin told me the latest, “Clark called me last night.”

“Thank God. What’s been going on?”

“He’s been at Donovan’s ever since the party, just like I thought. I think he and Bon Bon have hooked up, but he denied it.”

Robin’s eyes were glassy. I squeezed his hand.

“I asked him if he was using,” Robin continued. “He said no, but I know he’s lying.”

“I made a few inquiries at the station,” I said. “No one seems to know much about his bodyguard, Zen, but I’m meeting with some narcotics detectives tonight so I thought I’d ask them.”

My brother took a sip of wine. “Clark told me he needs some space, that he’s reassessing his life and relationships.” He looked at me. “Is that bullshit, or what? I’m going back to Donovan’s tomorrow and confronting him face-to-face.”

The last thing my brother needed to do was tangle with Donovan’s bodyguard again. “Do me a favor. Let me talk to the detectives before you do anything. I don’t want you getting into a situation that might be dangerous.”

Robin smiled in a way that reminded me of when he was a boy. “Always the big sister.”

“Always,” I said and kissed his cheek.

At eleven that night, I found Chewie Smith and Charlie Riggs in their portable office building typing away on their laptops. The smell of hot coffee hit me when I walked through the door. The trailer was a mess of files, paperwork, and pizza boxes.

Riggs was picking up his cell phone as Chewie said, “Get a cup of coffee and pull up a chair. We’re tuning into the Wiener channel now.”

I poured two packets of sugar into black coffee as Bernie settled in the corner. “Do you think Mr. Wiener can pull this off?” I asked.

Riggs smiled. Thankfully, he must have realized I’d reached my pun capacity.

“He’s at PSP now. Jim Baylor is there hooking up the Wiener Cam.” He motioned to the laptop.

I watched as the computer began receiving a signal. The detective said into his phone, “We got game, Jim. Everything is a go.” Riggs checked his watch. “It’s getting late. Let’s send Mr. Wiener into the parking structure now.” He put down the phone. “Let’s just hope the Wiener scores tonight.”

“He better not come up short,” Smith said.

Guess they weren’t finished with the puns. We watched as Harold Wiener began walking through Pro Sports Pavilion, the camera sewn into his shirt recording his every move.

While we waited, I asked about Wolf Donovan’s body guard. “The guy goes by Zen. He’s a body-builder type who likes to wave his gun around.”

Riggs looked at his partner. “Every time I think about that son of a bitch, my toe starts to throb.”

Smith took a bite of pizza and, with his mouth full, said, “Zachary Edward Nolan or Zen...” He swallowed. “Hey we should have a mug.” Riggs began thumbing through a file as Smith continued, “We arrested him last year for possession of meth. The bust went down at Donovan’s estate after a party got out of control.” He worked on his pizza again. “Surprised you didn’t hear about it.”

“I might have been on vacation. I remember hearing something about a disturbance while I was gone, but didn’t make the connection.”

“During Zen’s arrest, my esteemed colleague, Mr. Riggs, suffered a broken toe and was out of action for about four weeks.”

“That fat toad Bon Bon stepped on it during the melee.” Riggs flipped open another file and said, “Bingo.” He held up the mug shot of the bodyguard.

The mug was a more menacing version of the man I’d seen at Club SUK a few days earlier. Zen had dark eyes and a shaved head, except for a long black ponytail in the back. I learned that he was twenty-nine, six feet two, and two hundred twenty pounds. Perfect bully dimensions. I couldn’t imagine Robin confronting him.

I handed the mug back to Riggs. “Karate kid on steroids.”

“Yeah, but this kid is not only using, he’s also selling drugs. He beat the rap only because Donovan hired the best lawyer money can buy. Hung the jury. He’s bad news.”

“I think Mr. Wiener is getting close to some action,” Smith said, motioning to the laptop.

We watched as the camera recorded a group of men standing near a silver

Mercedes. Harold Wiener said something by way of a greeting as a tall man arrived.

"That's Robinson," Riggs said.

The camera panned around. I was a little concerned about the quality of the images in the dim parking garage. The recording would be the key piece of evidence in any prosecution.

I also began to worry when Harold Wiener opened his mouth. Our informant was trying to fit in, but was obviously nervous.

The camera moved closer to the basketball star. Small talk about the night's game was exchanged. Wiener then said, "Can you help me out tonight?"

Robinson smiled down into the camera. "Bad timing little man. Things are tight."

Wiener persisted, but his request was again denied. Robinson became upset. The camera's lens came closer to the basketball star as he went off on our informant. "I got nothing for you," Robinson said. "Get away from me."

"Shit," Riggs said. "He's blowing it."

Wiener's voice pitched higher, his desperation surfacing. "Please help me out, just this once. I've got to score something or I'm in trouble."

"Idiot," Riggs fumed.

The camera then caught angry images of Joaquin Robinson saying, "This is a setup."

Muffled sounds. The camera panned wildly around. Robinson could be seen getting into his car.

The scene shifted again, the camera moving in the basketball star's direction. Robinson rolled up his window, nearly catching his pursuer's fingers.

More images swam across the screen. Our informant was circling the car. The scene then went dark.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I think Robinson's got a Wiener on top of his car," Smith said. "He's driving a Wiernmobile."

We heard a revving engine, squealing tires.

Riggs had kept his phone open and asked, "What's going on, Jim?"

As reports came back from the detective in the parking garage, Riggs repeated what he heard, acting like a play-by-play announcer at a strange sporting event. A Wiener round-up?

"Wiener is on top of Robinson's car...they're speeding through the parking garage...there's a lot of screaming, crying...the car has stopped...Robinson is

peeling Mr. Wiener off the car...Robinson has taken off again...our informant is on the pavement, wailing like a baby.”

Riggs turned to us. “What the hell should we do now?”

“Put him back in cuffs and take him to jail,” Smith said. “I knew the idiot couldn’t pull this off.”

A few moments later, Riggs ended his call and said, “Mr. Wiener is back in custody. He’s crying like a baby, wet his pants.”

I stood and stretched, then gathered up Bernie who was sound asleep in a corner of the office. “Sorry this didn’t go as we hoped. Better luck next time.”

I was headed for the door when I heard Riggs say to Smith, “I wonder if Diamond was Robinson’s runner? It would explain the supply problem.”

I stopped and turned back to them. “Did you just say the name Diamond?”

“Yeah, Roger Diamond,” Riggs said. “Mid-level dealer who supplied some of the local users before he turned up dead last week.”

I was quiet, wheels turning.

“You okay, Kate?” Smith asked.

I smiled at the detectives. “My day just got a whole lot better.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

I wasn't scheduled to be at work until noon the next day, so Natalie and I paid a visit to Pearl Kramer in the morning. As we walked up the pathway to the cottage, Bernie trotted behind us, still favoring his sore leg.

The vet had checked my hairy partner and assured me it was only a sprain, but I still worried. Maybe Bernie was bringing out the maternal side in me.

"Got a fresh pot of coffee on the patio," Pearl announced, after greeting us.

On the way to the patio, we got a tour of his cottage. Casual furnishings. Overstuffed sofa, chairs. There were also lots of paintings, some his own, and masks.

"I've been a mask collector for twenty years," Pearl said. "Some are primitive, a few are from Africa. Even have an assortment of Mardi Gras masks."

Natalie pointed out a party mask with a downturned expression. "Looks like a guy I once knew in Liverpool. Nuttier than a squirrel's cheeks."

Pearl showed us to the patio where we saw the unfinished painting he was still working on. I saw that some forms were starting to take shape. Modern art?

"Still waiting for the images to find me," Pearl explained, referencing the painting. He poured us cups of steaming coffee.

We took seats on the patio where I told Pearl and Natalie about Roger Diamond possibly being Joaquin Robinson's drug connection.

"According to the detectives, the dearly departed was into both porn and drugs. He used his connection to the drug trade to curry favor with celebrities and athletes."

Pearl's silver hair glistened in the mid-morning sunlight. "Any speculation about Harper being involved in the drug scene with Diamond?"

"No, but this is where it gets interesting." I took my cell phone from my purse and handed it to Pearl. He seemed confused until I explained that my phone received e-mail.

He put on his glasses; studied the screen. "Phones with e-mail? What's next?" I showed him how to scroll down to the message from Avenal State Prison. It read:

Detective Sexton;

Per our conversation I've attached the list of inmates either sentenced or transferred to Avenal from 2012 until the present. As I mentioned, we don't keep logs of telephone calls unless there's a legal issue, but we do have visitation records if you find someone of interest. Regards,

Patty Washington
Avenal State Prison
Inmate Records Division

Pearl began scrolling through the list of names before removing his glasses and looking over to me. "Nathan Kane?"

I nodded, meeting his gaze.

Natalie was examining the screen over Pearl's shoulder. "Who is this Kane fellow? The way you're actin' he must be some kinda prison rock star."

"Kane was transferred to Avenal from Folsom in May of 2012," I said to Pearl. "Ostensibly for medical treatment and because of a downward classification of his risk level."

Pearl handed the phone back to me. He massaged his brow as I continued, "I called Patty Washington this morning. She checked the visitation records. There's no record of Harper ever visiting Kane, but..."

"Let me guess," Pearl said, still kneading his brow. "Roger Diamond?"

"He visited Kane on a regular basis, up until about two weeks ago."

Natalie was up, pacing. "Okay, I'm startin' to get a case of the uglies 'bout this Kane fellow."

Pearl pulled back his chair and stood up. He freshened his coffee and said, "As I recall, Nathan Kane was sentenced to life in prison for murder and some drug charges back in the nineties. The vic had something to do with organized crime."

"An east coast operative named Marty Rubin," I said. "According to the case summary Patty Washington read to me this morning, Rubin was connected to an east coast syndicate that ran drugs from Columbia. The organization was trying to establish a foothold on the west coast and began supplying drugs to the L.A. area."

"Kane controlled almost all the drug traffic at the time and a turf war developed. He wanted to send a message to the syndicate and Rubin ended up floating in a canal over in Venice. The feds got involved, Kane eventually admitted the murder to an informant. He plea-bargained the case in state court to a life term."

Natalie clapped her hands. "Now we've got a gangsta involved in our case. This thing is gettin' bigger than Paul McCartney's alimony payments."

"According to the department's narcs," I went on, "Kane is still behind a lot of the drug trade in Hollywood. He's pulling the strings, using people like Diamond, even while he's been behind prison walls all these years."

Pearl walked back to us and sat down. "I'm beginning to think Natalie is right."

We're onto something big, Kate, especially if Harper's involved in the drug business with Kane."

"But why would a rich bampot like Harper be involved in the drug trade with somebody like Kane?" Natalie asked. "What's in it for him?"

"Now you're thinking like a detective, Natalie?" Pearl said.

I set my coffee cup down. "There could be lots of reasons. Maybe Harper took some special interest in the porn business and decided the tax breaks were too good to pass up. Or, it could be that Kane has something on Harper from the past and he's been using him all these years."

"Like blackmail?" Natalie asked.

"Maybe. We know from the phone records that Harper started making calls to Avenal in early 2012. The calls have continued on a regular basis since that time. There's no one else on the inmate list he would have any reason to call."

I picked up my coffee, took a sip. "Maybe you two could work on the motive issue. We need to know what connection Harper has to Kane and how Diamond might have played into that."

"We're on it like gum on a shoe," Natalie said, beaming.

"And, then there's the Cassie Reynolds connection," Pearl said. "The question is still out there. What did Cassie know that got her killed?"

I finished my coffee. "I'm planning to pay Mr. Kane a visit later today. I'll let you know what I find out."

Bernie and I arrived at the station at noon. Charlie greeted me, fanning out a dozen pink messages like the winning hand in a poker game. "You get more phone calls than Irma."

I grabbed the messages. "How's our favorite teenager?"

"Packing." I glanced up from the messages. Charlie looked like hell. "She's moving out this weekend."

"I'm so sorry." I reached across the desk, touching my partner's hand in sympathy. He acted like I'd put his fingers in a flame and pulled away.

"Kid's gotta learn," Charlie said. "Besides, I think she's bluffing."

"I hope you're right." I noticed I had a message from Mr. Wiener asking me to contact him. I showed it to Charlie just to relieve the tension. "He must have written it in the middle of the night, had the jail express mail it."

"Heard the Wiener show was a flop."

I filled him in on the disaster. I then spent the next fifteen minutes telling him

about Conrad Harper's phone calls to Avenal and Roger Diamond's visits to the convicted killer.

After listening to the developments, Charlie said, "I think you'd better take a look at your last message. Afraid IAD wants you to call."

After another one of Charlie's *watch your back* lectures, I called IAD and was informed Detective's Blaylock and Preston wanted to meet with me as soon as I could get to their office.

I hung up the phone, felt a pounding in my head. I found some Godiva Chocolate in my desk drawer and wolfed it down before Charlie could jump me for it.

I took Bernie by the leash and said, "Do me a favor, Daddy. Let the captain know that I'm heading downtown to meet with IAD and then going home sick."

After an hour in stop-and-go traffic, Bernie and I arrived at the Bradbury Building in downtown Los Angeles where IAD was located. The Bradbury was a couple of blocks from the Police Administration Building and was home to something called, The Professional Standards Bureau. The department had recently given the Internal Affairs Division a name change, maybe hoping to improve its image, but everyone still called it IAD.

The Bradbury was one of the oldest commercial buildings in Los Angeles. A central Victorian courtyard that rose almost fifty feet from the first floor, opened to caged elevators and marble stairways with ornate iron railings. The place had a comfortable feel that recalled a simpler era. It seemed out of place for a division that sometimes went out of its way to make life miserable for honest cops trying to do a thankless job.

I took the elevator to the top floor where a secretary led me to an ornate conference room with lots of oak paneling and even a fireplace. I found Blaylock and Preston sitting at an oval table like rigor mortis had set in. Maybe working for IAD caused both stupidity and muscle rigidity. Blaylock stood and motioned for me to take a seat.

I made a point of looking at Preston. When he didn't make eye contact, I leaned over the table and said, "Done any shopping lately?"

The beefy detective blushed. He glanced at his partner who was giving him a questioning look.

Blaylock reached into a briefcase and shoved an official looking document across the desk at me. "This is formal notice that you will be subject to interrogation proceedings this Friday at 11:00 a.m. in this office. You have the right to representation during the proceedings, if you so desire. The letter

explains your other rights.”

I scanned the document, then folded it in half. I cut my eyes to Blaylock who showed no emotion. “Why am I under investigation?”

Preston spoke before his partner could answer, “Possible disciplinary action related to your conduct on October 2nd during the failed arrest of a felon wanted on a murder warrant.” The chubby detective’s grin was a twelve on a ten point shit-eating scale.

“I want the OIS report.”

“If the report is used during your interrogation, you’ll get a copy then,” Blaylock answered. “Not before.”

As I was heading for the door, Blaylock noticed Bernie was limping. “So, what happened to your partner?”

I stopped and turned back to the detective. “Bernie wanted to get laid and came up limp.” I motioned to Preston. “Heard your partner’s an expert on that. Let me know if he wants to give you a fashion show and starts singing soprano in the church choir.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Melvin Coben sits next to Nathan Kane as they wait for the two parole commissioners to enter the hearing room. The clock on the wall above where the jurists will sit shows that it's after four. The commissioners are half an hour late.

Kane whispers to his attorney when he's sure no one is watching, "What the hell's taking so long?"

"Probably just dealing with some administrative issues," Coben says. "Prisons run on paperwork, if nothing else."

Kane hates the little bastard and his excuses. When this is over, he decides, Coben will find himself out of a job. It's taken months to get his hearing on the parole calendar and now he senses his long sought freedom is in jeopardy. If he dies in prison, Kane will make sure before he's gone that the attorney will suffer for his incompetence.

Ten minutes later, the doors to the hearing room swing open. Ben Walker and Ann Warren take their seats. The hearing is called back into session.

Walker renders his decision first. "When we adjourned, I stated on the record that I do not consider the prisoner a threat to the health and safety of the community." He pauses, letting his eyes sweep over Kane and his attorney. "I maintain that position. I state again for the record, based upon the medical issues presented at this hearing, I have no opposition to a compassionate parole release for Mr. Kane."

Walker leans back in his chair, looks at his counterpart. Kane lets his dark eyes sweep up to the female jurist. Ann Warren looks exhausted, maybe from arguing against his parole. If she denies his release, the bitch will pay with her life.

"I have carefully considered all of the testimony and reports prepared for this hearing," Warren begins. "I want to again state for the record I have concerns about parole based upon the serious nature of the prisoner's conviction. However, I am now convinced that the costs of continuing to incarcerate this prisoner, given his serious and deteriorating medical condition, mitigate what would be gained by continuing to house him in a secure setting. I have also studied the extensive medical records in this case. I am persuaded that the defendant's medical condition makes the risk to public safety minimal."

Kane senses the jurist is trying to make eye contact before rendering her final decision. He keeps his eyes downcast but moves a shaky hand up to his mouth, concealing the smile he is unable to suppress.

"I concur with Commissioner Walker," Ann Warren says. "However, while I

said there is minimal risk to the public, that does not mean there is no risk.”

A rage explodes in Nathan Kane. What is the bitch saying? If she considers him a risk there will be no release. He will spend the rest of his life in prison.

“I agree that a release on parole should be granted,” Commissioner Warren states, “under the condition that the prisoner is required to wear an electronic monitoring device at all times. Should he tamper with or remove that device it will cause an immediate alert so that his parole can be revoked and he will be returned to this facility.”

Melvin Coben thanks the jurists before they adjourn the hearing and leave the room. He then reaches over, tries to shake his client’s hand. “We did it. You’re free.”

Kane refuses the handshake. He is livid. “What about the monitoring?” he whispers.

“Just a formality. You wear an ankle bracelet for a few months and go about your business. Eventually they’ll remove the monitor and you’re free.”

“Eventually. In the meantime it means they will know my every move, watch everything I do.”

“Yes, but..”

Kane holds up his beefy hand, silencing the attorney. “How soon?” Kane murmurs. “When can I walk out the door?”

“Let me check with the administrative clerk.” He tells the orderly who has come for his client to wait while he speaks with the clerk.

When he returns, Coben bends over to Kane and says, “They will begin processing the release papers immediately. The electronic monitoring is another matter. They probably won’t be able to hook you up until tomorrow morning.”

Kane dismisses Coben. He lets the orderly push his wheelchair through the now empty hearing room. Before he leaves, his eyes move up and sweep over the desert landscape outside the window. He could be in Hollywood by noon tomorrow if all goes as he’d planned. But there are a few other matters to attend to first. Things that no electronic monitoring device will be able to stop.

When they move back into the medical wing, the orderly is handed a note from one of the clerks. He reads the request before abruptly changing directions, moving Kane back out of the medical ward.

“Looks like a busy day for you,” the orderly says. “You’ve got a visitor.

Chapter Twenty-Five

After meeting with the IAD detectives, I dropped off Bernie at my mother's house with orders to attack if there was any sign of an orgasm. I then went home and changed into a pair of pants and a sweater. On my way out the door, I wolfed down some Ghirardelli Chocolate squares for my headache.

Three hours later, Olive belched to a stop in the parking lot of Avenal State Prison. The little desert community north of Los Angeles was in the middle of nowhere. Cold. Windy. A barren moonscape. All things considered, a good place for thieves and killers.

I showed my credentials at the inmate visiting center where an attractive young woman introduced herself. "I'm Patty Washington. We spoke a couple of days ago."

As Patty processed my paperwork, we made small talk. She then handed my credentials back, lowered her voice and said, "Good luck with this one. Heard he's an HB."

"Is that an inmate classification code?"

"Hairball," Patty explained. "He's just been granted a parole release as a medically incapacitated inmate." The clerk went on to tell me about Kane's medical condition. "Word has it behind the fence that his medical issues are exaggerated."

Behind the fence meant inside the walls of the prison. "They think he's been faking it?"

Patty shrugged. "Just letting you know what the rumor mill is saying. I'll let you make your own assessment."

"When will he be released?"

"He's going out on a bracelet. Our Electronic Monitoring Unit will probably hook him up in the morning."

I found my way to the visiting area via a series of electronically locking interior doors off the medical wing where I was told Nathan Kane was housed. The windowless room where I waited was warm.

I removed my jacket, folding it over the back of my chair. There was a steady hiss of a radiator somewhere blowing air that had no effect on the room temperature. My chocolate meds hadn't touched the headache still pounding behind my temples.

A door swung open and Nathan Kane was wheeled into the room. Despite his physical condition, the prisoner was a formidable man with muscular forearms

and a wide chest. He made no attempt at eye contact, but I could see his dark eyes moving beneath a heavy brow.

As the orderly moved the prisoner's wheelchair up to the desk across from me, his medical issues aside, I sensed the man in front of me was dangerous and calculating.

"I'm Detective Kate Sexton with LAPD," I said after the orderly left the room. I took a few moments, explaining my duties with the department and telling him that I was there on a special assignment. It wasn't entirely factual, but I had no qualms about stretching the truth with a convicted killer.

I then got right to the point. "I'm here to talk about Cassie Reynolds and Roger Diamond."

No reaction. Eyes downcast.

My head was throbbing and I was out of patience after the long drive. "I know about the phone calls Conrad Harper's been making to you, about Roger Diamond's visits." No response. "Tell me about your relationship with them."

I might as well have talked to the wall. I stood, walked away and brushed a hand over my damp forehead.

Why not try a lie, I decided. I had already stretched the truth and could be a pretty good liar when it was necessary. Maybe it would get a reaction. I came back to the prisoner, placed my hands on the table, and pitched my frame forward.

"I know that you had Roger Diamond murdered," I said.

Zero. The thing about lies is that it's almost impossible to stop at just one. But sometimes a lie can lead you to the truth.

"I've talked to Harper. You both set up the hit on Diamond. It was arranged during one of your phone conversations."

Dead eyes. A heavy breath.

"Tell me Mr. Kane, was Cassie Reynolds also murdered because Roger Diamond told her something about your drug dealing?"

I thought I saw something flicker in Kane's face, but his eyes remained downcast. I had no way of proving he was still involved in the drug trade while in prison, but that didn't stop me.

"Diamond was your middle man on the streets. He was also your laundry boy. Your connections on the outside supplied the drugs; Diamond was the runner. He washed the money through his porn movies, while Harper bankrolled everything."

I thought I saw Kane's thick lips move. Progress?

“I’ll give you thirty seconds to tell me what’s been going on before I go to the warden. I’ll have your parole revoked before it begins.”

That was a good one. I had no idea if the warden was around at this hour or if anything I told him would affect Kane’s parole status.

“You have no idea,” Kane whispered, his dark eyes slowly lifting.

Despite my racing heartbeat and pounding headache, I tried to remain cool in a room that was getting hotter by the second.

“I have lots of ideas,” I said. “One of them involves you spending the rest of your life in this prison unless you tell me what’s going on.”

The hint of a smile played on the prisoner’s lips, but as quickly as his gaze had come up, it swept down and away from me again.

I moved away from the table, wondering if I had just wasted four hours and forty bucks worth of gas listening to a convicted killer say nothing worthwhile.

“Time for me to talk to the warden,” I said, moving toward the door.

Kane began to rock back and forth in a gentle swaying motion. He whispered something I couldn’t hear.

I moved over to him again. “What are you trying to say?”

His voice was a soft hiss, barely audible. “It will be your fault, Detective.”

“What,” I said, leaning in, trying to make eye contact. “What’s going to be my fault?”

The rocking continued. “His death.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, my forehead popping with perspiration.

Nathan Kane’s dead eyes swung back up to me. The furtive smile found his lips again and he said, “Your brother.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

On my way out of the prison, I asked for the warden. Patty Washington said he was gone but took my cell number, promising to get him a message to call me as soon as possible.

When I reached the parking lot, my emotions were on overload. Anger. Rage. Anxiety. My heart was racing, only intensifying my relentless headache.

A call to my brother went to voice mail. "Robin, it's Kate. Listen to what I say carefully. I think you could be in danger. I need you to lie low until I can explain everything. I'm out of town, but will be back in Hollywood later this evening. I'll stop by and talk to you then. Call me."

As I pulled onto the freeway, my phone rang. I snatched it up without looking at the screen and said, "Robin?"

"Sorry, Kate, it's just me. The guy wanted for murder."

"Jack!" For some reason I felt like I'd just been rescued from a desert island. "Where are you?"

"I'm a fugitive remember? We're supposed to hide out. It's in the job description."

My relief over hearing his voice gave way to my concerns about Robin. "I just met with Nathan Kane at Avenal State Prison, Jack."

"Pearl filled me in on what's been happening. So what was his story?"

"He fooled the parole board into granting his release. He's going out on a bracelet tomorrow, but there's something else." I was unable to stop the tears flooding my eyes. "He threatened my brother."

"I don't understand."

"I don't either. All I know is that I asked him about his relationship with Diamond and Harper. He didn't react, but as I was leaving he said something about me being responsible for Robin's death."

Despite my best effort, I realized there were tears on my cheeks as I continued, "Jack, I'm really worried. I think Kane or whoever he's involved with is trying to get to me through my brother."

"Give me Robin's address, Kate. I'll do a little checking, make sure he's okay."

I gave him the address and thanked him.

The drive back to Hollywood was one of the longest of my life. Interstate five is a two lane ribbon of asphalt filled with drivers who have never heard of speed limits and truckers who weave in and out of traffic like drunken sailors. Olive

was like a duck in a thunderstorm as we dodged our way back to the city.

I was nearing Hollywood when my phone rang. It was Walt Peters, the Avenal State Prison warden.

“Sorry it took a while to get back to you,” Peters said. “I’m at the opera, just checked my messages.”

Avenal has an opera? “I met with Nathan Kane this afternoon,” I said. “I understand he’s been granted parole with electronic monitoring?”

“That could be. I’ll get an update on the parole hearing tomorrow.”

“That will be too late. He threatened a member of my family during our interview. I want his parole revoked.”

Peters didn’t respond right away. When he finally spoke, his tone was defensive. “What was the nature of your interview, Detective? Is he a suspect in a crime? He’s been in prison for well over a decade.”

Now I was on the spot. If I told him about my unauthorized investigation and that I suspected Kane had some involvement in a murder, even though I had no proof of that, I would be in more trouble. And I was already up to my eyeballs in trouble.

“Let’s just say that it was an informal interview about some issues that have come up in Hollywood,” I said. “That’s all I can say for now.”

Another hesitation. Peters finally said, “You do understand that Mr. Kane’s parole will be strictly monitored. He’ll be on an electronic leash at all times.”

“That’s not good enough, Warden. You and I both know he can cut the monitor and be back in Hollywood in a matter of hours.”

“I’m sorry, but unless you can give me some solid grounds for revocation I can’t modify the parole board’s decision. There’s also the matter of medical costs. Keeping an inmate like Mr. Kane in custody with his medical problems is prohibitively expensive.”

My anger and my headache went to the moon. “I understand one thing, Mr. Peters. You are allowing a dangerous man who has made threats against my family walk the streets again.”

I ended the call, tossing my phone onto the seat. What was it about administrators? Peters was like half the command staff at LAPD. They pushed a lot of paper, talked a lot about community safety, but they didn’t get it about keeping dangerous felons off the streets.

As I turned off the 101 Freeway in Hollywood, I tried Robin’s number again. No answer. I decided to stop by his condo and check on him.

I was ringing my brother’s doorbell when I heard a voice in the darkness.

“He’s with your mother.”

I instinctively reached for my gun, simultaneously jumping back. I almost fell off the brick entryway.

“Who’s there?” I demanded.

“For God’s sakes don’t shoot me.” Jack Bautista took a step toward me, illuminated by the lamplight. “Who do you think it is?”

I put my gun away, exhaled. I tried to collect myself as Bautista walked over and held open the side gate to Robin’s condo.

“Care to join me on the patio?”

I walked past him, down the side yard. The night sky was filled with a fog bank, drifting in and out beneath the moonlight. The narrow side yard was dark. I stumbled again, nearly falling. Damn, I hated being a klutz.

“Careful,” Jack said, grabbing my arm and pulling me up.

I turned and looked up at him. There was a hint of a smile on his lips. His eyes were the color of chocolate syrup.

“Thanks,” I said, allowing myself to linger in his grasp for a moment, thinking how good it felt to be in the arms of a man again. Maybe being clumsy wasn’t so bad.

When we reached the backyard patio, I saw there was a candle burning on the glass table, illuminating a bottle of wine and two glasses. My brows lifted as I turned back to him.

“Took a chance you might stop by and check on your brother. I would have done the same thing.”

I took a seat at the table across from him. I felt a flutter in my chest. The headache that had been my constant companion all day was finally easing.

“I never took you for a romantic, Jack.”

He worked on the wine cork. “I never realized you were so beautiful in the moonlight.”

My heart beat faster. I tried to regain control by asking about Robin. “Did you tell my brother what’s going on?”

“I just told him there were some threats being made and you would talk to him tomorrow. He’s going to take the day off work, stay with your mother.” He popped the cork on the bottle and began pouring. “By the way, he’s still determined to see Clark.”

I took the glass from him and said, “He’s almost as stubborn as his sister.”

Jack clinked his glass to mine. “To beauty.”

“And the beast,” I said, thinking about Nathan Kane.

After a sip of wine, I took a few minutes and told him about my meeting at the prison. The wine was calming after my stressful day.

I didn't want to think about IAD or Nathan Kane and changed the subject. "So, where have you been staying, Jack?"

"Here and there. I've still got a friend or two out there." He tipped his glass. "Trying my best not to wear out my welcome."

I sipped my wine again, thinking about how we were two cops, each in trouble in different ways.

"Tell me something," I said, my earlier tension finally easing. "Why did you become a cop?"

He set down his glass. "I was a reckless kid living in a bad neighborhood who grew up without a dad and started to make the wrong choices. Stole a car when I was fourteen and spent six months in a detention camp. There was a counselor there, Ted Riley. He helped me sort things out, find my way back to the right side of a lot of things. We stayed in touch. I eventually got my juvenile record sealed. When I graduated from the academy, Ted was there for me." He swirled the wine in his glass and took a sip. "He showed me that one guy sometimes really can make a difference."

"Nice story."

"And you?"

My eyes drifted to the city below us as I thought about the question. "My dad worked patrol for the department. After a few years on the force, he was shot and killed. The crime was never solved. I was only four when it happened. Had some rough times later as a teenager, but something inside always told me that I owed it to my dad to straighten up."

I hadn't eaten much all day except the chocolate meds. I felt a light buzz from the alcohol, but tipped my glass up anyway before continuing. "When I got hired and took the department's psych exam, the shrink said something about me trying to make up for what happened to my father." I smiled, meeting his eyes. "I think she was a pretty smart woman."

Jack smiled. "It's funny how some people can take bad experiences and turn them into something good."

His comment made me think about Cassie Reynolds, how what he said wasn't always true.

"I had a lot of time to think on my way back to the city, Jack. A couple of things came to mind about Cassie. Did she ever mention her mother?"

"She said something once about her living in Arizona. I didn't get the

impression they had much of a relationship. Then again, Cassie kept a lot to herself.”

“Maybe you could do a little checking in your free time. Try to locate Cassie’s mother?”

He nodded; rubbed the stubble on his chin. “I’ll see if I can work it into my schedule.”

“I’m going to have Pearl and Natalie look into any relationship Cassie’s father and Conrad Harper might have had. If we can link Harper to John Carmichael we might begin to open some doors to the past and find out what got Cassie murdered.”

“Just be careful.”

I realized my head was beginning to spin from the alcohol. I set my glass aside.

“I think I need to get going, Jack.” Despite my best efforts, my meeting with the IAD detectives and then Nathan Kane drifted into my thoughts. “It’s been a very long day.”

Jack finished his drink and we stood up. I took a step toward the side yard, but realized he was at my side, taking my hand. I turned and faced him, feeling like my heart was going to flutter out of my chest.

The words that came out of the darkness were soft, just above a whisper. “Kate, I want you to know whatever happens, I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. One way or another we’re going to get to the truth.”

I wanted to fall against him, let him hold me in his arms. Instead, I said, “Jack, as I’ve said before, this is also about Cassie Reynolds.”

“I know, it’s just that...”

I took both his hands and moved closer to him. My head lifted, our eyes meeting. At the last second something made me hold back from kissing him. The image of my ex flickered through my mind. I had trusted once, trusted someone with everything, and then lost it all. I couldn’t forget that, even in the arms of a man who appreciated what I was trying to do for him.

I turned my head against his chest and said, “It’s okay, Jack. You don’t have to keep thanking me.”

I felt his hands move around my waist as he came closer. His warm breath was on my cheek. I drank in the scent of him. I knew I was vulnerable, but there was also something elemental and real in the moment.

When he spoke again, his words were even softer than before. “What I mean to say is thanks for believing in me, Kate. It means everything.”

I let myself fall harder into him. Whatever happened in the future, in that moment one thing was clear to me. Jack Bautista and I were joined together. Our fate was bound and sealed as one. I prayed that we would somehow prevail.

Slowly, reluctantly, I stepped back from him. "You're welcome, Jack."

I moved down the path and stopped. I turned toward him. It took every ounce of strength I had left not to go back.

"Goodnight, Jack," I whispered before moving off into the darkness.

I was back in Olive, headed for home when my telephone rang. It was Jimmy Chester, my union attorney.

"Sorry for calling so late," Chester said. "But I just got out of a meeting with Detectives Blaylock and Preston."

I was exhausted. The last thing I wanted was to discuss the two IAD blowhards assigned to my case with Jimmy the rat.

"Can't this wait until tomorrow?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, Detective, but you need to know where you stand."

"I'm listening."

"They want you to resign from the department by noon Friday."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Twenty minutes after Melvin Coben picks him up at the prison and gives him the keys to a rental car, Kane cuts off his bracelet and tosses it into a field. Two hours later, he's knocking on a door.

Bobby Jenson's girlfriend sees his knife when the door swings open. He slashes her throat. Blood spurts everywhere as her head flies back. It's a delicious sight. Bobby's in the bedroom. He gets the same treatment.

The killer then checks into a hotel using the false driver's license and cash his attorney provided. He cleans up and uses the hair dye he's bought to color his silver hair brown before hitting the road again.

The elementary school Marianne Wentworth attends is in the suburbs of Fresno, about an hour from Avenal. While he waits for the shrink's daughter to get out of school, he decides to make a call using the throw-a-way phone he bought at the local Wal-Mart.

Kane doesn't waste time with pleasantries. "I want an update on what's been happening."

The man on the line tries to sound reassuring. But when Kane hears Bautista is still on the run, it has the opposite effect.

"As I said before, if you can't take care of loose ends, I will." Kane's anger kicks up a notch. "The female detective also has to die."

"We've already talked about that," the man says. "Sexton is facing discipline and running scared."

Kane laughs until tears come to his eyes. "She came to see me yesterday, right after my parole hearing."

"What?"

"She talked to Harper and is beginning to put things together. It's time she disappears."

"We know about the meeting with Harper. The producer kept his big mouth shut for once." The man's voice takes on a pleading quality. "The timing is all wrong. It's one thing to kill a felon who's on the run, wanted for murder, but it's another to kill a cop on active duty. That changes the entire game."

Kane considers this and says, "Let me concentrate on Bautista first."

He ends the call and his thoughts drift back to his meeting with the female cop. There's something about her that interests him. She doesn't back down. He likes that. Maybe she will be worth saving until the end. In the meantime, they can use her brother and his idiotic boyfriend to keep her occupied. He feels

himself getting hard just thinking about how it will all play out.

The bell rings. Children begin streaming out of the school. Kane sees the third grader run into her mother's arms. His pulse begins to pound with excitement. God, he loves freedom.

Nathan Kane puts the car in gear, follows Marsha Wentworth and her daughter. It's killing time again.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"I'm just the messenger, Detective." Jimmy Chester's BB eyes darted around the office not looking at me. "The department made it very clear. They think they have enough evidence to terminate your employment."

It was early morning. I'd arranged to meet with the rat at his office after his late night phone call had ruined another good night's sleep.

I set my Starbucks latte on the edge of his desk. "I don't understand how IAD can make that claim."

"Blaylock wouldn't tip his hand, but he told me that if you don't resign there could be enough evidence to have the DA file criminal charges against you."

"Charges? For what?"

"That's all he would say. Believe me, I'm on your side, Detective. But I want you to know something—they want your head."

I thought about Charlie's name for police administration. "Guess that's why they call it the Tower."

Chester's brow furrowed. "Now, I might be able to work out a suitable arrangement. No prosecution, as long as you're willing..."

I was on my feet. "Listen to me, you little... I won't resign, ever."

Chester shrugged. "Your choice."

I picked up my latte and started for door. My anger stopped me and I turned back to him. "Our defense?"

"What?"

"What is our defense going to be, Mr. Chester?"

"Well...I guess we can say...you were trying to deflect..." He paused, clearly searching for something.

"Reasonable force," I said. "My actions were to keep another officer from violating the department's policy on reasonable force. It's on page ninety-one of the department's Use of Force Manual in case you want to look it up before Friday." I moved toward the door again. "And, try to remember. You're working for me, not the department."

I slammed the door and walked out. As I headed for my car I did some deep breathing exercises to try calming myself.

On the way to the station, I stopped at my mom's house to pick up Bernie. My furry 110 pound partner had fully recovered from his sprain. He jumped up on me when I walked through the door.

Robin laughed. "He's ready for duty, Kate. Another night of hearing what

Mom calls ‘presidential privileges’ and he told me he’s going to run away.”

After I recovered from Bernie’s love attack, I got up and hugged Robin. “That bad?”

My brother turned to Janet Logan and arched his brows.

“Another rough night,” Janet said. “The nurse should be by again this morning.”

I looked in on Mom who was still wrapped in bandages but sleeping peacefully. I then found Robin in the kitchen and poured myself a cup of coffee.

“That guy, Jack, who came by last night,” Robin said as I joined him at the table, “he was pretty worried about both of us. He said something about someone making threats.”

“It’s a long story. I can’t go into all the details right now, but I’d like you to stay here with Mom for a few more days.”

Robin looked like he had just been diagnosed with a terminal disease. “I’ll do almost anything for you, Kate. Watch your dog. Loan you money. Might even try going straight for a day. But there’s one thing I can’t do: spend another hour with Mom.”

I had to smile. “Okay, then please stay home, stay away from Wolf Donovan’s estate, and stay away from Zen. I got word he’s very bad news.”

“And what am I supposed to do about Clark?”

“Clark has to learn to take care of himself, Robin. You need to back off and let things sort themselves out.”

Robin took a deep breath, ran a hand through his hair. “I’ll try.”

I kissed his cheek. “Thanks little brother. You’re the best.” I heard a sound coming from Mom’s bedroom. Janet Logan rushed down the hallway. I looked at Robin and said, “First one out of here gets a presidential pardon.”

We nearly trampled one another running for the door.

When I got to the station, I was surprised to hear Natalie’s voice coming from the break room. I found her with several officers gathered around as she talked about her ride-a-long with Bob Anderson, one of the night shift officers.

“At first, I thought the girl was just a cabbage head,” Natalie said. “We were drivin’ her to the station when I glanced into the backseat. She was starin’ off into space, all mashed up from being at the pub. A minute later she starts flailing around and somehow gets her skirt pulled up at the waist.”

Natalie’s hazel eyes were like two full moons as the officers laughed and she went on. “I look down and then I see it. The girl’s got a knob! A moment later, she or I guess it’s he, starts grinnin’ at me and actin’ like Bernie on a poodle

prowl.”

Natalie glanced at my hairy partner who was lying next to me, resting his head on his paws. “Sorry old boy,” Natalie said. “Didn’t mean to get too personal.”

More officers gathered around as Natalie continued. Then I saw Jessica Barlow walk into the break room.

“Bitch at one-eighty,” I said to Charlie who’d also heard the commotion and wandered in.

“Probably here to take notes for the brass.”

Natalie continued, “So, the twonk starts in with the five knuckle shuffle right there in the back of the ruddy cop car.”

A roar of laughter rose up. Jessica had her hands on her hips.

“A second later,” Natalie went on, “he’s pullin’ on his pud faster than a jack rabbit in a rainstorm. So I turn to Bob here and say, ‘I’m just warnin’ you, I think our prisoner is gonna spunk up all over the backseat.’”

Anderson managed to comment over the laughter, “There was a sense of urgency in the situation.”

“Urgency?” Natalie said. “I’ll say. By the time we got the car to the curb, the dimbo exploded. It was like that volcano in Hawaii or somethin’.”

As the room roared with laughter, I said, “Sounds like just another routine evening patrol in Hollywood.”

Jessica Barlow moved forward. The laughter died. “That kind of conversation is more appropriate for the locker room than the break room.”

Natalie stared at Jessica and said, “You needn’t get your thong all up in a twist, lady. I was just havin’ a little fun with the story.”

Jessica scowled and turned to Bob Anderson. “And, since when do we allow civilians in the break room?”

I interrupted. “Since when is this any of your business?”

“I’m going to report this,” Jessica said, turning on her heel. She looked at the other officers who were still gathered around. “I would think the rest of you have better things to do than listen to sexually inappropriate remarks.”

“Are you kidding?” Anderson said. “That’s what we live for.”

As Jessica was leaving the room, Natalie said to the officers, “Fraid she’s got herself all worked up into a cluck fuck for nuthin’.”

When the laughter finally died down again, I walked Natalie to the parking lot where Clyde was waiting.

“Can you come by my house around seven tonight?” Natalie asked. “I also invited Pearl. Got somethin’ to tell you both about our investigation.”

“I’ll be there.”

I spent the rest of the day doing paperwork and thinking about my meeting with Jimmy Chester. I decided not to tell Charlie about the meeting. Just the thought of resigning from the department made my stomach churn. And criminal charges? I had no idea how my actions in trying to protect an unarmed man from being shot could even remotely be considered criminal.

The more I thought about what was happening, the more I became convinced I was being set up. And the setup was coming from the highest levels in the department.

When Bernie and I arrived at Natalie’s house that evening, I found her pouring a cup of tea for Pearl. I accepted an offer of wine instead of tea as we complimented her on the home she and Clyde had renovated—a mid-century modern with a view to die for.

As she showed us around, Natalie told us Clyde was out with the boys playing poker. Considering Clyde’s age, maybe they had a card room at a local convalescent hospital.

As I plopped onto the sofa between my friends, I felt the sleepless night catching up with me. Pearl apparently noticed. “Long day?”

“Had better.”

“Charlie told me about your IAD meeting on Friday.”

“It’s something called an interrogation. Just a few bamboo shoots under the nails, waterboarding, that sort of thing.”

“Let me know if I can help,” he said, squeezing my hand.

I took a breath, feeling emotional over the events of the last couple of days.

Natalie touched my shoulder. “I’m also here for you. We’re all in this fight together.”

I hugged Natalie as Pearl removed two sheets of paper from an envelope and set them on the coffee table. “Remember when we decided to follow the money trail? I spent the better part of today at the library continuing down that path.”

Natalie and I examined the first copy of what we realized were microfiche records. It was a legal notice of articles of incorporation from November of 1983. The corporation’s name was Pacific Trading Partners. I then read the names on the register. I looked up into Pearl’s brown eyes. “John David Carmichael and Conrad Bradford Harper.”

Pearl motioned to the paperwork. “The copy behind the one you’re holding is

a legal notice of dissolution of the corporation filed in June of 1984, approximately three months before Carmichael went missing.”

I looked up from the papers. “I wonder just what kind of business the corporation engaged in.”

“I’d sure like to ask Mr. Harper,” Pearl said.

I handed the legal notices back to him. “I doubt that’s going to happen.”

I then took a few minutes to fill them in on my meeting with Kane and the threat he made. “He should have been released on parole this morning. I just hope he stays away from my brother.”

Pearl slipped a piece of paper into my hand that had a name and phone number. “I talked to an old friend who used to work in the DA’s office. He said Bill Compton was the prosecutor when Kane was sent to prison. Thought you might want to track him down and see what he remembers about the case.”

Natalie tugged on my sleeve and said, “I also got me some news. I’ve been shakin’ some trees and found out that John Carmichael’s secretary, Lydia Grayson, is still alive. She lives at the Sandalwood Retirement Home in Santa Monica. I made an appointment for us to talk to her tomorrow afternoon.” Her eyes were on me. “Do you think you can make it?”

“I’ll be there.”

My answering machine was blinking when I got home. The first message was from Jimmy Chester, telling me not to worry, that he was going to mount a vigorous defense on my behalf.

After listening to the message, I turned to Bernie and said, “He might as well mount a sheep for all the good he’ll do me.”

The second message was from Jack, saying that he had a lead on Cassie Reynolds’s mother and would be out of the area for a few days. At the end of the message he said something that caused me to replay the recording a couple of times.

The message said, “Last night was very special to me; just so you know.”

After turning off the machine, I tossed a handful of bills into my wicker basket, fed Bernie, and then moved to the sofa. Tears filled my eyes as I thought about everything that had happened over the past few days.

A good cop was wanted for murder. My job was in jeopardy. I might be facing criminal charges. And my brother’s life had been threatened. I spent the next ten minutes engaging in what a girlfriend once called therapy tears. When I finished

my therapy session, the fatigue of the last two days caught up with me and I dozed off on the sofa.

Several hours later, I was jolted awake when my phone rang.

The voice on the line said, “Kate, this is Brian Jankowitz.”

I was immediately on the defensive, wondering if the captain was calling because of my pending disciplinary proceedings.

“Yes, Jank. What is it?”

“I’ve got some bad news, Kate. Your brother’s been arrested.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I broke all the speed limits rushing to Men's Central Jail. I don't know why I drove like a mad woman because I knew there wasn't much I could accomplish until Robin was released on bail. Jankowitz wasn't specific about the nature of the drug charges my brother was facing. But I did know one thing for sure. Robin never used drugs.

Tom Bouchet greeted me in the reception center. I couldn't remember a time when he wasn't there. Maybe the detention officer had a room in the jail.

The grizzled veteran punched Robin's name into the computer terminal. "Possession for sale of a Schedule II, Controlled Substance. Methamphetamine. A felony."

My anxiety level went through the roof. "Possession for sale? I don't understand."

"Had to do with the quantity." Bouchet looked up from the screen. "Had enough meth in his car to supply half of Hollywood."

"That's crazy. Robin won't even take an aspirin and he certainly wouldn't sell drugs."

Bouchet didn't respond. He tried what I decided was a sympathetic look, but couldn't pull it off.

"I've called a bondsman," I said. "In the meantime can I have a brief visit with my brother?"

"One of the perks of being in law enforcement. Anybody else would have to wait until regular visiting hours."

As I waited for Robin in the visiting area, questions and guilt assaulted me. If I hadn't been obsessed with trying to help Jack Bautista would any of this be happening? Hadn't I been warned to stay out of things that didn't concern me? And then there was Conrad Harper and Nathan Kane. What roles were they playing in what was happening? Was this the first in a series of paybacks that would ultimately result in Robin's death? What if Kane planned to have someone kill Robin while he was in jail? Why hadn't I simply backed off the investigation like Charlie had said?

My stomach churned with acid. I felt like I was on the verge of passing out. I again punched the number for the bail bondsman into my phone. When I was told they determined I didn't have enough assets to bond my brother's release, I remembered I was on the deed to Mom's house and used that for collateral. I was sure she would approve.

I ended the call as Robin was being escorted to the visiting area. Seeing my brother in an orange jumpsuit on the wrong side of the glass nuked my anxiety level. His face was sallow. He looked like someone who had already accepted defeat.

I picked up the phone and said, "I just talked to the bondsman. Bail should be posted within the hour and we'll have you out."

"Thanks," Robin managed. His pale blue eyes only met me half way. "I should have stayed home like you said. I blew it. I'm sorry."

"None of this is your fault." I wanted to tell him he was probably sitting in jail because of my refusal to stay out of an investigation I had no business being involved in, but the timing was wrong. "Tell me what happened."

"I know it was the wrong thing to do, but I ended up going back to Donovan's place earlier tonight. I was parked down the road from the main gate when a car came out and I followed it. Turned out to be Clark and Bon Bon doing some clubbing. They ended up at Club Bang on Sunset."

The club had a reputation for drugs. When cops arrested someone there, they always said the suspect was Bang Busted.

Robin continued, "I parked and followed them into the club. I tried to talk to Clark while Bon Bon was in the restroom." Robin paused, his eyes filling. "Kate, he was high. He wasn't able to carry on a conversation. I think Bon Bon was giving him Oxies."

"Oxycontin? What makes you think that?"

"I've seen what the drug does. Clark was dizzy, confused, on the verge of passing out, talking out of his mind."

I was far less concerned about Clark than my brother. "How did you end up with drugs in your car?"

"I left the club around midnight, right after Clark and Bon Bon. Someone, probably Zen, had set me up, put the drugs in my car. I think it was a payback because of my relationship with Clark. The police pulled me over when I was driving home." Robin's eyes were moist again. "Sis, I wouldn't lie to you about this. I don't use drugs."

"You don't have to go there. I know." I sighed. Without any witnesses or other suspects the case would be difficult, if not impossible, to beat.

"There's something else," Robin said. "When the police were handcuffing me, a car drove by and stopped for a moment. The windows were tinted and, at first, I couldn't see into the car. When the window came down I realized who it was."

"Zen?" I asked.

Robin shook his head. "I only saw him at the party at his estate once, but I'm sure it was him. He was sitting in the back of his black Mercedes staring at me with this strange look on his face." My brother released his breath, like a deflating balloon. "It was Wolf Donovan."

I sank back into my chair. Another wave of nausea hit me. Robin's words crashed through my mind. *Wolf Donovan...black Mercedes...tinted windows...* I gulped in air, fighting the bile rising in my throat.

Then the questions came. Did Nathan Kane somehow use Wolf Donovan to get to Robin? Or was Conrad Harper involved? I remembered the phone records. Pearl had said, "He made calls to all the major stars." Maybe Harper's phone records showed him calling Wolf Donovan. And then there was the Mercedes that had nearly run me and Natalie off a cliff and almost hit me in the hospital parking lot. Was Donovan also behind those events, helping out Harper and Kane?

The overhead florescent lights dimmed. I felt dizzy.

"Kate? Are you okay?" Robin touched the wire reinforced window separating us.

I took a deep breath, tried to steady myself. "I will be. Just as soon as I get you out of here and someplace safe."

After bailing Robin out and dropping him at Mom's house, I dragged myself home and into bed. I had the next day off and slept until ten when Bernie broke into his potty dance. I slipped into a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, grabbed my partner's leash and we headed for the side yard where I met Marilyn Monroe.

"Care for a cuppa?" Natalie asked, primping her blonde wig. She was wearing a white cotton dress that I think Marilyn wore in an old movie. *Some Like it Hot?* Natalie was definitely hot.

"Why not?" I said. My mind was still reeling over my brother's arrest and I needed a distraction. "Meet you on the patio."

I let Bernie finish his business and then we came around the appliance store to the patio area.

I took a seat across from Natalie and motioned to the salesman at the windows. "They're staring at you like you've got nothing on."

"It's not true that I had nothing on. I had the radio on." Natalie laughed, then lost the Marilyn impersonation. "It's one of her lines from an old movie." She pushed a book across the table.

I read the title out loud. "Acting Up, Acting Rich." I looked at her. "Let's see, a few days ago you wanted to be a cop, now an actress. Are you sure about this,

Natalie?”

“Sure as a wizard’s winkle.” She set teacups on the table. “Actually, I’ve thought the flicks might be for me since I was a kid. That’s why I originally came to tinsel town, before Old Clyde swept me off me feet. Besides, if I don’t become a star, I can always use me actin’ abilities when I go on a snoop.” Natalie took the teapot. “Let me fill your boots.” She poured and said, “I have a bit of a favor to ask.”

“I don’t know anyone famous and I can’t get you onto the sets of the movie studios, if that’s what you’re after.”

Natalie shook her head. “I’m goin’ to attend that actor’s workshop your mum’s sponsorin’ tomorrow night. It’s still goin’ on even though she’s under the weather. Clyde threw a wobbly when I mentioned it. He refused to drive me and I still don’t have me license. I was wonderin’ if you could give me a lift, come with me to the first class?”

“Why don’t you just take a cab?”

“Had me a bad experience with a cabbie a few years back.” Natalie locked her beautiful hazel eyes on me. “Please. Just come with me to the first class. After that I’ll make other arrangements.”

“Okay,” I said, deciding I must be deranged. I was a couple of days away from my interrogation with IAD and my brother was facing drug charges, probably thanks to me, but there’s something about Natalie I just couldn’t resist. “I’m not acting though,” I warned her. “I’ll just be there to watch.”

“Good enough.” She removed her wig. “Can I also catch a ride with you for our chat with Lydia Grayson?”

I’d almost forgotten about the interview with John Carmichael’s former secretary. “Of course. Just give me a few minutes to pull myself together.”

Natalie and I found Pearl already parked at the curb in front of the Sandalwood Retirement Home in the hills overlooking Santa Monica. As Bernie tended to a flower bed, I took a moment and filled them both in on Robin’s arrest and his apparent sighting of Wolf Donovan.

“So call me crazy, but now I’m wondering if Donovan isn’t somehow linked to Harper and Kane.” I asked Pearl, “Didn’t Harper’s phone records show he was calling a lot of stars?”

“There were several calls, including some to Donovan,” Pearl said. “At the time, I just thought it was part of being a big time movie producer, but maybe

there's more to it."

We found Lydia Grayson's apartment overlooking a swimming pool. After a knock, the elderly woman greeted us at the door. Grayson stood just over five feet and was portly. She had one of those sweet, compassionate faces that you associate with a grandmother.

We trailed behind as she waddled like an overweight duck toward her living room sofa. We declined her offer of drinks and took seats.

Natalie sat next to Grayson and began the questioning, "As I mentioned when I called yesterday we're lookin' into the disappearance of John Carmichael. You worked for him back in the 1980s?"

"Yes, a long time ago." Her gaze fixed on Natalie for a moment. "You're very pretty. Do you have any royal blood?"

"Me great grandmum acted like a queen bean from time to time, but nuthin' official. Thanks for askin'."

"I couldn't believe it when Princess Kate was photographed in the nude," Grayson said, lowering her voice.

Natalie smiled. "Guess the royal assets need airin' out now and then."

The elderly woman laughed and then looked at Pearl and me. "Are you cold case detectives?"

Pearl leaned forward. His deep voice took on a confidential tone. "Of a sort. We're trying to establish any facts that might help us determine what happened to Mr. Carmichael."

"He was murdered, if you want my opinion," Grayson said. "That's why I couldn't understand why the police didn't look into it more."

"Do you have any idea who might have wanted to harm him?" Natalie asked.

The elderly woman's fleshy face folded into a smile. She looked like a child who was swallowing the last remnants of a cookie she had stolen. "Everybody liked Mr. C, especially the women. He was a real lady's man. He didn't have any enemies that I knew of."

"What kind of work did you do for Mr. C?"

"Answered the phones and sorted through the mail. Also paid the bills when he had enough money."

"We understand he was a movie producer?"

Grayson laughed. "He did a lot of things. Worked with wrestlers, trying to put shows together, did a few commercials, that sort of thing."

"What about the movie he was working on, *Days of Destiny*?" I asked.

"Mr. C had big dreams about that film. Thought he might even win an Oscar

someday, but he ran out of money.” She looked off into space for a moment and said, “I wonder whatever became of it?”

“Do you know if anyone was working on the movie with him?”

“Mr. C had a lot of people around him; small time actors who thought they were going to be stars someday. No one in particular comes to mind.”

“Records show that Mr. Carmichael ran a business called, Pacific Trading Partners with a man named Conrad Harper,” Pearl said.

“Yes, I remember that he and Mr. C got together when he was trying to arrange financing for different projects. I don’t think my boss understood business matters that well. He let Mr. Harper handle the details.”

“Did you see him with Mr. Harper a lot?”

“He just came around when John was in need of money.”

“What about drugs?” Natalie asked. “Do you know if Mr. C and Mr. Harper had any involvement in the drug business?”

“Heavens no. Mr. C. wasn’t into that sort of thing.”

“Was there anyone else Mr. Carmichael might have been working with at that time?” I asked.

“There was a man who sometimes came around with Mr. Harper.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry. I don’t remember his name.”

I held up a mug shot of Kane that I’d gotten from our records bureau. “Was this the man you saw with Harper? His name is Nathan Kane. He would have been much younger then, of course.”

Grayson studied the photograph. “I just don’t know. My memory isn’t what it once was.”

Natalie moved the conversation in a different direction. “What about female friends? Did Mr. C have a girlfriend?”

“He had lots of women around him, but no one he was serious about.”

“It seems that randy old Mr. C put a bun...” Natalie heard me cough and saw me shaking my head. “Sorry, I meant to say Mr. C had a daughter who went by the name Cassie Reynolds. She was born a few months after he went missin’.”

“A daughter! That’s so wonderful. I think he would have made a wonderful father.”

“A lady named Gloria Stallings was her mother,” Natalie said. “Does that name ring a bell? She might have remarried, changed her last name.”

“I’m sorry, as I said there were lots of women, but I had no idea anyone was pregnant.” Her gaze met Natalie directly. “Maybe you should talk to Cassie about her mother?”

Natalie nodded but didn't say anything.

I was getting frustrated. Grayson wasn't giving us anything new. I decided to ask the question that had been on my mind since Robin's arrest.

"Did you ever see Mr. Carmichael with the actor Wolf Donovan?"

Lydia Grayson's heavy face defied gravity and registered surprise. "Oh, heavens no. I would remember him. Wolf Donovan. Now, that would really be something."

I looked at Pearl and Natalie, picking up on their frustration. "Is there anything else you might be able to tell us, Ms. Grayson?"

The flesh on Grayson's face folded into a smile. Her tired eyes moved from Pearl to Natalie and then back to me. "Aren't you going to ask me who murdered Mr. C?"

I lifted my brows, my blood pressure rising. "Okay, who murdered Mr. C?"

The elderly woman's voice became hushed, "I didn't think much about it until several days after Mr. C disappeared. I tried to report it to the police but no one seemed to want to listen."

"What is that, Ms. Grayson?" I asked.

"The night before Mr. C disappeared I remembered I'd left my checkbook at work. I came back to the office that evening. Mr. C's office door was closed but I heard voices, angry voices, arguing."

"What was the argument about?"

"I couldn't tell. All I know is at one point I heard the voice of a man saying, 'You do that and you will regret it.'"

"Do you have any idea who he was talking to?"

Grayson shook her head. "No, I left right after that. I was worried someone might come out of the office and catch me there." A furtive smile creased her fleshy face. "But I saw his car. It was parked up the block from Mr. C's office."

We all exchanged glances. "Whose car?" I asked.

Grayson's lips turned up as she told a secret she'd kept for almost thirty years. "It was a black-and-white car. The man arguing with Mr. C the night before he disappeared was a policeman."

Chapter Thirty

Nathan Kane follows Marsha Wentworth as she pulls out of the elementary school parking lot. The killer's adrenaline surges; his thoughts racing with anticipation. The shrink's already shown the instincts of a mother who will do anything to protect her child. He plans to use that to his advantage.

Ten minutes later, Wentworth's car stops in front of a small older home. An elderly woman whose earnest countenance has the same oval shape and green eyes as the psychiatrist's comes to the front door. She must be the shrink's mother.

Kane curses as the old woman hugs the child. She then kisses the psychiatrist on the cheek and disappears into the house with the girl. Wentworth pulls away from the curb and is back on the highway.

Too bad. While he has no plans to harm the child, having her close at hand would make her mother's performance all the better.

The psychiatrist drives a few blocks to a newer tract of homes, Kane following at a distance. She pulls into the garage of a two-story colonial.

The garage door is left up as she dashes into the house. Wentworth's in a hurry. People are stupid. How many times has he used careless stupidity to his advantage?

Kane parks up the block and walks through the neighborhood. When he's sure no one is watching, he slips into the garage. He tries the interior door, but it's locked. After a couple of attempts he has the lock picked and pushes his way inside.

He knows from seeing the doctor's wedding ring that she's married. A quick check and he finds there's no one on the first floor. The good doctor's spouse is probably at work.

He moves up the stairs, passing photographs: first a formal pose of the shrink and her husband taken on their wedding day at a seashore, then a montage of the young married couple, followed by a picture of their daughter as a baby, and finally, at the top of the stairway, a recent group photograph. They are a beautiful family. All that is about to change.

He finds the psychiatrist in the master bedroom wing getting out of the shower. She has her clothes laid out on the bed. Probably getting ready for work where she'll spend the night shift torturing some poor soul with her psycho-babble.

As the glass door of the shower swings open, Kane steps around the corner.

“Hello, Marsha. Thought I’d drop by for a little session before heading off to Hollywood.”

The psychiatrist screams. He brings his large hand up to her mouth, holding the knife he used on Jenson and his girlfriend to her throat. “Another sound and I go over the river and through the woods.” He sees the terrified, confused expression. “To grandmother’s house, to Marianne.”

A nod. He releases her. Wentworth’s naked body trembles. She falls to the floor like a limp doll.

He yanks her up, pushes her toward the bed.

“Put on the dress. It’s time for a little therapy, Doctor.”

The whimpering psychiatrist towels off, begins dressing, fumbling with her panties.

“No underwear, just the dress.”

In a moment, the woman is sitting on the bed wearing the black dress. Her eyes are downcast, her voice is barely audible. “What do you want?”

He smiles, knowing she’s accepted her fate. “Your office? You must have an office?”

Wentworth lifts her head, but she doesn’t make eye contact. “Down the hall.”

Kane follows her to the office where he orders her to sit behind her desk. He sits in the chair across from her.

There’s something familiar about the scene. Another woman had counseled him a lifetime ago in an office like this one. She had listened and tried to help him understand the demons that possessed him. That was before he raped and sodomized her, then tossed her body into a drainage ditch.

“I need therapy,” Kane says to the psychiatrist. “I need you to help me understand why I enjoy killing.”

The psychiatrist stares blankly at him, starts to speak, but her eyes drift away. She shakes her head.

“Do you think I’m hopeless, Dr. Wentworth? Is that why you’re shaking your head? Because, if there’s no hope for me, I’ll just kill you now and then go take care of Marianne.”

“No, please.” She crosses her arms, clutching her sides. Her body convulses as she says, “I’ll try...please don’t hurt my daughter...I’ll do anything.”

“Very good, Doctor. I think we’re making excellent progress.” He stands up and walks around the room, examining the diplomas and awards the woman has earned. “You do seem very qualified to help me.” He takes a seat again. “It’s my childhood, Dr. Wentworth. I need to tell you about my childhood.”

“I’m listening.”

“My father was a very harsh man. We lived in a small town in eastern Ohio. The winters were cold. We were poor and the house was small. Father made me sleep outside in the barn. I remember one winter when I was eleven a blizzard came through our village. It was so cold that I spent the night shivering beneath my blanket until morning. When I couldn’t stand it any longer I went into the house.”

“I’m sorry,” Marsha Wentworth says. “That must have been terrible.”

“Not the childhood Marianne has, I’m sure.” He catches the terrified look at the mention of her daughter’s name. “Back to my story. I was still shivering when I got to the house. Mother must have heard me come in. She motioned for me to come into the bedroom and got me under the covers, holding me tight as she tried to stop my shaking. That’s when I heard the water running. I realized Father was in the shower.”

Kane reaches behind him, feeling the blade in his back pocket as he continues. “When Father came into the room, he was naked and had an erection. He saw me in bed, Mother holding my body as I shivered beneath the covers. He screamed at me. Kane meets the psychiatrist’s eyes. “Do you know what he called me?”

Wentworth shakes her head.

“A motherfucker.” Kane brings the blade out of his pocket, runs a finger along its sharp edge. “Father didn’t like his son in bed with his wife. He ran out of the room but returned a minute later, holding a very large, very sharp carving knife.” The shrink’s eyes are fixed on the blade. “It was very much like this one, Marsha.”

The room is quiet, except for the psychiatrist’s ragged breath. Kane continues. “That’s when Father decided the little motherfucker in his wife’s bed had to die. But first he killed Mother. When he turned the knife on me, I was ready.”

Kane lifts his shirt, showing the scars that cover his upper torso. “Father had practiced on me before. I wasn’t going to allow that again. When his knife came down, I jumped back and he missed me. I grabbed the knife and bit Father’s hand. I bit it very hard. So hard that two of his fingers came off in my mouth.”

Kane smiles, brings the knife up and points it at Wentworth. “Father died after he dropped the knife and I picked it up. But not before he lost all of his other fingers, as well as his penis.” His body convulses with laughter but the killer feels nothing. “My father died a dickless little wimp, begging for his life.”

“I’m sorry,” Wentworth says.

“For what?”

“Your father, for everything that happened.”

Kane chuckles. “Don’t be. I took care of the scene, made up a story about someone breaking in, killing my parents. I was very convincing.”

Nathan Kane stands and moves toward the psychiatrist. He’s hard, his erection bulging against his pants.

Wentworth falls out of her chair, retches onto the floor. When she’s finished, he pulls her up by her hair and drags her onto the desk. The knife blade is sharp, easily cutting through the straps on her dress. In seconds, he has her naked and screaming for her life.

Hours later, when the fun is over and he’s ready to end the shrink’s life, a realization comes over Nathan Kane. He knows why he likes the psychiatrist, why he’s taken the time to follow her home and play with her. She reminds him of someone. It’s the cop from Hollywood who came to visit him. Detective Kate Sexton and Dr. Marsha Wentworth could be sisters.

Chapter Thirty-One

“I have an appointment with Bill Compton.”

Bernie and I waited at the counter in the Santa Monica District Attorney’s Office. It was a little before nine in the morning and I was late for the meeting. After our talk with Lydia Grayson, I’d gone home and turned in early but had trouble falling asleep. I finally dozed off around three in the morning, but then hit the snooze button and overslept.

While the receptionist called the prosecutor who had put Nathan Kane in prison, I glanced around the office. It appeared to be organized chaos as attorneys prepared for the morning’s calendar. Bodies jostled and papers were being shuffled. A cart creaked past full of legal files. Then I saw him.

Doug, my ex-husband, was leaning over a desk, pushing the blonde bangs off the forehead of an attractive young woman. Or should I say girl? His target, or victim, looked barely out of high school. Neither of them had seen me.

The receptionist diverted my attention. “Mr. Compton says he’ll be out in a moment and you can walk with him to court if you’d like.”

“Thanks,” I said, tugging on Bernie’s leash and walking away. I strolled across the office and stopped directly behind Doug, listening to the conversation.

“It’s a cozy little place, just outside of Arrowhead,” Doug said. My ex was six feet tall with brown hair and blue eyes. As usual, he was using his considerable charm for his own selfish interests. “We could pack a lunch and picnic on the way up.”

The pretty young woman giggled. “I don’t know. I have to study this weekend, and...”

Doug’s victim saw that I was eavesdropping. “May I help you?”

I stood there, not answering, arms folded. I tilted my head to one side and smiled as Doug turned and saw me.

“Kate! Wha...what...a surprise.”

“Aren’t you going to introduce us?” I asked. Before he could respond, I moved around him and held out my hand to the young woman. “Detective Kate Sexton. I’m Doug’s ex-wife.” We shook.

“I’m...ah...Carolyn Porter.”

“Nice to meet you, Carolyn. Forgive me, but I happened to overhear that you two have a little weekend getaway planned.” I cut my eyes to my ex and smiled. “Did you tell her, Doug?”

“Don’t you have better things to do?” He was glaring at me.

“Not at all.” I turned back to Carolyn. “In fact, I consider this my civic duty.” I leaned over to the pretty young woman, lowering my voice. “Carolyn, just so you know, Doug sometimes finds it a little difficult talking about his condition.”

My ex became angry. “What are you trying...”

I cut him off. Bernie offered a little growl of support as I addressed Carolyn again. “They’ve made great strides with the herpes virus. But even with the new medications, it’s important to use protection.”

Carolyn cut her big blue eyes to Doug. Her mouth dropped open, something I’m sure Doug was eagerly anticipating, just not in this context.

“She’s making things up,” Doug said, visibly shaking with anger.

I ignored him, my eyes still on Carolyn. “And, by the way, you have seen the video, haven’t you?” The young woman shook her head. I turned to Doug who was red as a cherry. “I’m surprised you haven’t mentioned it?” I swiveled back to the clerk. “Doug’s a movie star, Carolyn. The fact is he co-stars in a production called, *Dougie Does Phyllis*.”

Carolyn’s eyebrows shot up. I raised my voice, seeing that I now had a small audience of the clerk’s co-workers. “Oh, you’ve never met Phyllis? She used to work here, but quit. Last I heard she was home with a really bad outbreak of herpes.”

Doug then went a little insane, pleading his case like a defendant facing a lynch mob. I noticed an elderly man with a briefcase in his hand standing at the reception desk. He had a bemused look on his face.

“She’s a God-damned liar,” Doug went on. “I don’t have...” He lowered his voice, “herpes...and the video she’s talking about simply doesn’t exist. It’s a figment of her imagination.” My ex must have suddenly realized several people were watching. He turned to his co-workers. “She’s an angry, bitter woman, who can’t accept that our relationship is over.”

I started to walk with Bernie toward the elderly gentleman, who I assumed was Bill Compton, but Doug’s outburst stopped me in my tracks.

I turned, held up a hand, and shouted, “STOP!”

Doug’s tirade abruptly halted. The office was so quiet you could have heard Phyllis moaning, if Doug hadn’t ended her employment.

I addressed the crowd of onlookers. “Has anyone here seen Doug’s video? If you have, please raise your hand.”

There was an awkward silence before a woman giggled and said, “I’ve seen it.” A moment later others spoke up as a multitude of hands were raised. The room erupted into laughter.

I looked at the clerk and smiled. “Carolyn, I rest my case.”

I walked back to the reception desk and held out a hand to the elderly man. “You must be Bill Compton? I’m Kate Sexton.”

Compton motioned for us to walk with him to court and said, “If you ever decide to become a prosecutor, let me know.”

“Thanks. But I’m a little particular about who I work with.”

Compton laughed. “I understand. If it’s any consolation, your ex is the worst attorney in the office.”

“Makes my day.” When we entered the elevator, I said, “I appreciate you seeing me and I’m sorry I was late. I’m here about a man you prosecuted several years ago—Nathan Kane.”

“Serving a life term for manslaughter.”

“Was,” I said. “He was granted parole yesterday.”

The elevator door opened and Compton held it for a moment. “I was afraid of that. We got the parole hearing notice but due to budget cutbacks I was told I couldn’t attend. I just hope the son of a bitch’s medical condition will keep him from being a threat.”

As we stepped off the elevator, I said, “Some of the prison staff aren’t convinced about that.” We stopped outside the courtroom. “I’m trying to establish a connection Kane may have had to a man who went missing about thirty years ago. His name was John Carmichael.”

Compton checked his watch. “I’ve got a felony arraignment calendar this morning. If Sharkey takes his usual ten-thirty recess to smoke three cigarettes, I can spare twenty minutes then.”

Bernie and I waited until we saw the silver-haired prosecutor push his way out of the courtroom during the morning break. I bought Compton a cup of coffee and we found a bench in the courtyard under a magnolia tree.

I took a few minutes to bring him up to speed on the investigation, starting with the murder of Cassie Reynolds as a probable cover-up of what she knew about the disappearance of her father.

“As I mentioned, I’m trying to establish any connection Cassie’s father, John Carmichael, may have had to Nathan Kane. I know Carmichael was involved in a corporation called Pacific Trading Partners that was formed in 1983 with the movie producer Conrad Harper. I also know that Kane and Harper have some shared interests.”

Compton dumped a packet of sugar in his coffee and said, “Let’s start with what I know about Nathan Kane. If he was connected to Carmichael, it probably

had something to do with drugs. Kane established a drug empire in the 1980s by importing paintings and other works of art from Europe. The shipments came from Paris via Mexico City where heroin was substituted for the art.”

“Why heroin?”

“A lot of cheap heroin was coming into Mexico from Southeast Asia, before finding its way into the states. The stopover allowed for the exchange of cheap European art for heroin, without much scrutiny.” Compton stirred his coffee. “Kane made a fortune and went on to control most of the drug trade in California.”

“And Conrad Harper—could he have been involved?”

“Harper was an associate of Kane’s. He stayed in the background, but I believe he had a role in what was happening.”

“That’s where I have trouble understanding things. Why would someone like Harper risk everything to be involved in the drug business?”

“You’ve got to remember, back in the eighties, Harper was just getting established in Hollywood. He was a fledging movie producer. The drug money helped him get his movie empire off the ground. Kane also offered up something Harper was probably interested in—prostitutes.”

This was the first I’d heard of Kane being involved in prostitution. “Can you tell me about that?”

“Nathan Kane, if you want my opinion, was, probably still is, a violent sexual predator. He operated a prostitution ring that pioneered the practice of bringing illegal immigrants into the country with the promise of citizenship. Instead, the women were used in the sex trade. He moved his victims in and out of the country, some were killed by pimps or Johns. Of course, since they were illegal, none of the victims who survived would go to the authorities.”

I thought about Conrad Harper’s relationship to Kane. He’d been at the studio for Cassie Reynolds’s attempt at starring in a porn flick. Jack had also mentioned he’d heard that Harper was a sex addict. If Cassie’s prostitution activities were somehow linked to Kane, maybe Harper had become acquainted with Cassie through that relationship, as well as the producer’s connections to Roger Diamond.

“Do you think Harper might have been involved in the prostitution ring?”

“You’ve probably heard the talk about Harper’s sexual appetite. I’m just speculating now, but Kane might have leveraged that addiction by providing prostitutes in exchange for Harper’s help in distributing drugs to all the right players on the Hollywood scene.”

“The arrangement would have benefited them both.”

Compton sipped his coffee, nodded. “Kane got out of the sex business in the early nineties. Concentrated on dealing drugs, before he went to prison behind the murder of Marty Rubin who tried to cut in on his territory.”

“I think Kane is still involved in the drug trade, running things even while he was in prison. One of his dealers, a guy named Roger Diamond, turned up dead a few days ago. He was involved with Cassie Reynolds and still has connections to Conrad Harper.”

“Kane is ruthless and cunning. He wouldn’t be the first guy to continue dealing while behind bars.” The prosecutor checked his watch. “Sharkey’s probably in the middle of his third cigarette.” He tossed his coffee cup in the trash and said he needed to get back to court. I told him Bernie and I would walk with him.

As we walked along a glass wall of tinted windows that overlooked the courtyard, Robin’s drug charges came to mind. “This is more curiosity than anything else on my part, but I’m wondering if you ever saw a connection between any of the players we’ve been talking about and the actor, Wolf Donovan?”

Compton shook his head. “There’s been a lot of speculation about Donovan’s drug connections and sexual escapades over the years. He’s certainly had his share of dealing with the dregs of humanity, but he’s been clever enough to cover his tracks. If you want my opinion, his idiot son has taken up where Donovan left off.”

As we moved through the glass doors into the courthouse, I said, “I talked to John Carmichael’s former secretary yesterday and she said something of interest. She told me the night before Carmichael disappeared, she heard him arguing with someone in his office.”

Compton stopped at the entrance to the felony arraignment court. “Did she give you a name?”

“She didn’t see who he was arguing with, but later saw a police cruiser parked down the block from his office. She believes it was a cop that was arguing with Carmichael.”

The elderly prosecutor raked a hand across his ruffled silver hair and smiled. “Ever know something you were absolutely sure of in your gut but couldn’t prove?”

I thought about Jack Bautista. I hadn’t heard from him in a couple of days and wondered if he was safe. I swallowed a lump in my throat. “Yeah, as a matter of

fact. Why?”

“When I did the work-up on Kane at the time of his prosecution, we went back and reviewed every police report—every scrap of information we could put together on the guy. I kept seeing the same cop’s name come up in a lot of the police reports. Sometimes it was just this guy signing off on reports that closed out investigations without any follow-up. Other times it was the same guy deciding the case didn’t have enough evidence to merit a referral to the DA for prosecution.”

The bailiff opened the courtroom door and motioned to the prosecutor.

“Kane and this guy have a long history,” Compton said. “Maybe he also had some connection to Carmichael. The guy’s name is Marvin Drake.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

The drive to Hollywood is invigorating. Nathan Kane listens to Randy Newman's "I Love L.A." as he turns off the freeway. Instead of the nondescript Ford he's driving, he imagines himself in a convertible making his way through the city he loves. It's a grand entrance.

Hollywood—the city of dreams. There are only a couple of things he craved while in prison. Marsha Wentworth has temporarily helped him meet both those needs. After killing the psychiatrist, he sanitized the scene and dumped her body in the desert.

But Wentworth was only the appetizer. He's already decided on the main course—Kate Sexton. The attractive detective will soon have a beautiful, memorable death.

When he reaches Sunset Boulevard, Kane parks and walks through a park. He isn't about to take the chance of using his cell phone while driving and getting caught. Careless people make stupid mistakes.

An image of the dead shrink skitters through his mind as he punches a number into the throwaway phone. When the call is answered, he asks for an update.

"Bautista's out of state. He's in Arizona."

Kane palms the phone, nearly crushing it. "You let him leave the area without taking care of business?"

"He's looking for Reynolds's mother. We're on top of it."

Kane swallows his anger. It's only taken a few weeks for everything to spin out of control due to arrogance, stupidity, and now inaction.

"I thought she was dead," he says. "Where is she living?"

"She's a drunk, in and out of the local homeless shelters around Tucson. We'll find her."

"Why is it that I have absolutely no confidence in that statement?"

Kane notices there's a couple within earshot. He walks over to a bench, sits down, and lowers his voice. "What about Sexton?"

"Her brother's facing a possession for sales charge. She's been scrambling around behind that and her problems with the department. We're getting the message across to stay out of things. She's not worth worrying about."

Kane doesn't respond. His anticipation of being with the female cop mushrooms into his consciousness.

"You there?"

"Yeah." His thoughts resurface, sweat pops on his forehead. "I'm going to

take care of that other matter we talked about. He's the asshole that set everything in motion and will now pay the price. I'll call you about Bautista tomorrow and the news better be good."

Back on Sunset, Kane follows the busy highway, passing Rodeo Drive before winding his way past the Los Angeles Country Club. When he reaches Holmby Hills, he parks on a side street. He walks a few blocks until he arrives at Eastlake, Conrad Harper's estate.

Kane walks past the gaudy gold leaf gates to the parking lot near the employee entrance to the estate. He waits until one of the housekeeping staff who approximates his size and build arrives. The man is lured into a wooded area and butchered. Minutes later, wearing the man's green pants and shirt, Kane walks up to the employee entrance, runs a plastic card reader over the electronic sensor, and enters the grounds.

He focuses his mind, concentrating on what is ahead of him. The task at hand requires his full attention. Mistakes are not an option when it comes to murdering a very rich and famous person.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The day after I met with Bill Compton, I left Bernie with my mother and went directly to my meeting, or should I say interrogation, with IAD. I'd filled Pearl and Natalie in on what Compton had told me. We agreed that a definitive link between Drake, Harper, and Kane needed to be established to move things forward. No small task.

As I sipped coffee and waited for Jimmy Chester at the Bradbury Building, I brushed a hand through my limp hair. I hadn't slept well, anticipating the meeting. I was wearing a tailored black Armani blazer with matching pants, but felt like I hadn't pulled everything together. I had no experience choosing an outfit for an interrogation.

Chester arrived ten minutes late, huffing about being tied up in traffic. As we took the elevator to the top floor and walked down the corridor, I noticed the rat had chosen a tan linen suit, complimented by a pale blue tie. It might have been appropriate for a summer dinner party, but it wasn't summer and we weren't going to a party. We were going to war.

We stopped outside a conference room where I'd previously met with the IAD detectives.

"Any advice on how I should handle their questions?" I asked.

Chester's tiny eyes darted in my direction. "We may reach a point when we have to decide whether or not to proceed. I'll call a recess if that happens."

My stomach felt queasy. I tossed my coffee in a receptacle and asked, "What are you saying?"

The conference room door opened. Blaylock poked his head outside.

"Be right there," Chester said to the IAD detective. The door closed and the rat turned back to me. He sniffed the air, his voice lowering, "Just follow my lead."

When we entered the oak-paneled conference room, I was immediately put on the defensive. The two IAD detectives were sitting next to a video camera. They stood and shook hands with Chester, then nodded in my direction.

When I sat down, Blaylock said, "Not there, Detective." He motioned to another chair. "We'll need you across from the camera."

"Suppose I don't want to star in your movie?" I turned to Chester. "Can we ask them to remove the camera?"

"It's just for the record." The rat turned to the detectives. "We are formally requesting a copy of any recordings."

“Duly noted,” Preston said, his fleshy face contorting into a smug grin as he flipped the switch on the camera.

I tried to stop myself. I really did. But I just couldn’t resist. I leaned forward and said to Preston, “You seem a little flushed. Might want to loosen your girdle before we begin.”

My adversary killed the camera. His cheeks were the color of Victoria’s Secret’s scarlet fall panty line. He turned to his partner and shrugged.

Chester leaned over to me. Using a hushed tone that everyone could hear, he said, “There’s no sense in stirring things up before we begin.” He turned to the IAD detectives. “Our apologies. Let’s proceed.”

Preston restarted the camera and, per my lawyer’s directive, I formally agreed to answer questions, acknowledging that any refusal to answer could lead to disciplinary action. The air conditioning in the room had been turned off. I removed my blazer as the proceedings continued.

After stating my name, rank, and assignment, I acknowledged that I’d received instruction on the department’s Use of Force Policy. After a few questions about the policy, Blaylock began focusing on the day of Jack Bautista’s failed arrest. I explained that I received the tip about Bautista being at the Pinewood and telling Drake about it.

“I advised the captain that we should call the Warrant Task Force for assistance. He insisted that we proceed directly to the apartment building and look for Bautista. That decision went against established protocol.”

Blaylock said, “Could it be that the captain simply wanted to act on the information without delay and get a wanted murder suspect off the streets?”

I tugged at the collar of my blouse. “I’ll say it again. Not calling for backup violated protocol, regardless of how you want to try to explain it away.”

Preston spoke up, “Isn’t it true, Detective, that when you and Captain Drake arrived at the Pinewood Apartments, you intentionally interfered with the arrest of a wanted felon by pushing the captain’s arm away while he was discharging his service weapon?”

I’d been anticipating the question, but regardless felt the perspiration popping on my forehead. “My actions were consistent with the department’s Use of Force Policy.”

“Explain what you mean.”

“The policy allows an officer to use the level of force that is reasonable and warranted by the circumstances at hand, either to arrest or subdue a resisting subject. It does not authorize an officer to shoot an unarmed suspect.”

“Are you sure that the suspect was unarmed?”

“Absolutely.”

Preston removed a stack of papers from his briefcase and tossed them across the table. “This is the report of the Officer Involved Shooting Team. I’ll give you a moment to review it, but I think you’ll find the summary on page eighteen very enlightening.”

This was the moment of truth. I picked up the report. Chester was a mouth breather, badly in need of a breath mint. I felt his hot breath as he looked over my shoulder.

I skimmed the report, thumbing through it until I came to the last page. One word on that page stood out, shooting my anxiety level off the charts.

“Casings?” I said, cutting my eyes to Preston who was wearing his best shit-eating grin. I tossed the report back across the table. “This is a complete setup.”

Blaylock took over. “You can call it whatever you like, Detective, but it doesn’t alter the fact that the OIS team found two spent nine millimeter cartridges in the exact location where Jack Bautista had been standing when the captain discharged his weapon.”

I pushed back in my chair and exhaled. “If there were any spent casings they were planted there. Maybe they were left over from the last time you guys shot someone in the back. Jack Bautista did not fire his weapon.”

“And how are you so sure of that?” Preston asked, still grinning.

I mocked his stupid smirk. “Because I was there when everything went down.” I felt Chester tugging on the sleeve of my blouse as I continued, “Jack Bautista was carrying a bag of groceries in his hands. After the incident occurred my...”

“A moment please,” Chester said to the IAD detectives, interrupting me. He then whispered in my ear, “We don’t want to let them establish that you and Bautista had a relationship.”

It took all my effort to maintain control. I quietly said to Chester, “A phone call does not constitute a relationship. I’ve already provided information about receiving the call in my statements to both RHD and OIS.” I glared at the rat. He lowered his eyes and nodded for the detectives to continue.

“Please continue with your answer,” Preston said.

“Bautista called my cell phone after the incident occurred. I’m sure he got my number from the department’s emergency phone list. I specifically asked him if he fired at the captain. He said he was armed but was carrying a bag of groceries and did not draw his weapon.”

“Why didn’t you release your dog when the incident occurred?” Blaylock asked.

“I followed my training and policy. Our protocol dictates that we don’t release until the canine is off leash and the command is given.”

“Let’s move to the area of relationships,” Preston said. “Isn’t it true that you and Detective Bautista have been involved in a romantic relationship for several months?”

“What?” I was furious. “No that’s absolutely untrue.” I turned to Chester who was avoiding eye contact. I realized he must have known all along what they were going to say.

“Isn’t it also true,” Preston continued, “that when you last attended the department’s Christmas party you and Jack Bautista engaged in a public display of affection?”

This was unbelievable. “Bautista had too much to drink and tried to kiss me while my husband was at the bar. I told him I wasn’t interested. There was no public display of anything.”

“Did your relationship with Jack Bautista result in the breakup of your marriage?”

“No. Absolutely not!” I swallowed hard, trying to keep my voice from shaking with anger. My blouse felt damp with perspiration. “We did not have a relationship. As everyone in the department knows, my marriage ended because my husband was caught screwing his secretary in an interrogation room and it was recorded on videotape.”

It was Blaylock’s turn. “Detective Sexton, did you on numerous occasions receive phone calls from Jack Bautista, knowing that there was a warrant for his arrest for homicide?”

I wanted to leap across the table at both men. They were, in effect, saying that Jack Bautista and I were lovers and I was covering up and protecting him. I heard Chester again whispering something in my ear, but was so angry I tuned him out.

“Answer the question,” Preston demanded, taking over for his partner.

I opened my mouth and began, “Jack Bautista and I...”

“Stop!” Chester screeched.

I was so dumbfounded by the wretched little rat’s caterwaul that I stopped talking in mid-sentence. Chester was tugging on my sleeve again, turning bright red. He rose from the table, pulling me up with him.

“We demand a recess,” Chester said.

We found a private conference room across the corridor where I unloaded on him. “This whole thing has been orchestrated to get me to admit to a relationship that doesn’t exist.” I leaned forward, looking down at Chester. “And you knew about it.” I pushed a hand through my damp hair. “I won’t let them get away with it.”

Chester walked away from me. He paced, remaining silent. When he finally turned back to me his gaze fixed on me for the first time since we’d met.

“I need to explain something to you, Detective Sexton, and you need to listen very carefully.”

I exhaled and slumped into a chair. I was exhausted and couldn’t imagine spending several more hours going at it with Blaylock and Preston. “Okay, I’m listening.”

“By law, nothing in these proceedings can be used against you in a criminal case.”

“I’m not guilty...”

“I’m not saying you are guilty of anything, but you need to hear me out.” I nodded, biting my tongue. “As I said, what you tell the detectives can’t be used in a criminal case, but, as I’ve told you before, the law governing peace officer interrogations makes it clear that anything you say can be used administratively for disciplinary proceedings.”

I started to respond, but the moment faded, along with my last ounce of energy. Everything was now clear to me. I didn’t have a chance. I never had a chance. I’d been set up and it was a matter of time until I was fired.

Chester continued, “If you tell these detectives that you continued to receive phone calls from Jack Bautista, however well-intentioned or innocent your discussions might have been, they will use that as a basis to establish that you had an ongoing relationship with him.” Chester took a step closer to me. “They will use the admission that you were in contact with a wanted felon to terminate your employment.”

I stood up and walked away from him. The room was spinning. I clutched my sides, trying to breathe evenly and keep my emotions in check.

I glanced over at a poster on the wall. It was one of those public relations posters that showed an officer bending down and offering a hand to a little girl who was crying. The caption read, *To Protect and Serve*.

My discussions with Jack Bautista swam through my mind. My first inclination had been to get him to turn himself in. But as we’d continued to talk, I became convinced of his innocence.

I had to admit that I was attracted to Jack, but nothing had happened between us. I had been trying to do the right thing, both by Jack Bautista and Cassie Reynolds. It was the only solace I could find.

I looked at the poster again. I was about the same age as the little girl in the picture when my father was murdered. He had sacrificed everything for the department, including his life. In the end, that sacrifice hadn't even been acknowledged by putting his badge in a display case for fallen officers.

I felt disgusted, the bitterness catching in my throat. Whatever happened, I was sure of one thing. My motives and actions had been honorable, just like my father's. We had both done the right thing.

I turned back to my attorney and said, "I guess it's over."

Chester nodded. "The only advice I can give you is to go back into that room and assert your fifth amendment rights. Refuse to answer any further questions."

"And, when I refuse to answer I'll be subject to disciplinary action. I will be fired."

"Yes, but there's something else, Detective. While it's true that nothing you say in these proceedings is admissible in a criminal court, if you talk and allow them to establish that you had any kind of relationship with Jack Bautista, it won't stop Blaylock and Preston from doing an end run, going to the DA behind your back, trying to convince that office to file charges for aiding and abetting a fugitive."

Chester sat down, mopped his brow. "The choice is yours. Keep your mouth shut and face termination of your employment. Or keep talking and run the risk they will use anything and everything you say to both terminate your employment and work on the DA behind the scenes to prosecute you."

I sucked in a breath, released it slowly and turned away. The reality of what was happening now fully settled in. My world caved in at the realization I would lose the job I loved and could end up in prison if I said anything further. I saw myself divorced, unemployed, and facing criminal charges.

"It was the right thing," I said weakly, not meeting his eyes.

"What are you trying to say, Detective?"

"Whatever happens," I said, my voice breaking, "I was trying to do the right thing." I turned and looked across the room at Chester. "For what it's worth, I want you to know that."

"Unfortunately, sometimes doing the right thing is a costly proposition."

Ten minutes later, I was back with the IAD detectives, the camera in my face. I told Blaylock and Preston on the record that I was refusing to answer any

further questions.

Preston grinned and said, “You do understand that your failure to answer is grounds for disciplinary action up to and including termination of your employment?”

I stood and locked eyes with my adversary. “I understand one thing and it’s very clear to me. The department doesn’t want to know the truth. That, Detective Preston, goes against everything this profession should stand for.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

After I left IAD, I called Charlie and filled him in on what happened. He mumbled something about maybe I could file an appeal.

I ended the call, telling him I was taking the rest of the day off and would see him tomorrow. I knew there was no appealing a setup that had been orchestrated to get me fired.

I stopped by my mother's house on the way home to pick up Bernie. Mom was still in bandages, but her imaginary dalliance with the former president hadn't resurfaced. I told Janet Logan I'd stop by again tomorrow.

After leaving Mom's, I stopped at a market and purchased a self-pity tool kit. The kit had come in handy over the past year. It consists of a bottle of wine and a bag of Fugs. A Fug is an unhealthy, deep-fried, god-awful, cheese-dusted, carb-bomb that a college roommate named Sally Clapper, yes Clapper, introduced me to. I've since become addicted to Fugs, even though Sally and I, in a fit of wine-induced depression one night, had the horrific thought that Fug might stand for Fat Ugly Girl.

During my Fug-therapy sessions Bernie gets a rawhide chew, I get drunk, and end up with Fug-dust all over my PJ's. I usually channel surf during these sessions and get more despondent because there's nothing worth watching, unless I want to buy a device that will squeeze the juice out of a radish or the fat out of my thighs. I usually end up falling asleep on the sofa and sometimes wake up in the middle of the night to some idiotic home improvement show. I then feel sorry for myself because I live in an appliance store and stumble off to bed.

By late afternoon, I'd drifted off to sleep until the persistent peal of the phone woke me. I let the answering machine pick up, but heard Pearl Kramer's voice.

"Kate, I talked to Charlie and heard what happened. There's been some..."

I stumbled to the phone, killed the machine.

"Are you okay?" Pearl asked after I picked up. "I heard your session with IAD didn't go well."

"That's an understatement," I mumbled. "What's going on?"

"I got off the phone with Peter Jacobs a little while ago. Conrad Harper was found dead at his estate. The story's been held back from the press, but will probably be in the papers by morning."

I nearly fell off the sofa. "What was the cause of death?"

"The family had Harper's private physician certify he died of natural causes. Apparently they don't want anything to interfere with the esteemed producer's

legacy or their large inheritance. But Jacobs thinks there's more to the story—that the death wasn't from natural causes.”

“What makes him think that?”

“Harper was, according to Jacobs, heavily addicted to drugs, various pain medications as well as illegal substances. He spent the better part of this past year in rehab kicking the habit. When Jacobs found the body, there were several vials of medications nearby. He thinks there were enough drugs in Harper's system to bring down an elephant.”

I brushed the hair off my forehead. “Maybe it was an accidental overdose?”

“Jacobs doesn't think so. One of their employees was found dead near the staff parking lot a few hours after Harper's body was discovered. His clothes had been removed and the man's electronic card reader was used to enter the estate. Jacobs thinks whoever used the access card had a hand in Harper's death.”

“Are the police involved?”

“Yes, but Jacobs doesn't think the investigation will go very far. They have no direct evidence there was any foul play and the family has rushed things along; already had the body cremated.”

After the news sank in for a moment, I said, “I wonder if Nathan Kane is back in town?”

“Thought maybe you could call Avenal and see if he's still on his electronic leash.”

Ten minutes later, I called Pearl back after speaking with Patty Washington at the prison. “Kane cut off his bracelet twenty minutes after being paroled. He's in the wind.”

“Or in Hollywood,” Pearl said.

“I'd bet on it.” I had another call and told Pearl I'd get back to him later.

When I answered the call, I heard Brian Jankowitz's voice. “Kate, I need you to meet me in my office first thing tomorrow morning.”

My pulse raced. “What's going on?”

His voice faltered before he said, “I'm sorry, there's just no easy way to say this. You're being suspended from duty pending a Board of Rights Hearing.”

The next morning I stopped at a home improvement store on my way into the station and picked up some boxes. I saw that Charlie was at his desk, munching away on something that looked like chocolate pretzels. I stood behind him for a moment, not saying anything. My eyes drifted up and over our workspace,

probably for the last time.

On the filing cabinet behind my desk was a photograph of my dad in his dress blues taken upon graduation from the police academy. Next to that was a photograph of me and Bernie on our first day of patrol. On the opposite wall was a framed letter written by some third grade kids, thanking me for a talk about safety.

I looked down at my beat-up desk. There was a half-dead Boston fern, my empty coffee mug, stains on the blotter, and an in-basket that seemed forever overflowing. Behind me I heard the steady drone of voices, phones ringing, and gardeners trimming hedges somewhere outside the building. The place had its own unique smell—something brought on by sweat, stress, and maybe a little blood. This was my world and it was all going away.

I put the boxes on my desk and told Charlie about my meeting with Jankowitz and upcoming suspension.

“Do me a favor,” I said. “While I’m meeting with Jank could you pack up my desk? I’d like to make a quick exit when this is over.”

Charlie stood and took the boxes from me. I saw that his eyes were red and glassy.

“Cheer up, Winkler. It’s not like I’m facing a firing squad. I’ll still let you buy me a beer now and then.”

“I’m counting on it.” My overweight partner moved forward, gave me a quick hug that felt more like a reverse Heimlich Maneuver, and then turned away. I think I saw a tear rolling down his cheek.

As Bernie and I walked down the corridor to the captain’s office I decided I was wrong. This did feel like I was facing a firing squad. Everything I had worked for over the past nine years would be gone.

I remembered feeling on top of the world when I made detective four years ago. Now, I had no idea how I was going to even pay my rent. I saw myself broke and living with my mother as I knocked on the Jank’s door.

Brian Jankowitz had been an ice hockey player in college and still bore a couple of scars from the sport. He was a tough but fair cop, an exception that I appreciated given my situation. Bernie settled at my feet as I took a seat in front of the captain’s desk.

“I’m not going to drag this out with small talk,” he said. “I have a letter given to me by administration. Take a few minutes and read it, then I’ll need your signature at the bottom, acknowledging receipt.”

Bernie let out a soft whine, but I ignored it as I scanned the letter. My eyes

held on some of the key phrases.

Insubordination...failure to cooperate...willful disobedience of a direct order...conduct unbecoming an officer...suspended from duty...

The letter said my termination would be final within seven days unless I filed for a Board of Rights Hearing.

I signed the letter and slid it across the captain's desk. "Just so you know, I am going to file for a hearing. I won't go down without a fight."

"I wouldn't expect anything less of you, Kate." Jankowitz met my eyes. "Off the record, I want you to know I wish this wasn't happening. You've been one of my best officers."

"That means a lot to me." I pushed down my emotions. "I'll have my attorney, Jimmy Chester, call you about the hearing. I'd like it to be held as soon as possible. I'll waive any time issues. There are some things I want to say about what's been happening as soon as possible." I removed my gun and badge and pushed them across the desk.

The captain nodded. "I'll let administration know and see what I can do to move the hearing along."

I thanked him. Despite my best efforts, I realized a tear was on my cheek. I brushed it away, gathered up Bernie, and moved toward the door.

"There's one other thing," Jankowitz said.

I turned back and faced him. I saw the distress in his face.

The captain cleared his throat. "It's about your partner, Kate."

"Charlie?"

Jankowitz shook his head. "Bernie. I've been told that when...if the termination is upheld, he will be reassigned. Until then he can remain with you, but I need to ask for his badge as well."

I was overwhelmed by what he'd said. I'd been so caught up in my own problems I hadn't even thought about how any of this would affect Bernie. "I don't understand." I moved back to the captain's desk. "The department has a policy that when an officer retires, their dogs are usually allowed to end their service at the same time."

Jankowitz exhaled. "This isn't a retirement, Kate." He ran a hand over his damp forehead. "If I were you, if things don't go well at your hearing, I'd write a letter to the chief. You never know, he just might let Bernie go out with you."

I looked down at my big dog. He pushed his nose against my hand, whining softly.

I cut my eyes back to Jankowitz. "Not if Marvin Drake and his buddies have

anything to do with it.”

I removed the badge from Bernie’s collar, pushed it across the captain’s desk, and walked away.

Charlie helped me carry my belongings to the car. As I loaded the boxes into the trunk I realized I was about to lose everything I cared about, even Charlie. I turned to my partner and saw tears streaming down his face. He was sobbing like a child.

I kissed my now ex-partner on the cheek, and said goodbye for the last time. I was headed down the street when the dam burst. I cried so hard I couldn’t see the road in front of me.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Wilcox Avenue is a busy tree-lined street in a working class neighborhood just off Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. The avenue has apartment buildings and several bail bond establishments. It's also the headquarters for Hollywood Division. It is the kind of neighborhood where no one is likely to notice a man in a car parked a block up from the police station.

While Nathan Kane waits, he gets some news he's been hoping to hear. "We've found Bautista," the man on the phone says. "He's been staying in a motel in Tucson for the past couple of days."

"Did he locate the whore's mother?"

"No. We're almost positive about that. We think she's living on the streets. He's been making the rounds of the homeless shelters, asking about her."

"Let's not waste any more time, then. I want him dead."

"Consider it done."

Kane closes the phone, thinking about the woman Bautista is tracking. He doubts Cassie Reynolds's mother knows anything, but after he takes care of other business she will also die. The loop has to be closed.

There's also the matter of Bautista talking to Detective Sexton. Even though Sexton went to see Harper, he doubts that she got anywhere. If she'd found out anything worthwhile she would have said something by now.

Kane smiles, remembering how he forced the hairless little billionaire to choke down his medication until he lost consciousness.

Harper's death had been too easy, but it had to look like an accident. Any questions about the cause of death might eventually lead back to him. In the end, the bastard got what he deserved. After all, he was the one who'd tipped Diamond and Reynolds off about everything. It was the stupid little producer's actions that had set the killings in motion.

Sexton! He sees the detective walking out of the police station, her hands full of boxes. She loads the containers into her car and then falls into her fat partner's arms, crying like a baby. Perfect.

He knows the detective has been suspended from duty. In a few days she'll be out of a job—permanently. She's not much of a threat now. Her death will be more of a pleasure than anything else. The exhilaration of watching her stirs his excitement to a fever pitch. The memory of each of his victims surges through him like an orgasm.

How many women has he killed? The number is somewhere around two

dozen, but there were some nights when the drugs and his vengeance blurred his memories. There was a time when his bloodlust was so overwhelming that he'd been given the nickname, The Assassin.

Kane remembers a prostitute that he'd tortured all night before tying her to a tree and leaving her. He was sure the wild things of the night had finished the job he had started.

Wild things. The Assassin likes the sound of that.

He sees the suspended cop drive out of the parking lot and slumps down in his seat as she passes by.

Soon, Kate Sexton will know what a wild thing can do when it's on the hunt for blood.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The afternoon after my suspension I went home and prepared my standard self-pity tool kit: a bottle of Chardonnay and a bag of Fugs. But as I got a corkscrew out of the drawer, something in me shifted.

I was without a job, without any credit, I had virtually no money, and I was going to spend the day with wine and junk food crying my eyes out. My depression turned to anger. I dumped the wine down the drain then tossed the junk food in the trash as my phone rang.

"I just got a call from Clark," Robin said. "He's at the salon and wants to talk. Do you think you could pick me up at Mom's and give me a ride over there?"

"Stay put. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

On my way to the car, I let Bernie water some junipers at the side of the store. Natalie spotted us through the window and came outside. She held up a pair of pink boxers and said, "Meet'n with a little resistance. Most of the guys don't want to wear these while workin'."

"Sounds like a rough start for Laundry 'n Lace."

"Not to worry. Got me a couple a ladies startin' tomorrow." She held up a pair of lace panties and a bra. "We'll see if the worm starts to turn when they see 'em in these."

"The worm may not only turn," I said. "It might stand up and whistle Dixie."

Natalie laughed. "Care to come in for a muffin?"

I declined, telling her I had to meet Robin.

"Okay. I'll come by tonight, just before seven."

I was confused. "Did we have a..." I then remembered promising to take Natalie to her acting class. The last thing I wanted to do was spend the evening with a bunch of wannabe actors after my suspension, but I had made a promise. "I'll see you then."

"Good. Just so you know, it's dress up night. I've always thought you had some Cuban blood in ya."

I had no idea what Natalie was talking about, but that wasn't unusual.

Janet Logan gave me an update on my mom when I picked up Robin. "I think she's got her history confused, she's been talking about Watergate. She's also been saying something about the president and his cigar."

"I've heard enough," I said, making a mad dash to the car with Robin.

I'd borrowed Robin's car because Olive was in the shop again. On the way to the salon he explained about Clark.

"According to Barry, Clark showed up at the salon last night and was sober, but he looks like he's aged ten years. I'm worried about him."

"And I'm worried about you, Robin. Don't let Clark's problems drag you down. He's the one who got himself into this mess. You can't make it all go away."

"I just want to help make it better. That's the least I owe him."

I voiced my concerns again before Robin changed the subject. "I was in court for my arraignment this morning. They continued bail and set my hearing for late November."

My anxiety spiked, thinking about his upcoming trial. "We need to see about getting you a good lawyer."

My brother turned to me, his eyes were filling. "Something happened in court today, Kate. During my arraignment, I glanced at the back of the courtroom and realized Zen was there."

"What?"

The tears flowed down Robin's cheeks. "He was just sitting there, smiling at me."

I tried to reassure my brother, but didn't know what to say. It only further confirmed my feelings that Wolf Donovan was, for some reason, behind what was happening.

As we pulled to the curb at the hair salon, Robin controlled his emotions and said, "Charlie called and told me about the suspension. I'm so sorry."

What would I do without Charlie? "I'm not throwing in the towel, just yet." I motioned to the figure standing near Sinclair's trademark green door. "Looks like Clark's waiting for you."

I purposely tended to Bernie while Robin and Clark greeted one another. After a few minutes, I went inside and said my hellos. Robin made some coffee and we settled into the employee lounge at the rear of the salon.

Clark was fidgety as Robin poured the coffee. He and Robin tried to politely amuse one another with tales of the difficult customers they'd worked with over the years. Clark looked like someone who was still coming down from what had probably been a cocktail of drugs. He needed to be in a detox program.

After a few more minutes of chit-chat, I decided to level with him. "Clark, let's talk candidly for a moment. You need help with your drug problems. I know of several programs in the area."

“We only want what’s best for you,” Robin chimed in, trying to take the edge off.

Clark didn’t look at either of us. His voice broke with emotion, “I’ve blown everything. Almost a year of sobriety gone in an instant.” His fragile composure melted, tears streaming down his face. “I’m sorry for everything that’s happened.”

As Robin tried to comfort him, I said, “You need to tell us what’s been happening for the past several days.”

After regaining his composure Clark tried to explain, “Everything spun out of control so fast. I was offered some Oxies at the party. I refused at first, but everyone at Donovan’s was using. I began feeling like I was the only sober person on the planet. I was given what I thought was an energy drink, but Bon Bon had spiked it and I was off and running. I spent the next several days out of control.” Clark broke down again, sobbing in Robin’s arms.

I swallowed my anger at Robin’s apparent easy acceptance of what had been total betrayal by Clark.

“Tell me about the drug scene at Donovan’s,” I said. “Who is involved and who is supplying the drugs?”

Clark blotted his tears on the sleeve of his shirt. He took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. “Everyone’s involved. Bon Bon and a guy named Zen organize and control everything. They stage all the parties and invite the celebrities.”

“Who is their connection?”

“I don’t know.” He didn’t look at me. “It could be lots of different people.”

I studied him for a long moment. I’d interviewed hundreds of suspects in similar circumstances. I was sure that either Clark was lying about not knowing who the drug connection was or there was a lot more to the story than he let on.

“Okay, Clark,” I said, “let’s have the truth. Robin is facing serious drug charges that could send him to prison for years. I need to know who you’re protecting.”

Clark shot a glance at me then set his eyes on Robin. “I don’t know anything more than I’ve already said. You’ve got to believe me.”

Robin touched Clark’s shoulder, then turned to me. “He’s been through a stressful time, Kate. Let it go.”

I was disappointed in my brother. He was taking sides, making me the enemy. I tried one last approach, “I need Clark to tell us about Wolf Donovan.” I looked at my brother’s partner. “What’s his role in everything?”

Clark didn't look at me. "He usually stays in a different part of the estate. Bon Bon and Zen run the show. I didn't see him much."

I didn't believe him and was about to say as much when Robin interrupted.

"Where are you staying, Clark?" Robin asked.

"In a motel over on Western. I'm basically homeless."

"You can move back in with me."

"Robin!" I shook my head, then fixed my gaze back on Clark. "You need to be in a residential drug program, not bringing your drug issues home to my brother."

Clark regarded me for a long moment. I saw the defiance in his eyes. "I'll get back into my twelve-step program. I can work through this with Robin's help."

I turned back to my brother. "Remember what we talked about earlier?"

Robin didn't look at me. His eyes were locked on Clark. "You're right. We can work through this together." He finally looked over at me. "I need my car back."

I removed the keys from my purse and handed them over. "You know I don't agree with your decision, but please stay in touch with me."

Robin didn't respond. He took the keys, put his arm around Clark, and they headed for the door. I called after him, "Robin, please be careful."

My brother didn't look at me, but said, "I can take care of myself."

It was after six when I finally got home after bailing Olive out of the repair shop. I was still ranting to Bernie about the repair bill as we walked through the front door.

"Three hundred and sixty-four dollars! It's highway robbery." I'd written a check to the mechanic and prayed it wouldn't bounce.

After crushing the receipt and tossing it into the wicker basket with the other bills, I looked at Bernie and said, "Maybe I should just consider it a down payment on my new home."

Half an hour later, Natalie arrived. As I opened the door, she said, "Hello Ricky. It's time to get dressed."

"Lucy," I said, laughing at her costume. Natalie made a very young, very attractive version of Lucille Ball, complete with a red wig and matching lipstick.

"I brought your suit, Ricky." Natalie held out a black pin-striped suit and white fedora. She then turned to Bernie. "Maybe Fred and Ethel can stay with you while we're out."

I began the excuses: "The outfit is too tight. What if someone I know sees me."

I don't look good in a fedora. I have a lousy Cuban accent."

None of it worked. Natalie countered every argument. "Come on, now. Don't make me blither about the need to forget your troubles for a couple a hours, not lettin' anyone piss on your popcorn."

Natalie held up a plastic bag, waving it at me. "I even brought you a wig and moustache." As I shook my head, she reached into the bag and held up a man's sock. "I also stuffed up one of Clyde's socks with a rock so you'll have a trouser knob."

I laughed. Bernie danced around and yelped as she twirled the sock in the air.

I surrendered. "I've got to be out of my mind. Okay, why not? But just so you know, I draw the line at the crotch rock."

After I dressed, we said our goodbyes to Bernie and headed for Olive. I spotted my reflection in one of appliance store windows wearing the wig, moustache, and white fedora. We both broke into fits of laughter.

As we got into the car, I said in my best Ricky Ricardo voice, "Lucy, you got some 'splanin' to do!"

Natalie turned to me, held out the stuffed sock, and in a perfect imitation of Lucy said, "Oh, just put this in your pants big boy. The time for talk is over."

I passed on the sock again.

When we walked into the Westside Actor's Studio, I felt like a complete idiot. A moment later, I almost forgot I was dressed like a dead sitcom star.

A cast of dozens of Hollywood stars, some living and some dead, paraded around the room. I was introduced to everyone from Elizabeth Taylor to Reese Witherspoon. There was even a political slant on the costumes when a young woman, who was dressed like a former president—thankfully not Richard Nixon—introduced herself to us.

After a few more introductions and small talk, I took a seat next to Natalie and watched as one of the acting coaches set up a scene. The actors did a good job of moving through the scenario and a couple of more that followed.

Natalie then stood up and whispered something to one of the coaches. She reached into her handbag and removed the sock I had declined. I groaned when the actress dressed as the ex-president was brought up on stage and the coach set up the scene.

"You will remain in the character of Lucy," the acting coach said to Natalie. He then turned to the presidential lookalike. "You will also remain in character; however, you will have a slight problem."

The coach handed Natalie's sock to the former president who unzipped. "It

will be Lucy's task to explain as politely as possible that you have left your zipper down, Mr. President." The acting coach then walked off stage.

The uproar began even before a word was spoken as the actress playing the ex-president inserted the sock and stared off stage, whistling like she or he was completely ignorant of his problem.

"Ah, excuse me Sir," Natalie began in the voice of Lucy, losing her British accent. "I believe you're a little over exposed, Mr. President."

"It happens when you've been the head of the free world," the presidential actor said. "I'm used to people staring. Sometimes they even want to touch me." The actor chortled, imitating the retired president.

Natalie continued as Lucy, now showing some frustration. "I mean to say, your barn door is open and the cow looks as though it's ready to do a bit of grazing."

"Yeah well," the former president said, "here on the ranch, we get a few problems with old Bessie from time to time. I just try to keep her milked."

The audience roared with laughter.

"Let me get right to the point," Natalie said, the exasperation in her Lucy voice now clear. "The turtle is coming out of his shell."

The ex-president stared at Lucy. "Pets can be quite the nuisance from time to time. I once had a pussy that was so much trouble I got rid of it."

Now Natalie was laughing. I saw the acting coach double over before he pushed a man in a suit, who looked a little like one of the Blues Brothers, on stage.

"Excuse me, Mr. President," the man in the suit said, pointing at the presidential crotch. "As your assigned Secret Service Agent, I need to tell you something. Your fly is open."

The former president looked down, pulled the sock out of his pants, held it up and said in a high pitched voice, "I don't get it. The warning label said the worst that could happen would be a painful four hour erection."

The audience became hysterical. I was the only one in the room not laughing. The voice of the actor who played the secret service agent was replaying in my mind. It was the same voice I'd heard at the Dark Dating event, the voice of the man named Sean who had warned me to stay out of things that didn't concern me.

As Natalie came off stage, I stood and removed my fedora, wig, and false moustache.

"What are you doin'?" Natalie asked.

“I’ll be back in a minute. A voice out of my past just came to me.”

I followed the actor who seemed in a hurry to leave the room after I removed my costume. I found him in a dressing room and blocked the doorway.

As the actor’s blue eyes glanced up into the mirror, he caught sight of me studying him from behind. I saw the look of recognition move over his face.

“Can I help you?” he finally asked.

I walked over to the dressing table and took a seat next to him. I moved a hand through my hair and released it from the bun I had used to conceal it beneath the wig.

I locked eyes with the actor. “You can start by telling me why you go around threatening people in the dark.”

He ran a cloth over his face, not looking at me. “I don’t know what...”

“Stop!” I removed my small wallet badge from my purse. I’d forgotten to turn in when I met with the captain earlier in the day. I held it up. “I want the truth, now.”

The actor pushed back in his chair and released a breath. “It was a job. I was paid to show up and say what you heard. That’s all.”

“A job.” I stood and circled behind him, studying his blue eyes in the mirror. “Who sent you?”

“I don’t know. I was paid two hundred bucks by a guy I met a few days ago. He showed me a photograph of you and told me what to say. I did the job and never saw him again.”

I kicked the chair I’d been sitting in across the room. It slammed into the wall and fell over.

“Stand up.” I removed the handcuffs from my purse.

“What’s this all about?”

I pulled the actor up by his shirt. “Threatening a police officer is a crime. You’re going to jail.” I said it with such authority that it only dawned on me afterward that I was on suspension.

“Okay. Stop. I’ll tell you everything I know if you’ll let me go.”

I swung him around so that he faced me. “I’m listening.”

“I got a call from a friend. He said he met a guy at a party who needed some help with a small acting job. I didn’t know what it involved, but I needed the money. He put us together. When I met with the guy, he told me about the dating event and said I was to make sure I got seated with you. He then handed me a script and told me I had to say the words exactly as they were written. That’s how it went down. I swear.”

“This guy—what was his name?”

“He said it was Brian, but he probably made that up. He wanted me to act the part, paid me the money, and said I would never see him again if I followed through.”

The actor was nervous, but I sensed he was telling me the truth. “What did the guy look like?”

“Late twenties, dark eyes. Looked like he worked out a lot.”

“His hair,” I said. “Tell me about his hair.”

The actor hesitated. He probably realized if he told me anything more he could be in danger.

“I’m waiting and I want the truth.” I pushed him up against the wall.

“His head was shaved.”

“And?”

The actor’s gaze fell away from me. “A ponytail. His head was shaved except for a long black ponytail.”

I pushed the handcuffs back into my purse and walked out of the room. A smile found my lips.

It had been one of the worst days of my life, but I was now certain of one thing. Wolf Donovan was linked to Cassie Reynolds’s murder. I had no way to prove it, but I was sure of it.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Nathan Kane parks on the street and kills his headlights. He watches through the window as the detective moves around her apartment.

It's been a frustrating day, following her and waiting until she's alone. Now that she's finally home, he knows there's a problem. The police dog is with her. He can't risk breaking in. Why didn't they take the fucking dog when they suspended her? The flesh on his face hardens with rage. The stupid department can't do anything right.

After watching from the street until the lights in the apartment go out, Kane starts his car and drives away. He spends the next half hour driving around the city. It's a Wednesday night, but that makes no difference. The action in the city of dreams never lets up.

Kane stops outside a club and watches the lineup of young people tipping the bouncers, trying to get past the velvet rope. A stretched Hummer rolls up to the curb, music blaring. As the door opens, he sees neon lights flashing inside the car and there's even a stripper pole. A couple of naked women dance around the pole to the beat of the music.

Idiots. Maybe he's been away from the city too long. There are better ways to amuse yourself than riding around, watching some whores fuck a pole.

He drives away and turns onto Hollywood Boulevard. There's a parade of women moving up and down the street. He slows down, taking his time.

Tonight he needs something special—someone who will take his mind off the detective. When he finally pulls to the curb, Kane knows he's made the right choice. The girl is young and full of attitude. He likes the plaid skirt and white blouse with her nipples almost popping through.

"Whatcha lookin' for tonight?" the girl asks.

Kane flips a hundred dollar bill through the open window. He knows he's overpaying, but he'll get the money back later. "Something special, something I'll never forget."

The girl takes the bill, folds it into her clutch purse. She smacks her lips. "That might just be a down payment then."

Kane laughs, his sharp teeth glinting in the streetlight. He likes her attitude. This is going to be fun.

When she gets into the car, he pulls away from the curb and asks, "What's your name sweetheart?"

The girl again smacks her lips together, bends over and unzips his pants.

“Most people call me Hoover, but I’ll be anyone you like tonight.”

Kane laughs. The prostitute begins working on him as he drives away. He turns off on a side street and eases over to the curb. He pulls the girl’s hair away and brings his knife down to the base of her neck. It rakes across her skin, drawing blood.

He feels the woman tense up, start to pull away.

“Nice and slow now,” he says. “The longer you make me happy, the longer you have to live.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

After stopping at the post office the next morning and calling an emergency meeting with Pearl and Natalie at Dirty Rays, I got Jimmy Chester on the phone.

"I want you to expedite my Board of Rights Hearing," I said.

"Captain Jankowitz already called me about this. I believe you're making a mistake, Ms. Sexton."

The rat was no longer calling me *Detective* and it irritated the hell out of me. "I don't care what you believe. I want to defend myself at a formal hearing and the sooner the better."

"These things take time. There are scheduling..."

"No excuses. I want the hearing set as soon as possible!"

"It's your funeral but..."

I ended the call and turned to Bernie. "One of these days I'm going to serve you a rat for dinner." Bernie licked his chops as we pulled to the curb in front of the coffee shop.

I got my usual from the barista and waited for Pearl and Natalie on the deck that overlooked the city. It was just after ten, the day dawning cool and clear.

"Good mornin'," Natalie said, pulling up a bench across from me. I waved to Pearl who was at the counter. She stirred sugar into her tea. "Got me a call from a producer who was at the actors' workshop last night. He wants me to be on one of them reality TV shows."

"What kind of show?"

"Somethin' called, *Hollywood Couples*. They want me and Clyde to live with some other couples in a big house in the hills for a week, see how many scuffles we can get ourselves into."

"Bet Clyde's thrilled with that idea."

Natalie laughed. "Maybe I'll get him some boxin' gloves to go with his pink undies."

Pearl took a seat next to Natalie, hearing the end of our conversation. He smiled at us. "I'm not even going to ask."

"Probably a good idea," I said. I took a moment to tell them about my suspension. After receiving some sympathy, I moved on, filling them in on last night's conversation with my Dark Dating companion.

"So you really think Donovan's involved?" Natalie asked.

"I'm sure of it." I opened the manila folder I'd received in the mail and pushed several police reports across the table. "These were sent to me by my friend in

the department's record division. The reports were misfiled, so it took a while to find them."

I pointed to the dates on a couple of the reports. "Some of these go back to the early 1980s. A few involve some minor scrapes with the law that Nathan Kane had, but some others involve rather large drug investigations that led nowhere. Each time, just as Bill Compton told me, Marvin Drake was the lead investigator. He closed all the investigations without follow up."

I sipped my coffee and then said, "Now for the good part." I removed another report from the envelope and handed it to them, explaining what I'd learned. "This report involves Wolf Donovan being questioned about heroin and cocaine that was found in a shipping container with some artwork under his name in the Port of Los Angeles back in 1983. The contents were to be delivered to a warehouse in Santa Monica rented by Nathan Kane. Both Donovan and Kane denied any knowledge of the drugs or how they got into the shipping container. The case was eventually closed for insufficient evidence under the signature of Marvin Drake."

Pearl thumbed through the report before removing his reading glasses. "Anything that links Donovan and Harper?"

I shook my head. "No, but we now have a direct link between Donovan and Kane, with Drake killing the investigation. And we know from Bill Compton that Kane and Harper were involved in the drug trade going back to the same era."

Natalie apparently saw the smile that tipped my hand. "Okay, give it up. You've got more sauce in your sizzle."

I moved the stack of reports aside and showed them a newspaper clipping from April of 1983.

"This is a copy of an article from the *Hollywood Reporter*. It was filed with one of the early reports on John Carmichael's disappearance. It talks about his film, *Days of Destiny* being suspended due to production costs."

I placed a second page of the article that had a photograph on top of the first. "Notice anyone familiar?"

"John Carmichael and a very young Conrad Harper," Pearl said, his smile almost as big as mine. "Who's the woman standing between them?"

"The article doesn't say, but If I was a betting woman I'd put money on it being Gloria Stallings, Cassie Reynolds's mother."

Pearl and Natalie spent a few minutes reviewing the article and police reports. When they finished, Pearl said, "I have a friend who works at the UCLA Film

Institute. I wonder if he would know anything about *Days of Destiny*.” He stood and tossed his paper cup in a receptacle. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment I’ll make a phone call.”

While Pearl took a walk to use his phone, Natalie and I spent a moment reflecting on where we stood.

“If we’re right about everything,” I said, “it means that Harper, Kane, Drake, and Donovan may have all had a hand in a conspiracy to murder John Carmichael. It’s a conspiracy that’s unraveling behind something Cassie Reynolds found out. I believe Drake framed Jack Bautista for Cassie’s murder, but then he or maybe all those involved thought better of it. That’s when Drake tried to kill Jack.”

“They were probably worried that Cassie told him somethin’ and wanted him out of the picture,” Natalie said.

“Then they started to worry about what Jack might have told me. That’s when the threats began, including Robin being set up on drug charges to warn me off the case.”

“No tellin’ what’s gonna happen next, especially if Kane is back in the picture,” Natalie said.

“As we get closer to the truth, the danger is going to increase. I want you to be careful, make sure someone is always with you.”

I saw Natalie’s usually expressive eyes turn down. She didn’t acknowledge what I said.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“You’re startin’ to be able to read me like a tabloid.” My friend swept a hand through her blonde hair. “Actually, old Clyde and me are havin’ a case of the squabbles. It’s not just the changes I want to make to the store he doesn’t like.” Natalie lowered her voice. “Clyde doesn’t think we’re sexually compatible.”

“What? I thought you two were...”

“At first we were, but I’m afraid the honeymoon is over. Clyde says our frequency is too frequent. Says I’m about to bust his banger.”

“Oh.” I’m usually not at a loss for words but didn’t know what to say. I saw Pearl making his way back up the stairs to the deck.

Natalie continued, “So, I was wonderin’ if I could spend a night or two with you. Try and sort a few things out. I’d just sleep on the sofa. Wouldn’t be any sorta trouble.”

“Of course.” I squeezed her hand. “Anything you need.”

Pearl was back at our table. “If you two have a couple of hours, I think we

should head over to UCLA. My friend's teaching a class, but his secretary is sure that he'll meet with us on his break."

I tugged on Bernie's leash as we stood up and said, "I love old movies."

We found Billy Canfield, the director of the UCLA Film and Television Archives, teaching a community class called, "The Stars of Old Hollywood." He agreed to meet us on his lunch break.

"As I mentioned when I called your secretary," Pearl said to Canfield after the class, "we're looking for anything you might have on a film that was being produced in the early eighties called, *Days of Destiny*. The movie was never completed."

Canfield was a better fit for a motorcycle than a library. Leather jacket. Gray hair tied into a ponytail. Full, bushy beard.

As he punched commands into a computer console in his office, he told us about the classes he taught. We chatted aimlessly for a moment and I mentioned that my middle name was Hedwig, taken from Hedy Lamarr.

"Your namesake was not only beautiful, but brilliant," Canfield said. "She starred in dozens of films. First actress to do a nude scene. She also invented a patented device that had military applications. Her personal life was interesting, as well—married six times."

"Maybe you should continue with your actin'," Natalie suggested. "You've already made a splash as a Cuban crooner."

I saw the questioning looks from Pearl and Canfield and said, "Don't ask." I turned to Natalie. "And my acting career is history."

Canfield turned his attention back to the computer. "Almost everything that's produced is catalogued by the American Film Institute. The AFI's archives go back to the silent film era. If your film has ever been distributed, it should be listed."

"But *Days of Destiny* was never completed," I said. "Would there be a record of an unfinished film?"

"It shouldn't be an issue, as long as the film somehow got into the hands of a studio or even a private collector."

Canfield's fingers continued to dance across the keyboard. In a few moments they stopped. He looked at us. "I'm not getting a hit on the movie by name."

"Would it possibly be listed by the director or production company?" Pearl asked. "A guy name John Carmichael directed it. It might even be listed as a

Conrad Harper production.”

Canfield again worked the keyboard. “Too bad about Harper. He was a true genius.”

A true asshole, I wanted to say.

“Got it,” Canfield announced after a moment. “It was filmed in 1983, but, as you said, never completed. The catalogue shows Harper was the producer.”

“Can we check it out of the library?” Natalie asked. “Got me library card right here in me purse.”

“I’m afraid not,” Canfield said. “The film is in Hutchinson.”

“Where?” I asked.

“It’s an underground film vault in Kansas, really just a big salt mine that absorbs moisture and prevents deterioration of prints and negatives. All the originals of anything anyone wants to preserve are sent there.”

“Can we request a copy?” Pearl asked.

“I can have it express shipped. It shouldn’t take more than a couple of days.”

My phone was ringing as Pearl made the arrangements with Canfield. I told the caller I would be right there and hung up.

“I’ve got to go,” I said. I turned to Natalie. “That was Clyde. He’s at the store and happened to notice the door to my loft was pushed open. My apartment was broken into—burglarized.”

“I’m comin’ with you,” Natalie said.

I felt sick when we entered my apartment with Bernie. It had been ransacked, the intruder leaving nothing undisturbed. The biggest mess was in my bedroom, where every drawer had been opened and the contents tossed onto the floor.

“This is enough to make me bite off an acrylic,” Natalie said. “Almost worse than when Clyde lived here as a bachelor.”

After a more thorough survey of the disaster with Bernie following me around and providing whines of support, I said, “It doesn’t look like anything was taken. I even had a small amount of cash in the bedroom dresser that was just tossed onto the floor with everything else.”

“Maybe someone was lookin’ for somethin’ besides money,” Natalie suggested.

“The police reports,” I said, remembering I’d left the reports Wilma Bibby had sent me in Olive’s trunk. I looked out the window. My little car was still parked at the curb where I’d left her, untouched.

For a moment I contemplated making a police report and having the apartment dusted for fingerprints, but decided against it. I already had enough problems with the department. It was unlikely that whoever broke in had left any prints behind. Something else about what had been happening over the last several days then struck me.

I checked the phone in the living room first and then the one in the bedroom. I found what I'd suspected, holding the listening devices up to Natalie.

"This explains why my every move seems to be known by someone almost before it happens."

My cell phone could have also been monitored. I knew that was possible from working a stalking case a few years back where the suspect hacked into the victim's calls. I made a mental note to call Riggs or Smith for advice on what to do. They were good friends who would help me out, even if I was on suspension.

Natalie was saying something about bugs when the phone in my living room rang. I threw the listening devices in a drawer and picked up the phone. The voice was muffled but familiar.

"Jack, where are you?"

"Still in Arizona." I heard the sound of voices in the background and then something that sounded like a loudspeaker.

"I found Cassie Reynolds's mother. Gloria Stallings has been living off the radar for years, in and out of homeless shelters here in Tucson, but she's currently staying with a guy named Harvey Bishop." He gave me the address.

After writing it down, I took a moment to update him on everything. There was a lot of noise in the background again. I then heard someone say something about time being up.

"When are you coming back to Hollywood?" I asked.

There was a jostling sound before he came back on the line.

"Just as soon as they extradite me, Kate. I'm in the Pima County Jail."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

I arrived in Tucson late in the day with Pearl and Natalie. We checked into a hotel that allowed dogs, and Natalie stayed with Bernie while Pearl and I went to the Pima County Jail.

When we got to the jail we were told that visiting hours were over. I didn't have a legitimate badge to press the issue and Pearl had to be back in Hollywood by late the following day, so we decided any discussion with Jack would have to wait.

The next morning we arrived at Gloria Stallings's house where Natalie and I were given a twelve gauge salute.

"Get off my property now," Harvey Bishop yelled as he racked his shotgun.

Bernie let out a deep growl. The house was a run-down cinder block affair half an hour from the city, surrounded by rusted cars and piles of rubbish. It's what Charlie would've called a Dirt Bag Shack.

"We just wanna talk to Gloria," Natalie pleaded, as I restrained Bernie. I was sure that she'd never heard the sound of a twelve gauge being racked. "Then you can go back to livin' in your shit hole."

Bishop appeared to be in his sixties. He had a full head of bushy gray hair; mounds of flesh spilled over his belt buckle.

We were looking at three hundred pounds of bad attitude, with an even badder means to back it up. That's why Pearl had circled behind the house and dropped quietly in behind Bishop.

"You've got three seconds to drop the shotgun or we'll see what a Glock-9 will do to that thick head of yours," Pearl said.

Bishop lowered the gun, but hesitated at waist level.

Natalie wagged a finger at him. "And, if by some miracle you live, you'll spend the rest of your life droolin' and watchin' the shit bag on your wheelchair fill up."

The gun hit the ground as I looked at my friend.

Natalie shrugged. "Heard that line in some old movie. Seemed like as good a time as any to use it."

I picked up the shotgun while restraining Bernie from chewing off Bishop's beefy leg.

Pearl came around as I slapped one end of my cuffs around Bishop's wrist and the other end to a railing on the porch.

"You can't handcuff me," Bishop protested.

I stared into brown eyes that were almost lost in the hair and fat on his face. “Just did. Sit down, shut up, and we’ll be out of here in a few minutes. Make any trouble and the dog will remove your dick, if he can find it.”

I left Bernie in the yard, giving him the settle command. My big dog took up a position less than ten feet from Bishop, licking his chops as he stared down at the beefy hairball.

We moved to the front door and realized Gloria Stallings had already opened it. After introductions and telling her that we were there about her daughter, Stallings let us inside.

The only thing Gloria Stallings appeared to share with Cassie were her blue eyes, but hers were hollow and lifeless. Mousy reddish blonde hair that came from a bottle crowned an aging face that showed the ravages of alcohol abuse. She looked nothing like the woman from the photograph in the *Hollywood Reporter* from 1983.

“What about Cassie?” Stallings said before we had a chance to sit down.

It was obvious that she had no idea her daughter was dead. There had been a mixture of fear and denial in her voice.

The living room had a dirty flower-print sofa and an assortment of other inexpensive furnishings. I took Stallings by the hand and we moved to the sofa. The next worse thing to losing a child is the death notification about a child to a parent.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, meeting her eyes. “I wish there was some less painful way to say this. Cassie is dead.”

We spent the next hour trying to console what was inconsolable. Gloria Stallings’s mood alternated from hysteria to despondency as we explained what we knew about her daughter’s murder. Between her mood swings we were able to fill in some blanks about her and Cassie’s life.

“After I got pregnant,” Stallings said in a calmer moment, “I wanted out of Hollywood. I didn’t have any means to support Cassie, so she went to live with my sister in Pasadena. She basically raised my daughter before she passed away when Cassie was eighteen.” Sadness again swept over the woman. “We didn’t have much of a relationship.”

“Did you know how Cassie was supporting herself?” Pearl asked.

Stallings shook her head. Pearl looked at us. A silent agreement was sealed. For now, we wouldn’t bring up Cassie Reynolds’s life as a prostitute to her grieving mother.

“Did Cassie ever mention a couple of men she knew, named Maurice Simpson

and Roger Diamond?” Natalie asked softly.

“No. I’ve never heard of them.”

Pearl held up the photograph from the *Hollywood Reporter*. “This picture was taken a few months before John Carmichael went missing. At the time he and Conrad Harper were working on a film called, *Days of Destiny*. The movie was never finished. As you probably know, Mr. Carmichael disappeared a few months later.”

Stallings studied the clipping. “I vaguely remember that day ... such a long time ago ... I was pregnant ...” More tears flowed.

“Can you tell us about the relationship John and Mr. Harper shared?” Natalie asked when the tears abated.

“I didn’t see Harper much, but I think he was helping John with financing. John was always looking for partners, trying to scrape together enough money for his projects.” Stalling’s red-rimmed eyes were glassy, distant. “He thought he was going to be famous someday.” She handed the clipping back to Pearl. “What’s this got to do with Cassie?”

“We think there may be a connection between what happened to John Carmichael and Cassie,” I said.

“I don’t understand. What kind of connection?”

Pearl leaned closer to Stallings. There was sympathy in his voice. “That’s what we’re trying to find out. A few months after the photograph was taken, Mr. Carmichael disappeared and was never seen again. Do you have any idea what happened to him?”

Stallings shrugged and found a clean tissue. “I have no idea.” She blew her nose. “Maybe he was murdered or just decided to go away.”

I looked at Pearl, back at Cassie’s mother. “Why would he decide to go away?”

“He was unhappy when I told him I was pregnant.”

“You think he might have disappeared to avoid paying child support?”

“No, I’m sure that wasn’t the reason. I never tried to collect support.”

“You said he might have been murdered. Who do you think would have wanted to harm him?”

A thin smile found her lips. “Besides me, it could have been half a dozen other women.” The smile slipped away. “John was a playboy. He wanted to play the field but not commit to anyone. That was clear to me after I told him that I was pregnant. He said he wanted nothing to do with the baby or with me.”

“Were you angry with him at the time?”

“If you’re asking me if I murdered John, the answer is no. Of course, there was a period when I was angry, but I mostly just wanted to get away. I wanted nothing to do with him ever again.”

I began to feel there was a lot more she wasn’t telling us. “Ms. Stallings, we have reason to believe John Carmichael may have been involved with Conrad Harper and a man named Nathan Kane in importing illegal drugs into the country. Do you know anything about that?”

She shook her head. “I don’t remember a Mr. Kane.”

I pulled Kane’s mug shot from my purse. She studied the photo as I explained that it was taken over twenty years ago.

“Never saw him before.” She handed the mug back. “All I know is that if John was involved in the drug business, he wasn’t very good at it. He was always broke, trying to scrape together money for rent.”

“Shortly before he disappeared,” I said, “Mr. Carmichael’s secretary said she heard him arguing with a police officer in his office. We have reason to believe his name is Marvin Drake.”

Stallings shook her head again. “I don’t know anything about that. I didn’t go to John’s office or for that matter any of the filming sessions. I don’t think he thought I fit in.”

“Why is that, dear?” Natalie asked.

“His friends were different than me—more interested in the Hollywood scene. I never liked it.” She dabbed her eyes. “John thought I was low class.”

“Did you ever see the actor Wolf Donovan with Mr. Carmichael?” I asked.

Stallings once more shook her head. Her gaze seemed to drift through an invisible window where the memories of the past lived. The tears came again.

After a moment, her thoughts surfaced and she said, “You said you think there’s a connection between what happened to John and Cassie?”

“Were you in contact with Cassie before she died?” I asked, not wanting to answer her question, just yet.

“Not really. I didn’t approve of the Hollywood scene. That city is dangerous and holds nothing but bad memories for me.” She looked at me. “I think Cassie had some ideas about becoming an actress.”

I arched my brows. “Then you did have contact with her?”

She locked eyes with me for an instant, before looking away. “From time to time.”

“Before Cassie died, she told a policeman that she had information about what happened to her father thirty years ago,” Pearl said.

“You mean, John?”

Pearl’s brow furrowed. He looked at me, then back at Stallings and said, “Yes, Ms. Stallings. That’s why we’ve been asking about John Carmichael. As we said earlier we think there may be some connection between his disappearance and Cassie’s death.”

“If she did know something, she never talked to me about it,” Stallings said. “As far as I know, she never thought much about her father. We never really talked about him.”

I ran a hand over my forehead. The air in the dirty little house was warm and stale. I again sensed Stallings knew much more than she was telling us. It was apparent from the way she told her story that she and Cassie had continued to stay in touch, despite her earlier claims that they didn’t have a relationship.

I walked away for a moment. The only redeeming quality to the dirty little house was a series of photographs of Cassie hanging in the hallway. They were taken from childhood until what looked to be when Cassie was in her late teens.

My eyes fixed for a moment on one of the photographs. I noticed for the first time that Cassie’s eyes were blue with flecks of green. They were beautiful, iridescent.

I walked back to the grieving woman. “Ms. Stallings. I’m going to ask you one more time and I want you to tell us everything you know. Do you have any idea what Cassie might have known about the disappearance of her father?”

I watched as her watery eyes lifted and moved to the window. “No”, she said, choking on the word. “I can’t imagine what, if anything, Cassie knew.” Her head slumped forward.

I stepped closer, reached down and moved a hand to her chin. I tilted her head up until our eyes met. “I need you to tell me what you’re holding back. Your daughter deserves that. We want to bring whoever murdered Cassie to justice.”

We held on one another’s eyes for a moment. Her head finally nodded.

“Cassie sent me something. I don’t really know what it’s about or why she sent it.” She stood up, almost losing her balance. “Let me get it.”

Natalie followed her into the bedroom. In a moment they returned with Stallings carrying a large white envelope. She handed it to me. “I only glanced through this once. Nothing in it makes any sense to me.”

While Natalie sat with Stallings on the couch, I cleared a place at the table and dumped out the contents of the envelope.

As Pearl and I sifted through the paperwork we realized it was a list of corporations. Each corporation had a corresponding list of production

companies, equipment supply houses, and film studios. Some of the corporations also had account information at various bank branches. The first name on the list was Pacific Trading Partners, formed in 1983 by John Carmichael and Conrad Harper. There were close to thirty corporations in total. The list ended with First World Entertainment and Blue Star Productions, the same corporations we had linked to Roger Diamond and Conrad Harper.

I looked at Pearl. "Smoking gun," I whispered.

He nodded, pointing at the postmark on the envelope. "Three days before Cassie was murdered."

I left Pearl with the documents and walked back to where Stallings was seated with Natalie.

I said, "Did Cassie say anything about why she was sending you this information?"

"No. There was just one of those sticky yellow note papers inside, asking me to keep the envelope for her. It said she would pick it up next time she saw me."

"Did Cassie tell you where she got this information?"

Stallings shook her head.

I was annoyed and made no effort to disguise it. "Why didn't you tell us about this earlier?"

"I just thought it was information Cassie needed for taxes or something. I didn't understand anything in the envelope, never really thought about it again until now."

I didn't believe her. Cassie had trusted her mother with information that she had to know would put her life in danger. And her mother had initially attempted to conceal that information from us.

Stallings looked up, probably seeing the disapproval on my face. Her gaze drifted away. "I don't know anything more about the paperwork. You need to go. Mr. Bishop doesn't like visitors."

I blew out a slow breath. Stallings had slammed the door to the past on us and I sensed we weren't going to learn anything more. Pearl gathered up the envelope and its contents.

"Before we go," I said, "we need to talk about Mr. Bishop."

Her eyes came up. A flicker of fear.

"I know he's been abusing you. Tell me what's been happening? We can get you help. There are shelters..."

"No...you have to go now...you don't know..." She began crying again. "Please, just go."

Harvey Bishop fit the profile of a sadistic, violent predator. He'd probably been abusing her for years.

I wrote my cell number on the back of my business card. "Call me at this number if you decide you want to talk."

As we closed the door, I heard Stallings begin sobbing again, maybe out of grief or fear, or both.

I moved to the porch and released Bishop's handcuffs. I stared into the big man's cold, dark eyes. "If you ever touch her again, I will find out about it and put you down."

A smile found Bishop's fat face, exposing gaps in his rotten, stinking teeth. "Go to hell."

I returned the smile and motioned to his shit shack. "I'm already there."

It took us almost eight hours to make the drive back to Hollywood. Somewhere outside of Barstow my phone rang. On the advice of Charlie Riggs I'd downloaded some software to my phone that was supposed to prevent hacking and changed my voice mail password.

"Clark is gone again," Robin said. "He was up all night, trying to detox when he got a call."

"Bon Bon?" I asked, picking up on the anger in my brother's voice.

"I think so. He wouldn't say, but half an hour later he told me he was going out for coffee and never returned." His voice took on an angry edge. "I'm such an idiot. I'm sorry, Kate. You were right. I should have told him he needed a detox program."

I was more worried than angry. Based on what we'd learned, I knew that the danger to us all was increasing.

"I need you to do me a favor, Robin. Stay put. I'm going to stop by your house and leave Bernie with you tonight for protection." He started to protest, but I wouldn't listen.

When we got to Hollywood, Pearl was kind enough to make the stop and we left Bernie with Robin before heading home. I had almost forgotten about Natalie's problems with Clyde until she followed me up the stairs to my apartment.

"I won't be a bit of a problem," Natalie said as we got ready for bed. "I'm glad I don't have to listen to Clyde tonight. Snores like an old bull with his dick caught in a washer."

I was making Natalie's bed on the couch when she came out of the bathroom. I couldn't help but laugh at her outfit. She was wearing a pair of short yellow pajamas that bunched up at the rear end and spelled out the word QUACK. It gave her the appearance of being a very pretty, fuzzy yellow duck.

"All right, quit your smilin' at me sleepers. Clyde got em for me last Valentine's Day."

"Very romantic," I said. I couldn't keep it in any longer and broke into a spasm of laughter.

Natalie lowered her voice. "If you wanna know the truth, old Clyde used to sleep with a blanket covered with ducks when he was a kid. When we make..."

"Okay, I've heard enough," I said covering my ears.

Natalie continued over my protest, "Every time we make love he calls it doing the ducky."

"Stop." I was still laughing as I closed my bedroom door and said goodnight.

I slept soundly until just after midnight when I heard movement somewhere in the building. At first I thought it might be Natalie, but then realized it was someone moving up the stairway to my apartment.

I reached for the extra gun I always keep in my purse. Then I remembered, I'd left my purse by the sofa in the living room. It was right next to a fuzzy yellow duck that was sound asleep.

Chapter Forty

An hour after the lights go out in Kate Sexton's apartment, Nathan Kane makes sure they won't come on again. He leaves his car and walks to the alleyway behind the appliance store.

Inside the utility panel he finds both an alarm system and the electric service for the store. It only takes a minute. He disarms the alarm and kills the electricity.

After picking the lock at the delivery entrance, he moves up the stairway and pulls the blade from his pocket. He runs a finger over the edge, a delicious memory surfacing.

He spent the previous night with the prostitute. It was an eventful evening full of fun and torture before he severed the whore's head. He left her body in a canyon off Mulholland Drive. The bitch has a scenic resting place, a few miles up in the hills overlooking Hollywood.

Tonight is going to be even more special. He's been watching the apartment and knows the dog is not with Sexton. This will be a two for one. He's seen the little blonde bitch with the detective. She has a body to kill for—literally. He plans to take his time with the appetizer while Sexton watches, before moving on to the main course. His mouth waters.

Kane stops at the top of the stairway and listens. Silence. This is almost too easy.

He removes the pick, using a tiny flashlight as he works on the lock. Click. He kills the light. The door creaks opens. He pauses, listening again.

There's the faint sound of movement from somewhere inside. He steps over the threshold. The room is so dark he can't see anything, but he can't risk using the light again.

Kane decides to crouch low and touches the gun in his waistband. It's there for backup. The last thing he wants to do is spoil tonight's fun with the weapon, but he knows there's always a risk things could go wrong. He's calculated the odds and, as always, he has a backup plan.

A few feet into the room, he hears the bedroom door swing open. Sexton's voice calls out in the darkness. "Who's there?"

He doesn't respond at first, but the adrenaline rush overwhelms him. "Your worst nightmare." He can almost taste the fear in the room.

There's more movement, then stumbling. He thinks a table has been overturned, maybe a lamp is broken. Another voice calls out. It's the blonde

bitch.

“I’ve got a gun. Don’t move or I’ll blow your love spuds off.”

Kane drops to his knees, crawls forward. The gun comes out. His free hand reaches forward and finds the appetizer, grabbing her leg.

The young bitch yells out in the darkness again, “Hands off me, you dirty dicksplat.”

He hesitates when he hears the click. Then the room explodes. Shots ring out and he turns away, but not before he discharges his weapon in the direction of the explosion.

A few feet away, he hears someone scream in pain and crash to the floor. It’s Sexton. She’s down. Maybe she’s been shot?

A second explosion of gunfire then rips through the room. The world starts to spin. A searing pain slices through his leg.

He has to move fast now. He stumbles back, falling down the stairway. When he reaches the street he can see the blood. It’s pouring down his pant leg. He runs for the car and starts the engine. Before pulling away he turns back and looks toward the building.

The two women are running after him. They crash through the door, out onto the street. Sexton is hobbling behind the blonde. The young bitch is dressed like a duck.

She fires again and screams, “Die you fat streak of piss.”

Chapter Forty-One

I stumbled down the stairway after Natalie and the intruder. I slipped and fell forward, pain again shooting from the ankle I'd sprained when I fell into the coffee table. I stood up and moved forward again, finding my way through the darkness, out the door and onto the sidewalk.

My feet went out from under me again as I skidded across something sticky. I looked down and saw the streetlamps illuminating the blood trail. Then I saw Natalie. She was on the street, raising my gun in the direction of a car that was pulling away from the curb. Nathan Kane was at the wheel!

Shots rang out. Natalie fired a second time and yelled, "Take that you big dickfuck."

I finally made it to her side and took the gun away. Kane's car accelerated away from the curb, tires screeching. It fishtailed wildly and spun around, landing on the sidewalk up the street. It lurched forward again as he raced down the road.

"He's runnin' like shit through a short dog," Natalie said, sprinting for Olive. "Let's follow him."

I hobbled behind, my ankle throbbing with pain. "I don't think I can drive."

"Give me the key," Natalie yelled.

I realized I didn't have my purse. "There's a hide-a-key box under the left rear fender."

She found the key and I piled in on the passenger side. Then it hit me. Natalie doesn't know how to drive a car.

She turned the key and Olive lurched forward a few feet before sputtering to a stop.

"It's got a clutch," I said.

"What's a car doin' with a purse?"

"Not that kind of clutch. It's the pedal to the left of the brake. It engages the transmission."

"The what?"

Natalie twisted the key again, somehow found the clutch, as I slammed the gear shift forward. The engine roared and Olive screeched down the street.

"Put in the clutch again," I yelled as we lurched ahead. "We've got to change gears."

"I'll try and keep it between the ditches," Natalie yelled as we jerked forward.

It went on like that, Natalie working the clutch and accelerator, me shifting

gears, Olive jerking and revving as our bodies were slammed back and forth with every movement until we eventually made it into fourth gear. That's when things got crazy.

Olive fishtailed as Natalie twisted the wheel like she was in a video arcade game. We spun wildly down the street.

We turned onto Melrose, tires screeching as we skidded sideways and hit a newspaper rack. Olive belched and blew smoke.

I saw Kane's car up ahead. It was blowing through an intersection. The street was deserted...except...something large...blinking lights...moving in...our direction...

"It's a garbage truck!" I screamed. My foot stomped down, instinctively trying to hit an imaginary brake pedal. "Turn the wheel, Natalie!"

She hit the brakes. "Ruddy hell. Hold on." We swerved to the left and missed the truck by inches. Natalie hit the gas pedal again, back on mission. "I'm gonna get the ugly tonker."

I saw Kane up ahead turning onto Fairfax, barely missing another car. Natalie followed, taking a wide turn as we passed the high school. I thanked God it was the middle of the night. School was out and the streets were partially deserted. Kane sped up and turned onto Beverly Drive. We rounded the corner. Olive began to lurch, the engine lagging.

"We need to downshift," I said, grabbing the gearshift. "Hit the clutch and I'll change gears for you."

In retrospect I decided it was all a multi-tasker's nightmare. Too many feet, hands, bodies, and engine parts were involved. Olive's engine revved wildly as Natalie engaged the clutch but didn't ease up on the accelerator. I tried to downshift and heard metal grinding. Black smoke belched from under the hood.

Natalie slammed on the brakes. We spun around in the street. I heard a hard clanking noise, a huge swishing sound, and suddenly the world was full of water.

I turned, the clarity of the moment hitting me all at once. There was a duck sitting behind the wheel of my car, and a fountain of water spilling in through the open windows.

Natalie turned on the windshield wipers, looked at me and said, "I think we hit a fireplug."

Chapter Forty-Two

The day after Natalie and I survived our encounter with Nathan Kane I was hobbling around on crutches, thanks to a sprained ankle. We invited Charlie to meet us at Pearl's cottage late in the afternoon.

I'd filed a police report about last night's events, but told the responding officers our intruder was unknown. Charlie told me that Kane's parole warrant had already hit the system and I didn't want any further complications with the department until we had a chance to sort through everything.

After Pearl brought us drinks, I mentioned the painting set up on an easel he was still working on. I still couldn't make out the images in the unfinished artwork.

"I think it's a couple bumping frizzies," Natalie said.

"Why am I not surprised?" I said to my friend.

"The images are starting to come together," Pearl offered. "But, the painting is still a bit of a mystery, just like our case."

Charlie had taken a stroll through the rose garden adjacent to the patio to smoke a cigarette before joining us. He accepted a beer from Pearl and asked me about Bernie.

"He's doing watchdog duty for Robin at my mom's house. I want my brother safe until things are settled." His question brought Charlie's daughter to mind. "How are things with Irma?"

"Living with B-Boy for the past three days. She called me last night though. Wants to come by this weekend and talk."

"Maybe the grass isn't so green after all?"

"There ain't no grass. B-Boy lives over on Florence in government housing."

I knew the neighborhood. It was one of the worst in L.A. "Get her home as soon as you can, Charlie."

He tipped up his beer, set it down. "I know. I've got an app on my iPhone that picks up all the police dispatch calls. The department should just open up a station in one of the apartments."

I turned to the business at hand. "I wanted you to meet with us, Charlie, because at some point, maybe at my Board of Rights Hearing, we're going to have to bring other agencies into everything."

Charlie said, "Dorothy Velasquez told me you're trying to expedite your hearing. I don't get it."

"I want the department to know the truth and I want my job back as soon as

possible. Chester was able to get the hearing set for this coming Wednesday morning. That gives me three days to prepare.”

Charlie had guzzled his beer while I was talking and set it down. “If the department finds out you’ve been involved in a rogue investigation, the hearing will be a slam dunk. You won’t have a chance.”

I heard the edge in my voice as I said, “The only way I can keep from getting slam dunked is if we break the case. If I sit around and watch from the sidelines, the game’s over.”

Charlie shrugged and drank, maybe thinking I was a lost cause or maybe he just needed more beer to get the nerve to come back at me.

I took the next few minutes, summarizing everything for Charlie, including our meeting with Gloria Stallings and last night’s run-in with Nathan Kane.

“We would have gotten the ruddy wazzock,” Natalie said, referring to Kane, “if it wasn’t for a few mechanical problems.”

I estimated those mechanical problems would cost me close to a thousand bucks and didn’t want to even think about how I was going to pay the repair bill. I turned to Pearl after mentioning to the others that he’d received a copy of John Carmichael’s unfinished film by overnight mail.

“Before we watch *Days of Destiny*,” I said to Pearl, “maybe you can summarize what was in the envelope we got from Cassie’s mother?”

“It was a list of over thirty corporations, beginning with what we believe was the original company, Pacific Trading Partners, started by Conrad Harper and John Carmichael back in 1983. The documents included more than a hundred subsidiary companies, film studios, and related businesses. It’s noteworthy that the corporations were created, existed for a year or two, and were then dissolved.”

“Once they served their purpose,” I said.

“The corporations served two purposes,” Pearl agreed. “First, to get the fledgling drug empire off the ground by importing heroin and other drugs. Second, to launder the drug money by running it through the corporations and studios. Diamond was one of Kane’s dealers and Harper had the studio connections. He probably set that part of the scheme in motion.”

“Dirty flicks for clean money,” Natalie said.

“Good analogy,” I agreed. “When the movies were finished, they would be sold to independent distributors. A few of the films made a healthy profit, but for the most part they earned very little. Of course, none of that mattered.”

“Because the books were cooked,” Charlie said.

“In a big way,” Pearl agreed. “They couldn’t just put the drug profits in the bank because any deposits in excess of the government reporting limits would raise red flags. So they had to find a way to make it legal. The financial records would make it look like the corporations spent large sums of money on the productions, but the finished product wouldn’t come close to matching what they probably reported went into making the films.”

“What about the corporations?” Charlie asked. “Whose names are on the records?”

“So far none of the records show that any of our suspects are listed, except for the initial company that was set up by Harper and Carmichael, but that’s no surprise. Pacific Trading Partners was probably their test corporation, a learning experience, for fledging drug dealers who were testing the waters. As the business grew, they used small-time players to set everything up with multiple layers of insulation to protect them in case anyone became suspicious. In time, Kane also parlayed his drug money into a prostitution ring. The porn industry went hand-in-hand with that.”

Charlie was into his second beer. “This all sounds good in theory, but it’s gonna take a ton of research, warrants, and paperwork to make the case.”

I agreed. “The FBI and IRS will need to be involved. Unraveling a thirty-year-old con game will be complicated. There are millions of dollars at stake, not to mention the reputations and freedom of those involved.”

After we chewed on all this for a few minutes, Natalie referenced my earlier summary of our interview with Gloria Stallings. “Do you think Cassie’s mum knew about the dummy corporations and the drug dealing?”

“I think Gloria Stallings knows much more than she let on, maybe even who killed John Carmichael and their daughter. That’s a piece of the puzzle that still needs to be developed.”

“Once everything is out in the opening, Jessica and I can bring her in,” Charlie said. “See if we can break her.”

I gave my former partner the stare of death. “Jessica?”

Charlie set down his empty beer can, splayed his hands. “I don’t like it any better than you. Jankowitz told me I had no choice. Jessica Barlow’s been temporarily assigned to the warrant desk as my partner until your case is settled.”

“I can’t believe this.”

I turned away from him, thought about walking away to blow off steam, but didn’t want to put any weight on my injured ankle. Jessica working with Charlie

felt like the ultimate betrayal.

“What about me?” Charlie said. “Jessica won’t let me smoke or cuss without making a federal case. She’s got a hot poker up her tight ass about everything I do. She’s making my life miserable.”

I refused to look at him. There was stony silence as Pearl and Natalie worked on the DVD player in the house. Charlie ignored the impasse by walking away and smoking a cigarette.

After a few minutes, Pearl called us together in the living room and said, “Let’s see what *Days of Destiny* was all about.”

For the next hour we watched as a series of unedited scenes rolled by. The shooting script and resulting scenes were out of order, but the plot dealt with the lives of two college couples in the early days of the Vietnam War. The movie focused on their relationships and how the opposition to the war was affecting their lives.

I thought the script had potential and, despite the film’s probable low budget, the acting was fair and earnest. When the film ended, we watched for a moment after the screen went blank. There were no credits listed.

“Guy had talent,” Charlie said, referring to Carmichael. “Too bad he got popped before it was finished.”

“Doesn’t seem like it helps us with anything,” Natalie said. “We’re still waffling around in the dark like a bunch of wet nellies.”

Pearl pushed some buttons on the remote. “Maybe not. Lot of things can change in thirty years, including a person’s name and appearance.”

We watched as Pearl moved to a scene in the film that showed several actors in a group shot. He froze the frame. “Notice anyone familiar?”

“I must be missing something,” Charlie said, shaking his head.

Pearl let the scene move forward. One of the actors played a marine recruiter who was talking to a young man of draft age. They become embroiled in an argument about whether the war was justified. The scene ended with the young college student telling the marine that his brother had been killed in the war. Pearl froze the scene as the camera focused in on the student’s face.

“Now I see it!” I shouted.

“What?” Charlie demanded. “I don’t see nothing but a skinny kid with a beard.”

I hobbled over to the television and pointed to the actor. “Imagine him with his head shaved, no beard, and about three hundred pounds heavier.”

“I’m about to widdle me pants,” Natalie shouted. “It’s Wolf Donovan!”

Charlie finally saw it as well. "I'll be damned."

We all went silent for a moment. I hopped back to my chair and sat down.

Pearl speculated that Donovan may have gone by another name when he began his acting career.

"The stage name and his altered appearance would explain why Carmichael's secretary never recognized him. He would've been just another small time actor starting out."

The others chimed in, but I tuned out the discussion. Our case, like the pieces of a kaleidoscope that had been broken and scattered on the floor, was beginning to come together for me. My heart raced as I considered the possibilities.

Nothing that happened had been a coincidence. Everything had been orchestrated, then covered up for over thirty years.

"You okay?" Charlie asked.

The corners of my mouth turned up. I brushed the frizzies off my forehead and looked at my friends. "Some things are falling into place for me and I'd like to run them down to you all."

Charlie got another beer and said, "Go for it."

"I believe everything that's happened over the past several days has been designed to protect two things. First, to protect the drug empire that we know Harper and Kane began. Secondly, to protect the identity of the third party in that enterprise—Wolf Donovan."

"That's one hell of a leap," Charlie said.

"Maybe, but let me go back to where this all began. We know that Cassie Reynolds was murdered and Jack Bautista was framed, but I think the frame was more of a coincidence than an intentional setup."

Pearl killed the television. "Jack was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Speaking of Jack," Natalie said, "is he still in the slammer?"

"He waived extradition, should be in our jail in a day or two." I went back to my theory: "I believe the plan was to murder Cassie because she had learned about the money laundering scheme and Diamond's involvement with Harper and Kane. Along the way, Cassie also learned there was a long ago third party who wanted to stop what Harper and Kane were up to—her father."

"But Carmichael formed the original corporation with Harper," Charlie said. "He had to know about the drug dealing."

"I don't think so. I remember his secretary telling us that Harper was the money man and Carmichael went along for the ride. She also said something about Carmichael just scraping by, that he wasn't sophisticated about finances. I

think Harper may have used Carmichael to set things in motion, without the young filmmaker knowing what he was really up to.”

Pearl followed along. “And when Carmichael found out that instead of producing his film, the corporation had really been set up to launder drugs, it got him killed.”

I nodded and then went back to Bautista’s involvement. “When Jack showed up, the shooter got spooked. He used the situation to murder Cassie and set up Jack. It was a pretty good frame, but it wasn’t thought through. It created a new problem—what did Cassie tell Jack before she died? It was a loose end that had to be tied up.”

“Hence, the attempted shooting of Jack by Drake,” Pearl said.

Charlie shook his head and belched. “Doesn’t add up. They would never have sent Drake to do the hit with another cop around, even if he’s been a party to everything.”

“It does,” I said, “if you consider that the hit on Bautista wasn’t planned for the day it was attempted. Remember, I got the tip about where Jack was staying from Barry Eckstein on my way out of court. I planned to call the taskforce, but when I picked up Drake after his car broke down and told him what Eckstein had said, he insisted we check out the Pinewood Apartments first. When we were searching the complex, he saw Bautista and acted impulsively.”

“Prematurely shot his wad off,” Natalie said. “Reminds me of a guy named Jerry Wallace...”

I shook my head, “Not now, Natalie.” I continued, “Drake probably thought he could get away with shooting Jack while I was searching the apartments.”

“He’d still have the problem of Jack not shooting back,” Charlie said.

“He probably would have found the gun on Jack after he shot him, tossed it near his body, and said Jack had pulled it during the confrontation. Or he could’ve had a throw-down gun he would have left at the scene.”

“And when Drake’s attempt to shoot Jack failed,” Pearl said, “he claimed you interfered. The shell casings were planted to make it look like Jack had shot back so Drake could say he acted within policy.”

“Yes, but there’s more to it. The others became worried about what Jack might have told me, so they bugged my apartment and began trying to intimidate me. They tried to run me off the road and nearly ran me down in a parking lot, before they paid an actor to warn me off the case. When I persisted, Kane made a direct threat about Robin being in danger. Eventually my brother was set up on drug charges.”

Natalie said, “Unless I’m off me trolley, this means Kane and Donovan are now workin’ together to keep things covered up.”

“With Drake acting as the enforcer, at least until Kane got back in town,” I agreed.

Charlie said, “I’m worried. After what happened last night, they’re not going to stop at anything to keep this covered up.”

“Worry won’t accomplish anything, Charlie,” I said. “It’s time we had a talk with Wolf Donovan.”

My former partner was out of his chair. “You can’t do that, Kate. We need to go to the department now, maybe take this right to the top. We can get warrants, look at the financial records, and bring Kane and Donovan down.”

I said, “Yeah, maybe we should just wait around for you and Jessica to wrap things up, say in six months or so after I’ve been fired.”

“Kate, that’s not what I meant.”

I ignored Daddy Charlie as Natalie spoke up, quoting one of Donovan’s famous lines from the spy thriller, *Deadly Rhapsody*, “No more games. No more talk. It’s time to rock.”

Chapter Forty-Three

Kane lies in bed, trying to recover from the bullet that exploded through his thigh. He's lost a lot of blood and thinks the bullet nicked an artery.

After the chase, a couple of phone calls secured the dingy motel room. His leg is loosely wrapped in an improvised tourniquet and bandaged, but that hasn't stopped the bleeding or the pain. A hot poker burns in his thigh and his head. A fistful of Vicodin finally cuts the pain, but leaves him groggy.

Kane turns on the television and watches, drifting in and out of consciousness. When he wakes up, it's almost midnight. The pain is better, but his leg still throbs with every heartbeat. He takes a breath and sits up when he sees his picture on the television screen. He turns up the volume, listening to the announcer.

The Los Angeles Police Department has just released this photograph of a man known as Nathan Kane. He was recently released from prison, but is wanted for parole violations related to the disappearance of a woman in Fresno. If you have any information regarding this suspect, please call the department's warrant taskforce at the number on the bottom of your screen.

Kane kills the sound. How did they link him to the dead psychiatrist? Maybe he left a fingerprint or some other evidence in her office. Or, it could be someone saw him leaving the residence. It doesn't matter now.

His mind drifts. He fantasizes about what it would have been like to be with Kate Sexton and the little blonde bitch. The night would have been exquisite. He's run the scenario of killing Sexton over in his mind at least a hundred times since their meeting in prison.

Now, acceptance finally settles in, replaced by anger. He has to focus on his options. He punches a number into his cell phone.

"I want Sexton dead and don't give me any excuses about how it will look."

The man on the line sighs and says, "I guess you know about the warrant. What the hell happened in Fresno?"

"None of your business. What about Sexton?"

After a hesitation, the man says, "I don't think there are any other options at this point."

Kane stifles a moan as the pain again shoots through his leg.

"There's another issue," the man on the line says. "Sexton was in Arizona. She found Reynolds's mother."

The pain in his leg is intense. Kane grips the phone harder. "Where is she?"

“We’re not sure. She was staying with a guy outside of Tucson, but left after Sexton’s visit.”

A stream of obscenities follows. He wants to throw the phone through a window. Finally, he asks the other question on his mind. “Bautista?”

“In jail. Picked up by the local cops on the warrant before we could get to him.”

Kane is outraged, again verbally assaulting the man’s incompetence. When he regains his focus, he knows there’s only one course left to him. It’s time to tie up all the loose ends, including the one at the very top. When he’s taken care of business, he’ll leave the country, maybe settle down in Costa Rica.

Kane says, “I’ll see to Bautista. You need to tell Marvin Drake that if Sexton isn’t dead within twenty-four hours I’m personally coming after him.”

He ends the call and lifts himself off the bed, testing his leg. He nearly passes out from the pain. He sits back on the bed, shakes the bottle of pain pills. They will never do.

Half an hour after another phone call, an envelope arrives. He removes the sticky brown substance from the plastic baggie, mixes it with water, and heats the concoction. He uses a shoelace to tie off his arm. The needle finds a vein and in seconds there’s relief. Heroin surges through his system like an orgasm.

He lets his mind fall into the sweet abyss of the drug-induced stupor. He will rest, sleep, and recover. The last threads of consciousness leave only one thing adrift in The Assassin’s mind.

Murder.

Chapter Forty-Four

The night after our meeting with Charlie, I slept with my gun under my pillow. I had a good night's sleep because I made sure the duck on my couch was unarmed.

Natalie had begged me to let her borrow Clyde's pistol, but I held my ground. The odds of her getting lucky and shooting a bad guy again were about the same as me deciding to date Harold Wiener when he got out of jail.

Pearl picked up Natalie and me at noon for our drive to Donovan's estate. I was wearing a conservative blue blazer and silk blouse. The ankle was better, but I was still hobbling around on a pair of crutches.

I'd clipped the flag lapel pin to my blouse that the narcotics officers gave me the night we discussed Mr. Wiener trying to set up Joaquin Robinson. I planned to record my conversation with Donovan, hoping it might result in something incriminating.

We stopped by my mom's and decided things were calm enough to take Bernie with us for the day. Mom was still in bed, but had stopped hallucinating. Robin was feeling sorry for himself about his breakup with Clark and was watching an old movie. He seemed to have given up all hope of reuniting with his former partner. Given Clark's continuing bad behavior, it was a positive sign.

Donovan's estate, named Olympus, was located on the highest point in the Hollywood Hills with a view of both the city and the ocean.

As we drove, I asked Pearl, "How shall we play this?"

"Ego is an amazing thing. Sometimes it can open doors that have been locked for years."

"Sometimes for almost thirty years?"

Pearl nodded. "Let's bait the wolf, see if he bites."

"I'm up for that," Natalie said from the backseat as Bernie drank in the air from an open window. "I've had practice baitin' Clyde a time or two. I once got him madder than a box of frogs just because I told him one night that I thought the captain had abandoned the boat."

I looked at Pearl who shrugged. "I probably shouldn't ask, Natalie, but were you and Clyde on a cruise?"

"No, just spendin' time together in the sack. Clyde had his problems findin' the little man in the boat; happens a lot. Once he even got out his spectacles and..."

"Stop, please," I said.

Pearl was laughing so hard I thought we might run off the road. I gave him a look.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m having trouble letting go of the visual.”

Boys will be boys, even when they’re sixty-something.

The road to Donovan’s estate terminated at a circular driveway with a white marble guard station. An iron gate with a fresco displaying the head of a wolf encircled with spears and lightning bolts announced the entrance to the grounds. A caption below the display read, Play...Prey...Prevail...

The guard opened a window and stared down at us. He looked like something out of a movie from ancient Rome.

“Your business?” The guard was in his fifties, with a silver crew cut and pale blue eyes.

“We’d like to talk to Mr. Donovan.” Pearl handed over a badge without the word *retired* on the emblem.

The guard took the badge, examined it, and handed it back. “Mr. Donovan is unavailable.” He slammed the window shut and turned away.

Pearl looked at me. “Guess the wolf is hibernating.”

I had Pearl pull his car into a parking space. I got Bernie from the backseat and hobbled up to the guard station window. I pushed open the glass, at the same time I pulled Bernie up until his front paws rested on the window frame. My dog had his head halfway inside the window and began a low, menacing growl. The guard flinched and stepped back.

“Get your boss on the phone,” I said. “You need to tell him Kate Sexton is here and it’s his day of destiny.”

I moved back, pulling Bernie with me. The window slammed shut again. Five minutes later it reopened and the guard sneered at us. “Mr. Donovan will give you ten minutes. Stay on the driveway until you get to the residence. Do not stop until you reach the residence or there will be an armed response.”

The window closed. I knocked on the glass. It sprang open again. “What?”

“Have a nice day, asshole.” I slammed the window shut, nearly clipping off the end of the guard’s nose. Sometimes being a bitch has its merits.

As we passed through the gates and moved up the driveway, I understood why the estate was called Olympus. The flag-lined road was flanked by marble colonnades that provided cover for walkways.

A series of buildings, all modeled in the style of ancient Rome, rose up along the top of the hill. Stone paths led from the main roadway to the buildings, giving the impression we had travelled back in time to an ancient Roman city.

“Wonder if Cesar is nearby,” Pearl said.

“He’s probably busy getting the lions ready for the afternoon feeding,” I said.

Natalie seemed a bit put off by the ostentatious grounds. “You’d think the douche bag could afford a couple a modern buildings. Looks like somethin’ out of the Flintstones.”

So much for impressing Natalie.

As we reached the residence at the top of the hill, the sun shone on its marble edifice. The imposing structure looked like a restored version of an ancient Roman temple, but on an enormously more expansive scale.

A moat encircled the residence and then branched off, the water disappearing into a cave. This was probably what Robin and Clark had described as, The Cavern.

We piled out of the car. Bernie sniffed the air as Pearl surveyed the scene. “Place seems to fit the owner’s ego.”

“Yeah, but it lacks a certain charm,” I offered.

“Looks like Henry the Eighth’s fuck shack,” Natalie said

There was simply no impressing this girl.

As we moved across the bridge to the entrance, I leaned on my crutches and looked up at the edifice of the building. It contained a series of faces that looked down from above the windows. Each face was from a role Donovan had played in his many movies. Every character from thief to general to madman was etched into the front of the building.

My eyes lingered on the face of Simon Bartlett, the mad son of a shipping tycoon. The role was one that had garnered rave reviews from the critics and won Donovan an Oscar. Maybe the mad man staring down at us was the real face of Wolf Donovan.

Before we had a chance to knock on the door, it opened and several people exited. They were chatting and laughing, not noticing us. I was half expecting to see Donovan’s bodyguard, Zen, but he wasn’t around. The party was crossing the bridge, leaving the residence, when a man turned and walked back toward us.

“Are you going to The Cavern?” he asked Natalie.

The man’s eyes didn’t seem to have the ability to elevate above breast level. My friend was wearing a pair of skinny jeans and a tight-fitting white poplin blouse. For Natalie, it was on the conservative side.

“What’s that?” Natalie asked.

“I’ll show you,” the man answered, extending a hand.

I pushed his hand away and pulled Natalie through the doorway. “You don’t

want to know.” I slammed the door shut behind us, feeling like her mother.

“Probably just some shit bog,” Natalie said. “Goes with the dump.”

If she only knew.

The foyer of the residence opened into a stone barrel vault radiating from the room’s elliptical center. Massive columns lined the dimly lit perimeter. The building had a quality that made it seem alive, but in a threatening way.

“I’ve been expecting you.”

The voice rumbled down to us from above. Wolf Donovan was standing on a suspended bridge that spanned the entire upper floor. Beneath the arched span of the crossing, I saw there was a frieze of a she-wolf suckling two infants. There was some Latin lettering beneath the scene.

The actor must have seen me looking at the inscription and interpreted. “She gives life so that men may rule.”

“Sexist pig,” Natalie whispered.

Even though he was a good twenty feet above us, I was struck by the sheer enormity of the man. He wore a white bathrobe that barely covered his ample girth.

Donovan was so famous I had to stop myself from associating the man with the many roles he’d played. I reminded myself that, while the actor was extraordinarily famous and wealthy, I also believed he was a cold-blooded killer.

“Take the stairway to the left,” the actor said, his voice again booming down. It was more a command than an invitation.

I was determined to make it up the stairway and set my crutches aside. I hobbled behind my friends up the marble steps to the second floor where sconces dimly lit corridors that receded into the interior of the building. I didn’t see any servants or guards, but assumed they were close at hand, ready to jump at the actor’s command.

We found Donovan at the top of the staircase sitting on a sofa in an alcove. We took seats on chairs lined up a few feet in front of him. I felt like a child in grade school who had come for an audience with a giant.

The actor had a bemused expression on his face. The only attractive feature of the man was his famous blue eyes. From this distance they looked more aquamarine than blue.

The actor’s eyes fixed on Bernie who was standing at my side. I felt a vibration coming up the leash, the beginning of a low growl, as my dog regarded the giant beast of a man in front of us.

“Domesticated and socially castrated,” Donovan said, shaking his head at my

dog.

“You’re wrong about that,” Natalie said. “He’s still got his balls.” She turned to me and whispered, “The arseface is so big he probably can’t find his.”

I was about to admonish my friend when Donovan exploded with laughter. I felt my anger rising as I watched the arrogant actor. The behemoth convulsing with mirth in front of me was nothing more than a common bully. He deserved every bit of the scorn Natalie was happy to dish out.

“We didn’t come here for you to insult my dog or for your amusement,” I said.

The laughter died. There was a small, fleshy movement in the rolls of fat on Donovan’s face. I wasn’t sure if it was a smile or contempt.

“And just why would you all pay me a visit on this lovely day?”

“We happened to recently view a film,” I said. “It was written and directed by John Carmichael and produced by Conrad Harper—*Days of Destiny*. It’s rather curious that your part in the film isn’t listed in any of your biographies”

The rolls of fat returned to their resting state, which I decided was a permanent scowl of contempt. “Oh, now I understand. You’re amateur film historians out on a field trip.”

I started to respond, but Donovan went on, “A rather unremarkable plot, and the performance was that of a young man trying to find his voice. I believed, or should I say I had hoped, the film had been destroyed—relegated to the dustbins of cinematic history.”

“It’s in a vault in Kansas,” I said. “We have a copy. Tell us about your relationship with Mr. Carmichael.”

“A small time filmmaker who, unfortunately, went missing before he could leave his mark on the world. He was kind enough to offer a fledgling actor a small part.”

Pearl said, “Let’s cut to the chase, Mr. Donovan. We know Conrad Harper used John Carmichael, setting up the first of several dummy corporations to launder the drug money that you all made with Nathan Kane. Roger Diamond was Kane’s drug runner. He and Cassie Reynolds were murdered because of what they knew.”

The fat snarled into contempt as the actor’s gaze swept over Pearl.

“Let us speak candidly,” Donovan said. “I know why you are here. I had nothing to do with the disappearance of Mr. Carmichael, the business arrangements you allude to, or, for that matter, the death of the whore you all appear to be obsessed over. Your little game ends right here, right now.”

“We also know about the frame—how you all set up Jack Bautista to take the

fall for Cassie's murder," I said.

My hand had brushed over the flag pin affixed to my blouse as I spoke. If it worked, I hoped it would record anything incriminating Donovan might say.

Before he could respond, Natalie broke in, "And this is no game. Cassie Reynolds wasn't just a whore, as you call her. She was a child once, someone's daughter. You might keep that in mind when you go callin' people names. It would be like me sayin' you're a fat shit with a little dick."

Donovan's snarl took on the look of a hungry predator as he sized up Natalie.

I tried to deflect the confrontation. "We have no doubt that Marvin Drake, and perhaps Nathan Kane, have kept you apprised of our every move."

"I make a point of knowing my enemies," Donovan said. "I have eyes and ears in every corner of this city." His fat face twisted into a smile. "One can never be too careful about who they trust, Ms. Sexton." The fat parted, exposing yellow teeth. "Perhaps the friend of a little birdie has also told me what you've been up to."

My anger rose. "If you think holding my brother's friend hostage and your other threats will have any effect on our investigation, you're mistaken."

"I believe the subject you're referring to has been a guest of my son. Not to worry. The last I heard, the young fellow has an inordinate appetite for sex and drugs, which he's been fulfilling to his heart's content. You might want to gently break that news to your brother."

I swallowed hard, pushing down my anger. "You set my brother up on drug charges in an attempt to stop our investigation."

Donovan's giant frame leaned forward. He glared at me. "Perhaps you should be careful about making allegations."

"Perhaps you shouldn't go 'round talkin' like a big bag a gas," Natalie said.

It was Pearl's turn to try to return some civility to the conversation. "It's the corporations we're interested in, Mr. Donovan. Tell us what you know about Pacific Trading Partners."

"Never heard of it."

"It was the first of many corporations that were created over the years to launder the drug and prostitution money. When John Carmichael realized the truth about the corporations, he was murdered. Marvin Drake was the enforcer. He's covered up everything over the years. It's only a matter of time until the money trail leads to your door."

I watched as the famous actor studied Pearl. There was a flicker of something in his eyes. If it was fear, it was quickly extinguished.

“Let’s say, just for the sake of argument, that I did exactly what you’re postulating. Let’s say I was the Cesar who used the corporations you referenced to establish an empire, built upon the death of an insignificant little man thirty years ago and got away with it. Look around you. Do you see the life I’ve created? Do you realize that my wealth and influence spans the globe? In some parts of the world I’m considered a God?”

“You’re nothin’ but a fat gimboird with delusions of grandeur,” Natalie said.

I had to agree with her, but wanted to move past the insult. “In this part of the world, you are just a man—a man who may have been involved in murder to cover up a drug and film empire.”

Laughter that I thought lacked some of its previous bluster split the air. “And what if I did commit murder, maybe even more than one along the way?”

“Then you’re a dirty scrud and will get the needle,” Natalie said.

Pearl interrupted another spasm of laughter, “It’s all going to unravel, Donovan. Your relationship with Harper, Kane, and Diamond will be brought to light. Your legacy will be one of greed, arrogance, and murder.” He stared hard at the enormous man. “We will bring you down.”

“Prove it!” Donovan shouted. His defiant eyes bore into us. “Prove I murdered John Carmichael. Prove I established a financial and movie empire on the back of drug money. And then try to prove that thirty years later, when Carmichael’s whore-slut of a daughter found out something about it, I had her killed. I challenge you.”

Natalie was on her feet. “You’re nothin’ but a ginormous ass trumpet.”

Then Bernie came up. There was a low growl as I restrained him. Donovan also rose and pulled the robe around his mammoth body, but not before he revealed something that was far better left unseen.

Natalie decided to describe the actor’s body. “Haven’t seen that many rolls since I was at the bakery. What are you wearing—an ass tent? Bet there’s a family of squirrels in there searchin’ for your little nuts.”

I tried to stop her, but the girl was on a roll. “By the way, your tits are as big as a woman’s. You’re so fat I’ll bet crap is backed up into that giant ass of yours. Betcha can’t even wipe it.” Natalie sniffed the air. “Anyone smell shit? I do.”

Donovan pulled the sash on his enormous robe. His face was bright red as he made a motion and several bodyguards, including the man I recognized as Zen, appeared instantly at his side.

Before we were ushered away, the actor stared down at us like a colossal, angry giant. His voice broke into a wheeze of laughter.

“What if I did it all and got away with it? Even if I did what you suggest, I could never be caught. The problem is your small minds could never prove it, even if it was all right there in front of you like some grand sport. You don’t have the brains to play the game at my level.”

The actor started to walk away, but stopped and turned back. He locked eyes with me.

“And you, Ms. Sexton. What will become of you as a result of this mindless pursuit? I’ll tell you. You will end up with nothing—no job, no brother, and perhaps no life.”

I moved toward him as Zen grabbed my arm. “This is no game, Donovan, and the threats will get you nowhere.” I jerked my arm away and fixed my eyes on the bodyguard.

I turned back to the actor as he said, “It is all a game, Ms. Sexton. I speak of matters beyond your comprehension. Leave me.”

After we were escorted to our car, Zen opened the door and smiled down at me. His eyes were dead. I hobbled closer to the bodyguard and thought about whacking him in the groin with my crutch. Natalie came between us and looked up at the muscular brute.

“Hey action-man,” Natalie said, pointing at Zen’s ponytail. “I’ve been wonderin’ about that skullet of yours. Do you use some special conditioner on your ponytail?”

Zen didn’t answer.

“Cause I once saw a horse’s tail all glopped out like that. It covered his backdoor so no one could see his ugly balloon knot. Kinda reminds me of your face.”

The bodyguard stood in stony silence. I heard muffled laughter from the other guards.

“Good thing you’re not sayin’ anythin’, grotbag,” Natalie went on. “Cause my guess is that if you opened that arseface of yours it would be like blowin’ the air out of a baker’s shit biscuit.”

We finally got Natalie in the car and headed back down the hill. As we moved through the gates and left the estate, I was sure of two things.

Natalie’s tongue was a match and Rome was burning.

Chapter Forty-Five

After our meeting with Wolf Donovan, I spent the following afternoon with someone I despised almost as much as I did the famous actor—Jimmy Chester. We were in the union attorney's stuffy little office near the police administration building preparing for my Board of Rights Hearing.

Chester was wearing an open collar blue shirt, which allowed gray chest hair matching his moustache to blossom. Guess he'd never heard the term *manscape*.

"I think we should consider a medical defense," Chester said, his beady eyes fixed on me. "If you can convince the panel that you were under extreme stress in your personal life, they might consider referring you to a psychiatrist. He could declare you temporarily unfit for duty. After a lengthy suspension and medical leave, you might be declared fit for duty again."

I stood up and walked away from the blathering little rat. I'd left my crutches at home since my ankle was feeling better.

While Chester went on about a shrink and medication, I stared out the window. By the time he was finished I felt like maybe I did need medication, just to put up with him.

I turned and faced the rodent. "Listen to me. I am not unfit for duty. I am not seeing a shrink. And the only medication I take is an occasional glass of wine so I can forget about having to deal with people like you."

"I understand you're upset Ms. Sexton, but if we go in there and tell them about your investigation..."

"That's exactly what I intend to do. I won't settle for anything less than the truth."

Chester's moustache wilted. "That, I'm afraid, will end your employment."

I gathered up my purse. "It's a strange set of circumstances when the truth counts for nothing."

I spent the remainder of the day with Robin and our mother. Mom's surgical dressings had been removed and she wanted to see herself in a mirror. Our arguments about waiting until the swelling went down were dismissed. We brought her a hand mirror and let her examine the results.

"It's not really so bad." Mom turned to me for encouragement.

"I think you're getting better every day," I lied. Mom looked like a bloated cat on amphetamines. I took the mirror away, suggested more rest.

I spent the next hour arguing with Robin about him staying with Mom for a few more days until things were settled. He agreed, only after I promised to

introduce him to a guy Natalie and I had met at her actor's workshop. I left Bernie with him again for protection.

When I got home, I found that Natalie had left me a note saying she finally had a lead on Cassie Reynolds's pimp, Maurice Simpson. She said she was going to bob off for a few, whatever that meant, and not to wait up for her.

I began worrying about what Natalie might be up to and poured myself a glass of wine. It wasn't a complete pity party because I was out of Fugs. All I could find was a bag of stale potato chips.

I channel surfed, finding an infomercial about how to lose cellulite in fourteen days, but fell asleep before they showed the results of their miracle pill. The phone woke me up a little after eleven. It was Charlie.

"I've been trying to call you all night. Your cell goes to voice mail and your answering machine isn't picking up."

I remembered I'd unplugged the answering machine and phone to again check for bugs and forgot to plug it back in. My cell phone was in my purse in the bedroom and I'd only heard it after several rings.

"I've been right here all evening," I said. "What gives?"

"Got a call from a guy I know who works over in Hollenbeck. He said they were notified about an overdose case this afternoon. The guy's in his early twenties and was found dead in a motel room."

My heart was racing. I prayed Robin hadn't gone looking for Clark again.

Charlie came back on the line. "When they began doing the notifications, they came across a name in the vic's wallet. They tried calling him, but didn't get an answer. They found your name and phone number on the back of the card. They tried calling you. When they couldn't get through, I got the call."

"Who was the OD victim, Charlie?" I asked, holding my breath.

"A guy named Clark Henderson. The card they found in his wallet had your brother's name on it."

I felt a strange mixture of relief and sorrow. I was relieved that Robin was okay, but I knew, even after everything that happened, the impact of Clark's death would hit my brother hard. I was also angry, knowing that Wolf Donovan and his son were probably behind Clark's overdose.

"Thanks for letting me know, Charlie. I need to go talk to Robin."

As I drove through the streets of Hollywood, I began having second thoughts about waking Robin to give him the bad news. I knew he would be devastated over Clark's death, and I worried he might once again try to confront Bon Bon or Zen.

I had decided to wait and tell him first thing in the morning when I saw Natalie on the side of the road. She was dressed in her best *come fuck me* outfit and standing next to a large black woman. I knew that a woman that large in clothing that tight could only be one person—Mo.

I pulled over and asked Natalie if she was trying to make some extra money.

She motioned to the cars slowing down on the street. “Nah, these curb crawlers give me the willies.” Natalie turned to Mo. “You wanna tell her or should I?”

“Let’s get some coffee,” Mo said. She motioned to a couple of girls working the street. “These ladies got my number if they need anything.”

Natalie and I followed Mo, who I learned made her rounds about town on a Vespa. The little motorbike was almost lost beneath the enormity of the rider as we followed her to a Denny’s on Sunset.

The waitress poured me a cup of coffee while Natalie ordered what she called a chicken-titty sandwich.

Mo put four packets of sugar in her coffee cup next to the largest slice of cheesecake I’d ever seen. She looked up at me and said, “I’m Maurice Simpson.”

I looked from her to Natalie, trying to understand.

Natalie set down her teacup. “Told you I thought Maurice was a woman. And, in case you’re wonderin’, Mo’s not a chick with a dick.”

I processed what she’d said while, between mouthfuls of cheesecake, Mo explained, “I worked the streets for a few years and saw too many girls being used in a bad way, including myself. When my pimp got whacked, I decided to become an entrepreneur.”

“Mo’s like a social worker for workin’ girls,” Natalie said.

“I try to be fair, offer some protection, and get the girls who want out off the streets,” Mo said. “The only condition I have is that they never give up the fact that I’m a woman. Wouldn’t be healthy for me.”

Mo took a bite of her cheesecake, then motioned to Natalie and laughed, her red spandex reaching something my friend might describe as critical-ass. “Guess some people can’t keep their mouths shut.”

“It’s probably an occupational hazard,” Natalie said, laughing at her own joke.

Natalie was wearing an off-the-shoulder white tank top that was tied at the waist and a micro miniskirt. Every guy in the restaurant was using a napkin to wipe the drool off his face. She was giving them her best stink eye as I processed what Mo had said.

“Can you tell us anything more about Cassie Reynolds?” I asked. “We’ve looked into the Roger Diamond connection you told us about. We think Cassie may have learned something about his drug dealing that got her killed.”

“Don’t know nuthin bout no drugs,” Mo said. Half her cheesecake was already gone. Her eyes softened. “Cassie was a fragile girl who Roger met while he was partying up in the hills with a bunch of celebs.”

I looked at Natalie and then back at Mo. “Where in the hills?”

She lowered her voice, “She was with that asshole Donovan and his crew. She lived up there off and on for years, ‘til she met Roger.”

I felt something shift inside me, the pieces of broken glass aligning again.

Natalie said it bluntly, “You mean that fat lump of gas was doin’ the squirt the blurt with Cassie?”

Mo shrugged. “Cassie lived at his estate since she was a teenager, even before her aunt died. She never told me exactly what went on up there, but I didn’t get the feeling any of it was good.”

“And Roger Diamond changed that?” I asked.

“I think she went to live with Diamond to get away from Donovan. Roger knew a producer, made promises ‘bout getting Cassie into the movies, and she believed him.”

“Was the producer Conrad Harper?”

“Cassie told me he liked to watch,” Mo said, nodding. “She and Roger put on some shows for him. I think she thought it would help her with her acting career. But as I said before, the only thing Roger had in mind for Cassie was doing porn. After she figured that out, Cassie left Roger and came to work for me. She wanted off the streets, out of the business.”

I was thinking about all this as Natalie said something to a man who had approached our table. There had been a cover-up, but maybe there was a different angle than what we had suspected. Cassie’s mother, Gloria Stallings, had to know about Cassie living with Donovan, but she’d kept it from us. Why?

I looked up as Natalie stood and wagged her finger at the man. “Take your limp sausage home, find a dirt rag, and beat the bishop.”

The man turned and made a hasty retreat.

“Guess he got the message,” Mo said. “You ever need a job, you can come work for me, helping me get girls off the street.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Natalie said. “If I decide to leave Clyde for good, I’m gonna need me a trade.”

“Speaking of that,” Mo said, “I’m worried about the girl you both met at the

Marquee. Hoover's been missing for a couple of days."

"Did you file a police report?" I knew it was a stupid question, even as I said it.

"Wouldn't do any good. Hoover's a working girl. They won't take a report for seventy-two hours and even then she'll be lower than a stray cat on their priority list."

"I'll ask around and see if vice knows anything," I said as Mo finished her dessert. "Do you have any thoughts on what Cassie might have known that got her killed?"

"All I know is Cassie was planning to go to the cops about something she found out about her father."

"You mean about who killed him?" I said. "His name was John Carmichael."

"Don't know. All Cassie told me was that she was gonna tell a cop 'bout everything that happened thirty years ago."

I tried my best to get Natalie to come home with me, but she insisted on hanging out with Mo. As I drove home, I was convinced there was something more that Cassie had known than who was involved in the drug trade. If she'd lived with Donovan for years, maybe she had something else on the actor that got her killed.

It was only a few hours before sunrise by the time I got home. I was thinking about having to be up early to talk to Robin about Clark. I'd then have to make it to my Board of Rights Hearing at eleven.

After unlocking the door, I started heading up the stairs. I turned and saw a man coming out of the shadows. He was holding a gun. It was aimed at my head.

Chapter Forty-Six

It's dark when Kane finally opens his eyes. He hits the TV remote control. After several attempts, he's able to focus on the screen. He finds a news channel and it slowly dawns on him, it's been over twenty-four hours since he was shot.

He watches the commentator for a few minutes. Will the announcement about him being wanted on a parole violation be broadcast again?

Nothing.

It's a good sign. He knows most people have the memory and attention span of a flea. People are stupid. Stupid people should die.

Kane checks the dressing on his leg and sees that the blood has soaked through. After a shower, he again dresses the wound. The pain is still intense, but he can put pressure on the leg, even walk without too much effort.

He waits to see if the blood will again soak through the bandage. Seeing nothing, he's convinced that he's well enough to leave the room.

A lot should have happened in the past twenty-four hours. If Marvin Drake, for once, did what he was told, Kate Sexton should be dead. The same for Bautista. He still has plenty of contacts in the jail system. During one of his lucid moments, he made a call; put the contract in place.

Two hours before sunrise, Kane dresses and leaves the motel. He carries a handbag. Inside the bag are three 9 MM Glock 19 semi-automatic handguns, each with a thirty-three-round magazine. The pistols are all equipped with the latest in noise suppression technology.

The weapons should be enough firepower to tie up all the loose ends. This is the end game. The time for killing.

He drives until he finds a little all-night diner in an industrial area near Mid City. He wears a cap, hobbles into the restaurant, and orders pancakes and eggs.

The skinny young waitress that takes his order is an idiot. She brings him someone else's food and then takes her time correcting the order. He wants to pull out one of the guns and blow her head off. He pushes down the anger, regains control. When he's finished with the meal, he leaves without tipping the bitch.

Back in his car, he drives up into the Hollywood Hills as the sun is rising over the city. It's a beautiful morning. The perfect day for killing.

When he reaches the top of the hill, he turns and travels down the long driveway leading to the marble security entrance. He notices the wolf's head on the gate, the flags lining the roadway up ahead.

Kane's anger spikes as he pulls up to the guard station. If the asshole had controlled himself thirty years ago none of this would be happening. Then the arrogant fool couldn't leave well enough alone, he had to put it all out there for everyone to see. It will be a pleasure killing Wolf Donovan.

A guard, wearing a costume, slides the little window open. He's older than Kane and looks pissed, like he's been sleeping most of his shift and just woke up.

"State your business," the guard grumbles.

Kane smiles and says, "Death. I'm in the business of killing."

He raises the Glock 19, hesitates wondering what it must be like knowing you're going to die any second. He then extinguishes the thought and the guard, putting two in the man's head.

The guard shack rains blood. Kane smiles. It's just a little storm front. A hurricane is coming.

Chapter Forty-Seven

I looked down the gun barrel aimed at my head. My vision widened and I saw the smiling face of Marvin Drake.

He motioned to my apartment with the gun. "Up the stairs, now."

I moved slowly, favoring my sore ankle. It occurred to me that I could try to kill the light switch, then throw myself back down the stairway.

By the time I reached the top of the stairs it was too late. Drake had the gun pressed against my back.

Once we were inside, he did a quick search before satisfying himself we were alone. I silently cursed myself for leaving Bernie with Robin.

My hands came up in a defensive posture as Drake pushed me down on the sofa, ripping my blouse. My adrenaline was on overload as the captain pulled a chair up across from me and aimed his gun between my eyes.

"Thought I would save you the trouble of going to your dismissal hearing," Drake said. "At least you'll technically still be a cop when you die."

My thoughts raced. The police captain was older than me and overweight, with poor reflexes. At some point, if I acted quickly enough and tried to overpower him, I might have a chance. But the gun aimed at my face, made me hesitate. My only option was to stall—wait for an opening.

"I know about everything," I said. "The drug empire Harper and Kane began, with you acting as protection."

Drake's laughter was low and tight. "You don't know half the story."

"I know you framed Jack Bautista after killing Cassie Reynolds. I also know that thirty years ago you met Cassie's father in his office and warned him not to go to the police about the drug dealing or there would be consequences. A threat you made good on."

Drake smiled, exposing ugly nicotine-stained teeth. "You have only pieces of a much larger picture. I did pull the trigger on the whore using Bautista's gun and set the frame in place on the detective, but I had nothing to do with Carmichael's murder."

I had no idea if he was telling me the truth, but with the gun pointed at me I had no choice but to continue stalling and wait for an opening.

"If you didn't kill Carmichael, who did?"

Drake sat there, maybe deciding whether or not to pull the trigger. He finally said, "Let's just say Carmichael was killed because he had a disagreement with someone. It had nothing to do with drugs."

“And Cassie found out about it from Diamond?”

The elderly police captain shook his head. “Harper told both Cassie and Roger Diamond a dirty little secret after one of their sex parties. It put them both in the crosshairs.”

“And what about Donovan? What was his role in everything?”

“The esteemed actor has quite a few skeletons in his closet. The drug and sex trade were only part of his demons.”

If what Drake was saying was the truth, I still had no idea who killed John Carmichael. If I was going to die, I at least wanted that piece of the puzzle. And I sensed I didn’t have a lot of time left.

“Carmichael. Tell me what happened to him?”

“Sometimes a young man’s desires get the better of him and a high price is paid for keeping things quiet.” Drake brought the weapon up. “I think we’ve had enough small talk.”

“Wait.” I was desperate, knowing that if I stopped talking I would be dead. “I just want to know the truth. Why did you cover up everything?”

His eyes fixed on me. “I’m just a minor player in a very big game. There was someone else who offered the real protection.”

His hand tensed on the gun, but he held off for a moment. “By the way, it’s too bad you interfered with me shooting Bautista. It forced me to leave the spent casings at the scene and get IAD involved. If you’d minded your own business, you’d still have a job, your brother wouldn’t be facing drug charges, and Bautista wouldn’t have died in jail.”

“What are you saying? Bautista is being extradited...”

“Was extradited. Arrived at the jail last evening and had an unfortunate disagreement with another inmate before he could be processed into protective custody.”

I felt something slipping away inside of me. My heart raced and I had trouble catching my breath. If Jack was dead, then my own death would be meaningless. Everything would have been for nothing.

I was thinking about Robin, wondering if he would end up in prison, when Drake spoke again, “Time to die, Detective.”

I held my breath, waited for the bullet, a million thoughts and images spinning through my mind. I would die, just like my father, both of our deaths unsolved and meaningless.

I blinked, looked up at Drake. Even as his gun was still trained on me, the captain’s eyes were fixed on the stairway. There was a rustling sound, the

movement of someone or something on the stairs.

A voice, smooth and familiar, called out, “Drop the weapon, Drake.”

I realized that Pearl was crouched at the top of the stairs. He was pointing a gun at the captain.

Drake turned toward Pearl and I seized the moment, throwing my weight against him. We tumbled to the floor. A shot rang out and then a second as Drake’s gun went off but missed me. I was pushed back and allowed myself to fall away from him, thinking Pearl needed a clear shot.

Drake came up to his knees, brought his gun up, and aimed it at Pearl. A third shot rang out, this time from Pearl’s gun. Drake’s body imploded. He slumped forward, blood oozing out beneath him onto the floor.

I picked up his gun, thought about checking for a pulse. But I knew it was too late. There was nothing there. Drake was dead. I turned and saw that Pearl was smiling at me.

I sucked in a breath and asked, “So how long have you been following me around?”

“Just long enough to keep you alive.”

Pearl stepped toward me. I fell into his arms, tears streaming down my cheeks.

Chapter Forty-Eight

I was a half hour late for my Board of Rights Hearing. Breaking the news to Robin about Clark's death had been more difficult than I'd imagined. My brother was inconsolable.

Before leaving, I called Barry Sinclair and Tyler Lewis from the salon to stay with Robin. Both men promised they would stay close to him over the next several days. I brought Bernie with me, deciding that my brother's friends could offer the protection he needed until I could sort through everything.

"You are late, Ms. Sexton," Jimmy Chester said as he met me on the top floor of the Bradbury Building.

My lawyer had his hands on his hips. It looked like he was wearing a coat right off the ten dollar rack at Goodwill.

I hadn't slept all night and wasn't in the mood to be lectured. "Sorry, but maybe you heard I was a little busy last night. And, by the way, unless my suspension becomes a termination, it's Detective."

"Fine, Detective. Just so you know, they're going to postpone the hearing."

"What?" I shook my head and moved toward the oak doors of the hearing room. "There's no way."

Chester ran behind me. Inside the hearing room I found the two command staff assigned to my case chatting with a woman who was probably the civilian representative on the board. They were drinking coffee and seemed startled by my sudden entry with Bernie at my side.

"Nice of you to finally join us," Commander Collins said.

I gave Bernie the settle command and said, "I apologize to everyone. There was an incident..."

"We know all about it," Collins interrupted. He was a short, intense man with a reputation for no nonsense. "In view of what happened last night we're going to continue this matter for..."

"No," I said, raising my voice a little louder than I'd intended.

I noticed the scowl on Captain Richardson's face, the other assigned command staff member. Collins and the female board member didn't look any too happy with me either.

"It's not your decision," Collins said. "The board sets the hearing date. This hearing was expedited only at the request of your attorney. Given what happened to Captain Drake, we're not going to proceed until further notice."

I looked at Chester. He had his hands turned out in a dismissive gesture. I

might as well have brought a mannequin from the local department store.

I turned back to the board members. "I want it on the record."

"Excuse me?" Collins said.

"If the hearing is going to be continued I want it stated formally on the record."

Collins looked at the others and shrugged. "Why not?"

After locating the court reporter, Commander Collins called the hearing to order. He gave a brief summary of my case before explaining the reason for the postponement.

"This matter was to rely upon the testimony of Captain Marvin Drake." Collins paused, something catching in his throat. "The captain was involved in an incident early this morning and is deceased. Given that circumstance, I recommend to the other board members that this hearing be continued until a mutually agreed upon date can be chosen by all parties."

"Before we adjourn," I said to the commander before he could continue, "there's something I would like to have on the record."

There was impatience in Collins's voice. "What is that, Detective?"

I moved forward and set my laptop on the table. The flash drive I had downloaded from the lapel pin I wore last night was already inserted in the computer. I'd managed to activate the device when Drake pushed me down on the sofa and my blouse ripped.

"This recording was made early this morning," I said.

Before Collins could object, I hit the enter button and listened as a recording of my encounter with Marvin Drake was played for the board members, complete with Drake's admission that he murdered Cassie Reynolds and framed Jack Bautista.

I expected that Collins would object and terminate the proceedings, but the impact of what he and the others were hearing, including the gunshot that ended Marvin Drake's life, was compelling.

When the recording ended, there was silence. Collins looked at the other board members who seemed to be in shock.

After Collins huddled with the other board members for a moment, he said, "We're going to recess for a few minutes and then reconvene."

I waited in the corridor, pacing with Bernie. I kept my distance from Chester who said what had happened in the hearing room was unprecedented. After an hour's wait my phone rang.

"Kate, just checking to see if Drake left any scars."

I stopped pacing, tried to catch my breath. “Jack?”

“Live and almost in person.”

“I thought that...Drake said you were...”

“A close encounter of the worst kind. Had a run in with a guy in the jail and it wasn’t Harold Wiener.”

“Are you okay?”

“A few stitches, a little rest, and I’ll be good as new. One of the doctors in the jail medical ward felt sorry for me and let me use his phone.”

I realized tears were on my cheeks. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I’d better go, Kate. Give me an update when you get a chance. And, if I haven’t said it enough before—thank you for everything.”

We were called back into the hearing room after a two-hour wait. Collins stated for the record that the board members had listened to the recording I’d provided.

I clenched my teeth, holding my breath, as he continued. “Based upon the evidence provided to this board, we are overturning the suspension of Detective Sexton. She is to be reinstated to active duty status as soon as arrangements can be made.”

I was on my feet saying thank-you when Collins held up his hand. “One more thing. Detective Sexton you are hereby ordered to provide the original recording of last night’s incident and a sworn statement to the detectives assigned to the shooting investigation of Captain Drake. We are confident when that information is provided to the district attorney, charges against Detective Jack Bautista will be dropped and he also will be returned to active duty.”

After the hearing concluded, I again thanked the board members. I took Bernie by the leash and walked past a little rat who was grinning like he’d just swallowed a giant slice of cheese.

On the way out the door, I said, “Nice work Chester. Couldn’t have done it without you.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

Kane drives through the gates onto the grounds of Olympus. He moves up the flag-lined road expecting the actor's security staff to respond at any moment. Nothing happens.

He's not entirely surprised. The world is full of incompetence. The only cure for incompetence is to eliminate the source.

It's early morning. To the west, a fog bank dances along the shore of Malibu, but Kane knows the fog will burn off by midmorning. The day should turn warm and clear. It will be a good day to bury a thirty-year-old secret forever.

Donovan is probably still in bed. He plans to confront the actor in his bedroom. The fat fuck will beg for his life before he blows his brains out.

It will be the great actor's final performance. Justice will be served. Kane's only mistake was not killing the pig thirty years ago.

When he arrives at the residence, he notices a man coming up the driveway behind him in one of those stupid little golf carts. He's wearing a blue jacket that says security and is armed.

The guard pulls up directly behind Kane's car and gets out. In his rearview mirror, he sees the man is tall, over six feet and solidly built. The guard has a shaved head, except for a ponytail that swings back and forth as he walks up to the vehicle.

"Do you have a security pass?" Ponytail asks.

Kane smiles at the man. "Yes I do." He brings the Glock 19 up and points it at the guard's face. "It's an all-day pass. It authorizes me to go anywhere I want, anytime." Ponytail takes a step back. Kane sees the wheels turning. "Go ahead, pull the gun. Make my day, punk."

He likes the variation on the *Dirty Harry* line and laughs. Ponytail is frozen. Kane gets out of the car and removes the guard's weapon. He shoves his gun into the small of the man's back.

"Let's go have a chat with the wolf."

"He's not here," Ponytail says.

Kane doesn't believe the guard. They move inside the mansion where two more guards are stationed at the door. He uses Ponytail to convince the men to give up their weapons. The guards are cowards who shit their pants before Kane puts a bullet in each of their heads.

During a search of the bedrooms, he finds over a dozen people, most of them still in bed. He kills the cowards who beg for their lives and locks the others in

the wine cellar with Ponytail. Then he moves back up the stairway, this time to the master bedroom.

When Kane opens the door, he finds the guard has lied. Donovan is in bed, snoring like a fat old bull. The covers are pulled over the actor's head. He uses the Glock to pull them down.

"Shit!" He pushes the muzzle of the gun into the mouth of the actor's son. "Where's your father?"

The fat little fuck stirs, begins choking on the gun barrel. Bon Bon's eyes pop open, like two brown pools of sewage. Kane pushes the gun deeper into the little asshole's mouth. Donovan's son gags, then vomits onto the bed when the gun is finally pulled back.

When his stomach is empty, Bon Bon rolls over and looks at Kane. "What do you want?"

Kane pushes the muzzle of the gun toward the young man again. He spits on him before smashing the butt of the pistol across his face.

"Son of the wolf. I want your father," Kane screams.

Blood gushes from Bon Bon's nose. He pulls a sheet up, trying to stop the bleeding. "Please don't hurt me. I'll do anything."

The cell phone is pushed into Bon Bon's hand. "Call Daddy, now. Any whimpering, crying, or begging, and you die."

Bon Bon controls himself long enough to get his father on the line. He hands the phone to Kane.

"I have your son," Kane says. "We need to talk."

The actor's voice is tight. "What's going on? I thought we had things under control."

"I'll explain everything when you get here."

"I've got a schedule I can't break. I can be there tonight."

Kane considers this. He's hidden the gate guard's body and locked up the grounds. No one can get in or out. He's in control. All the guards except Ponytail are dead. The estate is his. He can spend the day entertaining himself before Donovan arrives.

"See you tonight," Kane says. "Let's make this interesting. Come to The Cavern when you get here."

He ends the call and looks over at Bon Bon. The fat little shit is crying his eyes out again, his face full of blood.

"Let's go downstairs and find your friends," Kane says. "It's party time."

“This place gives me the collywobbles,” Natalie said to Pearl and me.

It was after sunset as we parked at Hollywood Forever Cemetery. The graveyard, located in the middle of the city next to Paramount Studios, was the final resting place for some of Hollywood’s biggest stars.

Natalie continued, “Clyde’s brother died last year. They had one of them open-lid ceremonies. Almost chundered me Cheerios when I saw the old chuffer. He looked like a happy sack that had been in the sun too long—all saggy and dried up.”

“Now that conjures up a visual,” Pearl said.

After my hearing, I’d spent the rest of the day with the investigators assigned to the Drake shooting. Pearl and I had both been interviewed and I provided the recording of the incident. We were confident the shooting would be considered justified.

We got out of Pearl’s car and walked through the crowd. I hadn’t slept in two days. The only thing keeping me going was coffee and the call I got from Brian Jankowitz, telling me I was to report to work in two days. He also mentioned the DA was reviewing the case against Jack Bautista in view of my recording and was likely to drop all charges.

I pointed to the black Mercedes coming up the driveway. “Here comes Cesar.”

We watched as Wolf Donovan got out of the car and made his way through the crowd, signing autographs.

Natalie went off as the crowd swarmed the actor, “Fat piece of clunge. Bet he hasn’t seen his lazy lob since the civil war. He looks like a fat log in a shit swamp. I’d like to grab him by the...”

“Natalie!” I turned and shook my head. Even Bernie looked like he was ready to cover his ears with his paws.

Some people might find it strange that a cemetery would show old movies on the wall of a mausoleum. But this was Hollywood and the memorial park was the final resting place for some of the world’s biggest stars.

This was also the place where Rudolph Valentino was buried. It was Donovan’s most famous role. He was here to introduce the recently released director’s cut of the movie and give a talk about the film.

“So are we here just to watch the bilge rat’s movie?” Natalie asked.

Pearl shook his head. “I did a little research and found out that Donovan was on the cemetery’s board of directors back in the early eighties. I also learned

that, Pacific Trading Partners, the original corporation Harper and Carmichael formed, not only imported works of art, but also coffins made in Mexico. Donovan and his friends were likely using the caskets to bring drugs into the country.”

“When Pearl told me that,” I said, “I realized that the cemetery would be the perfect place to bury a murder victim. The problem is, Hollywood Forever has thousands of graves. Carmichael’s final resting place could be almost anywhere.”

“Maybe they stuck him in a coffin with someone famous, like Bugsy Siegel,” Natalie suggested.

The former gangster was interred in the cemetery, but I doubted that he had a companion.

We listened as the famous actor began his talk about the movie. He ended the monologue, referencing the Lady in Black who leaves a rose at Rudolph Valentino’s tomb every year.

When the movie began, Donovan took a seat next to the film projector. We decided to hang back in the crowd. I didn’t want Natalie going off again on the famous actor.

As the film rolled, we watched the movie star in his younger and considerably slimmer days, portraying the life of one of Hollywood’s most eccentric stars. The film told the story of Valentino’s early life in Italy and Paris before he came to the United States and starred in dozens of films. The actor had died suddenly at age thirty-one, causing mass hysteria among his female admirers.

The movie was nearing the end when Donovan stood and began heading to his car. A standing ovation rose up. Natalie gave the actor a Bronx cheer before I could cover her mouth.

I didn’t see Donovan drive away. I didn’t see the crowd begin to gather their belongings and head out of the cemetery as the film was ending. I only vaguely heard Natalie say something about Donovan being a backdoor pile of bab. I was busy watching as the final scenes of the movie flickered over the wall of the mausoleum.

That’s when I noticed it. At first, I dismissed it as my imagination working overtime. Maybe it was just fatigue?

I shook my head, saying out loud, “No, I’m sure I saw his name.”

I motioned for Pearl and Natalie to join me. We moved away from the crowd.

“This might sound crazy, but I think I know where John Carmichael is buried,” I said.

“With Bugsy?” Natalie asked.

I shook my head. “There was a scene in the film, just before the mystery woman left the rose at Valentino’s crypt. The camera panned over the graveyard, past the rows of burial vaults, and across the mausoleum wall.”

As the film ended, I motioned for them to follow me to the burial vault. I pointed to where I thought I’d seen the name. The wall was blank, nothing but ancient, dried cement.

“There was a scene in the movie,” I said. “It was on screen for only a second or two. It was a vault that showed a date of birth and death. I can’t remember the birth date, but I remember the date of death was September 16, 1984. The name on the crypt was John D. Carmichael.”

Natalie scratched her head. “I’m a little bumfuzzled on this. Why would the big ball of bloat put Carmichael’s grave marker in his movie?”

“Ego,” I said. “I remember Jack telling me that Cassie Reynolds said something to him about it all being right there for everyone to see. I think this is what she meant.”

“It would be the ultimate head trip,” Pearl agreed.

“Remember when we were at his estate?” I said. “Donovan said something about even if he’d put what he’d done right in front of everyone’s eyes, he could never be caught. He also said that things from his past would remain buried forever. I think Wolf Donovan committed murder, put the clues to that killing in his most famous movie for the world to see, and got away with it.”

“Until now,” Pearl said, as my phone rang. It was Charlie.

“I just heard a call from dispatch on that new phone app of mine,” Charlie said. “There was a call from somewhere inside Wolf Donovan’s estate. Somebody on a cell phone said there’s a guy with lots of guns holding people hostage. From the description, it sounds like Nathan Kane.”

We ran for the car, nearly tripping over the grave markers as we went.

Chapter Fifty-One

All the lights are killed, except those leading along the path next to the river running deep inside The Cavern. Nathan Kane follows behind his guests, offering encouragement in the form of a promise: instant death if they don't do exactly as he says. There isn't a single protest. His guests have already seen enough to comply with any demand.

It's been a busy day. Kane has spent most of his time going down to the wine cellar. It's fully stocked with a variety of expensive wines and champagne. He selects carefully, moving past the alcohol to the women being held hostage.

The sex is amazing. There's nothing like a loaded gun to add a little spice in the bedroom. He's used the weapon in a variety of ways.

After a few experiments, he finds his favorite activity is using the amyl nitrate he found in the actor's bedroom along with the lethal sex toy. The drug gives the women a warm mellow feeling before sheer terror sets in at the realization they're going to die. Kane decides he'll have his own fully stocked cellar once everything is settled and he leaves the country.

When they reach the series of pools at the back of the cavern, his guests are ordered to stop. They clutch their sides, not making eye contact, probably expecting the worst. They have no idea.

He despises the actor's bloated son most. Bon Bon has spent the day trying to barter for his life. Kane would have killed the fat toad hours ago if he wasn't Donovan's son.

Even Ponytail has lost his bluster. The muscle-bound bodyguard doesn't make eye contact and seldom speaks. He's been broken down like a little boy.

"I want every stitch of clothing off now," Kane announces.

There is no protest. He watches as his guests strip down. In a moment, Bon Bon stands naked with the others, his belly distended like he's swallowed a giant balloon.

Kane pokes the naked bastard in the stomach with his gun. "Ever think of going on The Biggest Loser?" There's no response except sniveling.

When they're all naked, he motions to the river of water. "In the water, now."

They do as he says, some of them shivering and crying as they slip down into the ribbon of dark water.

Kane moves to the control booth at the side of the pool. He hits the strobe lights. The cavern flashes and pulses with color. Then he selects the music. He needs a nice beat with lots of bass. He settles on Ozzy Osbourne's, "Shot in the

Dark.” He hits a button and the cavern begins to throb with music.

As the strobes flash and the music blares, Kane strategically places his weapons, leaving one of the guns in the back of the cavern where the moving water dumps into a final chamber. He then removes his clothing and slips into the water. He waits, gun in hand, like a giant coiled snake ready to strike.

In a few minutes, he sees the light. It’s shining down the walkway from the entrance to the cave. The light begins to grow brighter. As it moves toward him, he sees it dancing around the cavern, illuminating the pool filled with naked bodies. Then the light stops, splashes back, and washes over the giant actor.

The Assassin grins in the darkness. The flickering light catches Kane’s long, sharp teeth for an instant. He is the bear and the Wolf is in his den. The bear brings the gun up and roars.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Charlie called me as we blasted through the gates onto Donovan's estate.

"I'm on my way, Kate, but I just heard dispatch say the first responding unit was in an accident, broadsided in an intersection. You're on your own until the other units get there."

Bernie's whine of concern turned into a harsh growl as I ended the call. We raced up the driveway toward the residence.

In the distance, we could see a black Mercedes stopped ahead. The driver opened the rear door and Wolf Donovan began ambling toward the cavern. He turned back for an instant, probably seeing our headlights. His blue-green eyes shone in the light like an animal's. I saw there was a gun in his hand as he slipped away, disappearing inside the cave.

"The fat piece of sludge is heading for the shit bog," Natalie said.

Pearl slammed on his brakes a few feet from Donovan's car. We brought our guns out as we ran toward Donovan's chauffeur. The man's eyes were fixed on Bernie who was now barking and straining on his leash—my big dog in attack mode.

"He's in the cave," the driver said, jumping on the hood of the car. "I don't want any trouble."

From the corner of my eye I saw Natalie reach into her purse and bring out something shiny. She waved a pistol at the driver.

"Run for your life and don't leave a slime trail behind you," she shouted.

The man sprinted down the driveway. Natalie had gotten at least part of her message across.

I thought about telling Natalie to put the gun away and wait in the car, but it was too late. We heard the music and saw the flash of lights coming up from somewhere inside the cave.

I knew it wasn't just strobe lights we were seeing. The flashes of light were accompanied by a muffled popping sound. Someone was shooting.

We moved into the cave, following a trail that snaked along the river. Music rose up, a loud, pulsing beat. Strobos and flashes of gunfire illuminated the interior ahead of us.

I felt like I was on some crazy nightclub dance floor. Pearl was in front of me, his body moving in the flashing lights, creating a series of still images that burned into my retina.

I caught sight of Natalie behind me for an instant when the path turned and I

was struggling to control Bernie. She was holding what I guessed was Clyde's pistol in both hands, swinging it from side to side, probably imitating something she'd seen in a movie. I prayed that she wouldn't shoot me in the back. I heard her shouting, but only made out something that sounded like "motherfucker" and "blubber."

A few yards from a large pool of water, we stopped. The strobe and gunfire flashes illuminated something out of a nightmare.

Nathan Kane was in the back of the pool, his body halfway out of the water as he casually fired at the naked bodies writhing in front of him. Between the beats of blaring music and gunfire, I heard screaming. I made out two of the victims, Donovan's son and Zen.

We crouched low behind some boulders and saw Donovan moving forward, down a separate passageway. He entered a glass booth.

The music suddenly stopped and the cave went dark. The shooting also stopped. The Cavern was deathly silent—except for the screaming and Bernie's barking.

"I can't see anything," Pearl whispered.

I was about to answer him when something fell on top of me.

"Sorry 'bout that," Natalie said. "Lost me footin'. Think I stepped in some kinda bat shit."

A dim set of overhead lights flickered on. Natalie was trying to pull herself off me. I realized that she had stepped on a dead body. My hands were slippery, covered in something sticky. I felt Bernie's leash begin slipping away from me.

"Bernie, blieb!"

The German command was lost in the screaming. My partner sprang into the water, heading straight for Kane.

I dove in after him and began swimming frantically. My hand hit something in the water, probably a dead body, and my gun slipped away from me.

I grabbed for Bernie's leash, turned and saw Donovan standing at the side of the pool. He was staring at me, grinning as he pointed his gun at me. He was about to fire when the actor's giant head exploded. It flew apart and snapped back, blood spurting, the head almost served from his body.

I turned and saw Nathan Kane swinging his gun around, moving it from Donovan to me. We locked eyes. Then the shooting began from somewhere behind me. I realized it must be Pearl—and Natalie! I held Bernie's leash and pulled him down as I dove toward the bottom of the pool.

Above us, I heard bullets slicing through the dark water. When I couldn't hold

my breath a moment longer, I surfaced, also pulling Bernie up.

I saw Nathan Kane moving back, his huge naked body slipping over the waterfall as the river washed down into another pool, deeper into the cave.

I swam forward, reaching out and touching something floating through the water. It was huge and bloody. Wolf Donovan's gigantic body rolled over like an enormous log, water gurgling from what was left of his face. His body then floated away from me.

I turned and saw Bernie. He was paddling, desperately trying to stay afloat. He was no longer barking and moving toward Kane. He seemed to be in some kind of distress. That's when I saw the red stain flowing into the water.

Nathan Kane had shot my dog!

Chapter Fifty-Three

I grabbed for Bernie, snagging his collar just before he went under. I swam toward the edge of the pool, pulling him along as I went.

From somewhere above us near the entrance to the cave, I heard voices shouting commands and making radio calls. I knew it was the responding officers, but I also knew they were too late to help.

I pushed Bernie up and out of the pool at the same time I saw fingers with perfectly manicured nails coming down into the water.

“I’ve got him,” Natalie said. She pulled Bernie up, removed her blouse, and used it as a tourniquet to stem the bleeding. She pushed her pistol into my hand, motioned toward the flowing river of water, and said, “I’ll take care of Bernie. No more faffing about. Stick this down the asswipe’s throat and blow his gob off.”

I took the gun, swam back into the pool, and found Pearl. We made eye contact and then pushed off, moving farther back into The Cavern.

The overhead lights faded as we were washed into the flowing water. The Cavern became a black pit. We swirled down before we were spit out into the final churning pool of dark water.

We tried to orient ourselves, but the cave was silent and dark. The only sound we heard was coming from the upper pool. It was the sound of voices, shouting in agony as the uniforms arrived.

I treaded water and felt Pearl push up against me. Kane seemed to have disappeared. Maybe he had been hit? Maybe he had drowned? Maybe not.

I felt Pearl’s hand on my arm. Then I realized it wasn’t Pearl. Something knocked my gun away and pulled me down, deep into the bottom of the swirling water.

I couldn’t see him, but I knew Nathan Kane had ahold of me. He had clamped onto me and was pulling me down. I was drowning. I fought back, pushing and kicking, but I was no match for the muscular madman who was sweeping me down to my death.

Water seeped into my lungs. Panic set in. The world began to spin. My consciousness began slipping away. I was choking, swirling deeper into the abyss.

I reached out as I was pushed to the bottom of the pool, my hands momentarily brushing against something. It was sharp and long. Then I felt the handle. I had ahold of a knife that Kane must have dropped.

My strength was almost gone but I willed myself to sweep the knife up in a slicing motion. It hit nothing but water. Then I swung it again and again and again. The blade struck something solid. I felt resistance and pushed harder. There was a gurgling, screaming sound in my ears.

Above me I saw lights moving over the surface of the water. I said a silent prayer that I hadn't stabbed Pearl. I found the last bit of energy somewhere in the deepest cells of my body and pushed off, madly swimming toward the surface.

It seemed forever before I finally broke through the water. I came up, choking and gasping for breath.

Light moved over my face.

I was blinded for an instant. The light moved off and swept across the water. I realized it was a flashlight being held by one of the responding officers. I frantically looked around, again searching for the madman, and praying Pearl was still alive. Then I saw it.

Nathan Kane's body was floating face down in the pool of water. I moved forward and found Pearl. With his help we rolled the killer over. His body was slack, the life force flowing out as blood streamed into the pool of water.

I turned to Pearl who reached out for my hand. He helped me as I used my last bit of strength to swim over to the edge of the pool.

I looked up into the beautiful face of Natalie who was cradling Bernie in her arms.

"Nice work, sistah," Natalie said as Bernie licked my face. "The ugly gump is tits up."

Chapter Fifty-Four

A week after the slaughter at Donovan's estate I was back on duty. It took a dozen stitches to close the wound in Bernie's hind quarters. The vet said the bullet had just missed an artery, but that he would fully recover, leaving my partner with a lengthy scar and enough bragging rights to end up with a Medal of Valor.

I'd left Bernie at home with Natalie the first few days after I'd returned to work. She was nursing him back to health on a steady diet of bones.

After sorting out the killing cave at Donovan's estate, it was determined that twelve people, including Kane and the famous actor, had lost their lives in The Cavern, along with six others inside the residence.

Bon Bon had been wounded but had survived the slaughter. Zen wasn't as lucky. The bodyguard had been killed in the shooting spree.

Donovan's son was singing like a fat canary about the drug and sex trade his father had been involved in with Conrad Harper and Nathan Kane over the years. As we'd already figured out, Diamond was cooking the books and laundering the drug money through the porn business.

Bon Bon admitted that he had Zen put drugs in Robin's car and called the police because he was jealous that Clark said he still had feelings for Robin. He also told us that Clark had been cheating on him with his father. It seems the famous actor's appetite for all things both edible and sexual was voracious.

The charges against Robin had been dropped. My brother was back at work, trying to mend a broken heart.

I called Jack Bautista the day after our confrontation at Donovan's estate and filled him in on everything. The DA had dismissed all charges against him.

Jack said that he planned to return to work as soon as he was medically cleared. He had asked me to dinner after he recuperated, but I was noncommittal. I wasn't sure how I felt about the detective and needed some time to sort through my feelings.

After reviewing the scenes from Donovan's film, we confirmed that the burial vault showing Carmichael's date of birth and death was in the recently released director's cut of the film. The scene had not been in the original movie. We could only speculate that Donovan had inserted the scene in a moment of crazed inspiration.

The forensics team was scheduled to meet with us at the cemetery the next day to look for John Carmichael's body, even though we didn't officially know who

murdered him. Unofficially, I thought I had a pretty good idea.

Pearl was allowed to sit in with Charlie and me as we interviewed Gloria Stallings. Cassie Reynolds's mother had been picked up by the Pima County Sheriff's Office at a homeless shelter and held in custody until we transported her to Los Angeles on a decades old warrant we found in the system for embezzlement. She had worked for a dentist in San Diego for a few months before Cassie was born, and a creative accounting system had allowed her to keep half the monthly receipts.

The RHD detectives assigned to the Cassie Reynolds investigation were behind the one way mirror outside the interview room. Baker and Kennedy were none too happy about getting second crack at Stallings, but Jankowitz had called in some favors for us.

As we settled in, I resisted the urge to smile at the glass and give the dragnet brothers the solo sausage salute as Natalie called it. I went into the room determined to close the case.

"Gloria, I'd like to begin," I said, "by asking about the early years of Cassie's life. You told us when we interviewed you before that Cassie went to live with your sister. How did that come about?"

Watery blue eyes darted in my direction before her gaze swept away. "I left John before Cassie was born. I was unemployed for several months, but got a job with Dr. Carson in San Diego."

"The dentist?" Charlie asked.

Stallings nodded. "I worked as his receptionist and took payments." She clutched her sides. A tremor ran through her body. "You know the rest."

"I can understand how a single mother could give into temptation," I said. "Is that why you embezzled the money?"

"Yes. But after I got fired, I started drinking too much. I decided Cassie was better off living with my sister. That's when I moved to Arizona."

"But you kept in touch with Cassie over the years?"

"I tried." She looked at me, her eyes filling. "She was my only child."

"What about Mr. Donovan?" Pearl asked. "According to the woman Cassie was staying with before she died, Cassie spent a lot of time at his estate."

Stallings's eyes drifted to the mirror, they were unfocused like she was looking through a window.

"My sister did some catering work. She took Cassie with her when she did parties up on the hill. I think over the years Donovan took an interest in her. He allowed Cassie to stay at his estate from time to time. After my sister died, she

needed a place to live and Donovan helped her out.”

“Why didn’t you tell us about Cassie’s relationship with Donovan when we talked to you in Arizona?” I asked, my anger surfacing.

“He’s a very powerful man. I didn’t want to stir up any trouble.”

I leaned closer to Stallings and lowered my voice. My patience evaporated. “I’ve had it with the lies, Gloria. I want the truth. That includes everything you know about what happened to your daughter.”

Stallings’s head slumped forward. She sobbed. I gave her a moment, bringing her some tissues and then water. She blew her nose and swept her thin red-orange hair away from her eyes, finally regaining some composure.

“Cassie called me a few days before she sent me the envelope I gave you. She said she found out who murdered her father from Conrad Harper when he was on drugs and drunk. He showed Cassie and Roger Diamond the movie.”

“Valentino?”

“They saw it in Harper’s screening room. Cassie said that Roger had also gotten the information about the past corporations that Harper and Kane formed. He was planning to blackmail Harper. Cassie wanted me to have a copy of the information, thinking it might offer her some protection. Her watery gaze drifted away. “She was wrong. I think that’s why they were both killed.”

Pearl asked, “What sort of relationship did Cassie have with Mr. Diamond?”

“He was sort of a boyfriend, but Cassie knew he was involved in drugs with the others. He was no good. When she found out about the kind of movies he wanted her to make, she left him.”

More tears flowed. I gave Stallings a moment. She had finally told us some of what she knew, but I was sure there was more—much more.

“Thank you for telling us the truth, Gloria,” I said. “I have just a few more questions. When we talked to you a few days ago, we told you there was a police officer who was arguing with John Carmichael the night before he disappeared. Do you know if that man was Marvin Drake?”

Her voice took on more resolve. “I doubt it. Drake sometimes hung out with John and the others, but he wasn’t part of their group. There was someone else.”

“Someone who was in law enforcement?” Charlie asked.

Stallings nodded. “A man named Carl Brasher.”

I looked at Charlie and then back at Stallings. I remembered seeing Drake and the deputy chief together at the police administration building. “What was Brasher’s role in everything?” I asked.

“He helped Harper and Kane take care of anyone who was a problem.”

“Like John?”

“Yes.”

I took a deep breath and stood up. I glanced at the mirror but my thoughts weren't on the RHD detectives on the other side of the glass. I saw the reflection of a broken, empty woman next to me who was at least partially responsible for the death of her only daughter.

I turned back to Stallings. “But Carl Brasher didn't kill John, did he Gloria?”

She didn't look at me. Her head shook.

“I need the truth now,” I said, my voice resolute. “All of it. Tell me about Cassie's father.”

Her eyes slowly came up to me. I sensed in that moment she knew what I'd already pieced together. Her head fell back onto the table and she wept. When she finally recovered, Gloria Stallings whispered a secret that she had kept for thirty years.

“I was...raped.”

I was sure I knew the answer, but asked anyway. “By who?”

Her head came up slowly and she exhaled, maybe relieved that the dark secret was finally being spoken. She looked at me and said, “Wolf Donovan.”

I nodded, now giving up what I had already determined. “They had the same eyes—cobalt blue with a hint of green. Donovan was Cassie's father and he knew it.”

The truth whispered from her quivering lips, “Yes. When my sister began catering his parties...he began asking questions...figured it out.”

“And John Carmichael knew you were raped?”

She nodded, brushing away her heavy tears. “John and I had grown apart. We were no longer...intimate, but he let me stay at his house sometimes because I had nowhere else to live. I told him that Donovan attacked me one night when he came by the house and I was home alone. John was angry and planned to go to the police.”

“Did he talk to Carl Brasher?” Charlie asked.

Stallings nodded. “Brasher tried to convince John not to file a complaint. He said that if he went to the police they would close down the production of his film.”

“*Days of Destiny?*”

“Yes. He said they would see to it that John never worked again. When he couldn't talk him out of it, Donovan and Kane came to see John before he could file a formal complaint.”

Stallings' tears came again, harder now. She finally regained some composure and went on, "I was upstairs, hiding. I heard the gunshot...saw them drive away...John's body was wrapped in a blanket."

"And that's why you left Hollywood?" I asked.

She nodded. "I knew if they ever found me I would also be killed."

"Do you know where John is buried?" Pearl asked.

Stallings shook her head. "Maybe in the cemetery like Cassie thought after seeing the movie. I don't know for sure."

I bent over the table and waited. Stallings finally looked up at me.

"Cassie's relationship with Wolf Donovan," I said. "It's time you told us everything, Gloria."

A torrent of tears flooded down her face again. When they finally stopped, Cassie Reynolds's mother gave up the last of her dirty secrets.

"He molested Cassie."

"From the time she was a little girl?"

She nodded. "Yes."

I leaned in closer to her. "And you knew about it?"

Stallings pounded a clenched fist on the table, tears gushing. "I'm sorry...I'm so sorry."

"And Donovan and Kane had Marvin Drake kill her," I said.

Stallings broke down again, losing all control of her emotions.

I pushed away from the table, took a deep breath. While Drake had pulled the trigger, I knew who had really killed Cassie Reynolds. I was looking at her. I was disgusted and couldn't hold back. I moved back to the prisoner and leaned forward, my gaze narrowing.

"You said it before, Gloria," I spat. "Cassie was your only child. She deserved her mother's protection. You gave her nothing."

Stallings's body shuddered in waves of deep, racking sobs that seemed to come from the center of her being. I shook my head as I walked away. Before closing the door on her, I stopped and looked back at her for a final time. I felt nothing but revulsion.

I joined Charlie and Pearl in the hallway outside the interview room. My partner's gaze came over to me.

Charlie said, "You mean the son of a bitch not only molested his only daughter but he had her killed?"

I nodded, trying to find the words to respond to what he'd said. I realized that I had nothing left. I walked away and felt something on my cheeks.

Chapter Fifty-Five

The day after my interview with Cassie Reynolds's mother I decided to take Natalie with me to Hollywood Forever Cemetery. My friend had earned the right to see if John Carmichael's body was interred there.

We decided that Bernie was well enough to go with us. I think my partner was getting antsy staying home.

Natalie put it less delicately as she brushed a hand under Bernie's muzzle when we stopped at my mom's house to reimburse her for Olive's repairs. "The mutts nuts are gonna pop unless he gets the rust outta his thrust."

As Natalie and Bernie followed me into the house, I said, "I think I'm going to put you in charge of Bernie's love life. I've done my time playing love referee."

We found my mother in what she calls her Spirit Room. There were hugs all around. I noticed that Mom, or Miss Daisy, as she calls herself when she's in one of her psychic states, was finally losing the Cat Woman look. The bandages were completely off and there were only a couple of fading scars.

Mom didn't waste any time commenting on my new hairdo. "You don't even look like my daughter. Where are your curls?"

"It's called a Brazilian Blowout, Mom. And my frizzies are history." I made a little primping motion. "Robin says it will last about three months before I have to do it again." For the first time in my life I had straight, thick hair, and I loved it.

"I think she looks like a vampire," Natalie said.

I turned to my friend. "Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"Don't go off your trolley, now. I'm talkin' 'bout that actress, Kristen Stewart. She played in that movie with the hunky vampires. I think you look bloody ridiculous." Natalie smiled, punched my shoulder. "That means really cool in American, case ya didn't know."

The critique went on for five minutes before Mom said, "There's something I need to ask you both. I'm doing a reading on Saturday night and need some energy in the room."

"What kind of energy?" I asked.

"The female kind. I was thinking you and Natalie might help out."

Natalie was on her feet, clapping her hands. "We'll be here. I've always thought I had a connection to the spirit world. One time during the Big O, I had an outta body experience. Saw this bright light and me grandmum."

"You saw your grandmother during an orgasm?"

“I think maybe she was jealous. Clyde had just gotten his Viagra and...”

I held up a hand. “Enough.”

Mom said, “I’ll be doing the reading for...” She lowered her voice. “Karma.”

Natalie jumped in the air. I thought she might be having a mini-orgasm. “Yes, yes, yes. I love her green outfits.”

My brow furrowed. “I’m sorry, who?”

“Karma only wears the color green,” Natalie said. “Has somethin’ to do with the earth’s energy. She’s got that hit song called, ‘Zipwalla.’”

It registered. Karma was a celebrity and well-known singer. Still, I had my reservations. “I don’t know. It sounds...”

“Karma thinks her fiancé is cheating on her,” Mom said. “She wants to find out before the wedding. She’s planning to marry Love Dawg.”

Natalie was saying something about dirty, cheating dogs and then apologizing to Bernie before Mom added, “Everyone is supposed to wear green at the reading.”

“Huh?” I said, still trying to catch up. “Love who?”

“Do you live under a rock?” Natalie asked. “Love Dawg is only *the* biggest rapper on the planet. This is our civic duty, Kate. We can’t let Karma marry a cheat freak.”

I surrendered. Maybe my decision had something to do with my own experience with a cheater.

“Okay, but I’m not wearing green. I look like a fat toad in green.”

As we turned to leave, I said to Mom, “See you Saturday night.” Something else occurred to me by the time I reached the door. “I hope you’re not having any more presidential dreams.”

Miss Daisy’s lips turned up. “No. But I do miss those nights at Camp David. There was one evening when we were nude in front of the fireplace and Dick...”

I ran to my car, holding my ears.

As Olive chugged through the streets of Hollywood toward the cemetery, Natalie broke the news that she was moving out of my apartment.

“I need to get me own place. Clyde and me are still on the outs and I can’t stay on your couch forever. I also got me eye on a little shop near La Brea.”

I wondered if she was planning to move Laundry ‘n Lace. “Are you thinking of opening some kind of store?”

“Sorta. I’ve given things a lotta thought and decided that I’ve got a lot more snoop in me than actin’ ability. I’m gonna try me hand as a private dick.”

“What? A private detective?”

“Gonna call it, Sistah Snoop.” Natalie smiled. “Wanna know who my snoop sistah is?”

“I’m not sure that I do.”

“Mo.”

My mouth fell open. Natalie was planning to go into business with Cassie Reynolds’s former pimp. I didn’t know what to say.

Natalie went on, “Mo thinks it’s time she got her heels off the streets anyway.”

“You two should make quite the pair,” I said as we turned into the cemetery.

“We might even do a little business with you from time to time,” Natalie said. “Just when we need some official help like gun permits, batterin’ rams, night goggles... that sorta thing.”

“Battering rams?”

I was still recovering from the news as we met up with Pearl and Charlie who were assembled with the forensics team near the mausoleum.

Charlie and I were partners again. Jessica Barlow had been assigned back to her regular duties, but not before she lodged a litany of complaints about Charlie being overweight, overbearing, and over the hill.

Charlie, in turn, had told Jankowitz, “It will be a cold day in hell before I work with that tight-assed bitch again.” He was almost as glad we were together again as he was to have his daughter, Irma, back home after promising she would stay away from B-Boy.

“Hear the news?” Charlie asked.

I saw the team was using a small drill on the wall of the tomb. “Don’t tell me you already found Carmichael’s body.”

He shook his head. “Not yet. Deputy Chief Carl Brasher resigned this morning. He’s facing a grand jury indictment. They found Kane’s cell phone. He was calling Brasher on a regular basis after he was released on parole.”

“Better late than never,” I said.

Somewhere in the distance I heard helicopters hovering. I realized that they were circling high above us in the hills overlooking the city.

“Wolf Donovan’s services are today,” Pearl said. “He apparently had been building a huge burial site on his estate for some time.”

“Why am I not surprised?” I said. I noticed Pearl was holding a painting in his hands. “You finally finished it?”

He nodded and handed over the canvas. The scene was of three children playing together on the seashore with clouds floating above them. The faces that had once been only a faint outline were now clear. The children in the painting

were Pearl, Natalie, and me, but Pearl's version of what he thought we all might have looked like at about age five.

"You got me spot on," Natalie said. "Used to smile like that when me dad chased me around and tried to spank me for one sorta rumpus or another."

"It's amazing," I said, smiling up at Pearl.

He motioned to the painting. "It's yours. I realized when I finished it there was something about our investigation that made me feel young again." He hugged me and then Natalie.

I glanced at the painting again, my eyes brimming. I thought about Cassie Reynolds.

The one question I hadn't asked Cassie's mother is if Cassie ever suspected that Wolf Donovan was her father. I didn't ask the question because I desperately hoped she hadn't known. I said a silent prayer and made myself a promise to find out where Cassie was buried and bring her flowers.

My vision was still blurred as we heard the forensic team calling to us. We assembled at the wall of the mausoleum. The team had constructed a pattern of lines and used a saw to cut through the cement in the area that was consistent with the scene of the tomb in Donovan's movie.

One of the technicians removed a heavy block of cement. Even before the announcement was made, I saw the bones. The body of John Carmichael had been covered with a blanket and pushed into the crypt.

One of the forensics specialists turned to us. "We're going to take photographs in situ and then remove as much of the skeletal structure as we can in one piece. It's going to take us awhile."

I looked at the others, nodded, then turned and walked away letting Bernie sniff the ground.

I wondered what John Carmichael might have accomplished if he'd lived. So many lives had been changed or lost by the murder of one man thirty years ago.

It made me think about my own father, how my family had been forever changed by his murder. I made a silent vow to never give up trying to find his killer.

I heard a car turn into the cemetery and looked over at the same time Natalie did.

"Looks like one of Donovan's cars," Natalie said, coming over to me. "Black Mercedes, tinted windows. Hope it's not some hired killer."

My adrenaline spiked as the car approached. It stopped on the driveway a few yards away. My hand tensed on the gun in my purse as the door swung open.

I relaxed when a chauffeur emerged. The man bowed, removed his cap, and opened the rear door of the vehicle.

“Mr. Jack Bautista requests that you join him for lunch in Malibu,” The chauffeur said to me.

We all watched as the handsome detective got out of the car. He had one arm in a sling.

I said, “You do know how to make an entrance, Detective.”

“I’ve been waiting for this day for a long time.” Jack motioned to the open door. “By the way, love the new do.”

I tossed Natalie Bernie’s leash. “Take care of my dog for a couple of hours. I’m going to the beach.”

I waved at my friends as we drove out of the cemetery. I then turned to Jack and looked into his smoky brown eyes.

At that moment I made a decision. In this place that was full of death, it was time to move on with my life. It was time to live again.

Thanks for reading, *Hollywood Assassin*...

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Now an excerpt from

Hollywood Blood
M Z Kelly

Chapter One

I was late and dashed into the spirit room, taking my place across from a psychic, a celebrity, and a dog. Thirty seconds later, I knew that the dog was the smartest one in the room.

“I call upon the spirit guide to come forth and give us a sign,” my mother, also known as Miss Daisy, said, sounding like Bob Marley’s sister. “Lolly Biloxi, we call upon you to help us.”

The psychic reading, my mother’s form of a prenuptial counseling session for a celebrity named Karma, should have been called a pre-nut. Every woman in the room wore green. No, it wasn’t St. Patrick’s Day. Karma calls green her *power color* and insists that everyone in her presence wear a shade of the color.

I cursed the lime green dress I’d bought for the occasion. It was too big for me, bunched up at my hips, and made me feel like something that catches flies with its tongue.

Mom sat at the head of the table using the fake Jamaican accent she conjures up during her readings. The scent of incense hung in the air. The lights were dim and creepy mood music played in the background. It all seemed fitting, with Halloween just a few days away.

The reading was designed to determine if the celebrity singer’s fiancé, a rapper named Love Dawg, was cheating on her.

Yes, Love Dawg.

Karma had apparently never been told that men are dominated by an organ that’s sole purpose is to activate their penises. It’s called a brain. Maybe I should give up being a cop and go into the business of predicting the future.

As the reading began, the dog in the room, my canine police partner, Bernie, displayed the unusual good sense to trot off to a corner and lie down. Bernie, a mixed breed of fur, attitude, and sexual wanderlust, has his own testosterone induced challenges, but was recovering from a gunshot wound and apparently didn’t want any part of ghost-busting his two-legged counterpart.

Karma’s elderly manager, Harriett Nordquist, made a snortle, something between a snort and a chortle, before she leaned over to my best friend, Natalie Bump, and said, “I think Lolly should stay in Biloxi and Miss Daisy is crazy.”

“Best to keep an open mind,” Natalie whispered in her proper English accent. “As the story goes, the last time someone made fun of Miss Daisy, she ended up being cursed and struck dumber than a pair of Winklepickers.” Harriett’s blue eyes widened as Natalie continued. “The old girl was last seen trying to clean

bird shit out of a cuckoo clock.”

“STFU,” Karma’s friend, Vee, a plump young woman with lots of makeup, big lips, and even bigger hair, said in a hushed tone from across the table.

Mo, Natalie’s partner in a private detective business they call Sistah Snoop, sat a couple of chairs over from me and must have seen my confusion.

“Shut the fuck up, Kate,” Mo said in her deep, yawning voice.

Mo is black, bad, and big, as in she’s pushing two hundred pounds. Still, I started to take offense at what she’d said.

“STFU—shut the fuck up,” Mo explained, stretching her green spandex at the seams until it threatened to unleash two of the largest breasts in the Milky Way.

“Oh, got it,” I said.

After another STFU from Vee, Mom adjusted her red and green headscarf and pleaded with Lolly to give us a sign. The lights dimmed and I heard a whimper that I should have paid more attention to.

Instead, I watched as Miss Daisy’s head began to loll and roll. She lost the Jamaican accent, and, in the persona of her spirit guide, said, “I am Lolly. What do you seek?”

I zoned out at that point, didn’t hear Bernie’s increasingly urgent whimper, and tuned out the spirit guide, who was saying that the Love Dawg was off his leash.

Maybe it was all the talk about dogs and love, but my ex, an assistant DA, crossed my mind. A year ago, he’d been caught on videotape cheating with his secretary in an interview room. The divorce had left me in credit hell and with the humiliation of knowing that the video, *Dougie Does Phyllis*, had made the rounds of nearly every division in the department.

After some evil thoughts that ended in an imaginary courtroom where I was found innocent by reason of justifiable castration, I found my mind wandering back to last night. It was my thirty-first birthday, there was a cake, and I’d done a little celebrating.

Detective Jack Bautista and I had recently solved a high-profile murder case in Hollywood. The case had taken on some complications involving Jack being a fugitive for a while, before I almost lost my job while helping him clear his name.

We were both back on the force and, thanks to some intervention by the newly appointed police chief, I had just been reassigned to RHD, LAPD’s Robbery Homicide Division, along with my partner, Charlie Winkler. Bernie had also been rewarded for his actions on the case, receiving a Medal of Valor after

taking a bullet while bringing down the bad guy.

All that seemed a long time ago when I thought about last night's birthday celebration. One thing had led to another, and...

"Happy birthday," Jack said, dimming the lights and lighting another candle.

I felt something wet...it wasn't wax. The candles didn't make it on the cake because the cake never made it as a cake or to the oven, for that matter. It was all clothes and flour, eggs and sugar, pots and pans, breath and hands. I felt the dripping of batter and then a better feeling...much better.

"Maybe we need some ice cream," Jack suggested after a while. "I think I could use some more sugar."

"It's bad for your health," I said.

"No one lives forever."

"Better watch our cholesterol."

"I'll watch yours, if you watch mine."

Things got a little more heated then. Maybe it was the air temperature, or the fact that the candles were burning rapidly, or that the ice cream was something called, Cookies and Dreams.

All I knew after that was that you don't need an oven to bake a cake.

Bernie's whine, an early warning signal that almost always signifies imminent disaster, ended my reverie and brought me back to Mom's spirit room. I heard Lolly telling Karma something about Love Dawg's happy sword.

And then the room exploded.

Chapter Two

“Stay down,” I yelled, the echo of the gunshot blasting through the room still ringing in my ears.

The lights in my mother’s psychic parlor were out, the room only illuminated by the light spilling in from an adjacent room. There was a momentary silence as we tried to understand what had happened. Everyone was on the floor; a writhing mass of arms, legs, fur, and Versace.

And then the screaming and yelling began.

“Get my driver, now,” Karma shrieked.

“The floor is wet, sticky,” Vee said, sliding around in the blood spray like a novice skater on a frozen pond. “I can’t get my footing.”

Mo was under the table, legs and arms in a spandex tourniquet, yelling something about motherfuckers.

Natalie let loose with a string of British obscenities ending with a reference to the queen’s genitalia. She pulled her husband, Clyde’s, antique pistol out of her purse and waved it in the air.

I finally found my own purse, yanked out my cell phone, and called it in.

“This is Detective Kate Sexton with LAPD. We have shots fired. I need tactical units, code three at my location. And send an ambulance.” I gave them Mom’s address and ended the call.

I wasn’t sure about needing the ambulance until I found the light switch. When the spirit room lit up, I realized that I should have just called for the coroner, and maybe a psychiatrist, considering the personalities in the room.

Harriett Nordquist had done a face plant onto the multi-colored spirit table. Blood was pouring out of a hole in her head.

“Fraid the dew is off the Lilly,” Natalie said, examining the dead body slumped over on the table. Nothing much bothers my British friend. “Maybe she shoulda settled for cleaning cuckoo clocks.”

“Get down, Nat,” I yelled. “And put the gun away.” I turned to my mother, who was also slumped forward across the table, her headscarf covering her face.

“Mom, are you hurt?” I said, trying to stay low as I checked on her. I pulled the scarf up and saw that Miss Daisy had fainted. She was coming to, moaning something about evil spirits and the dead. She appeared to be okay, at least as okay as my mother gets.

I took a moment to compose myself. The room was in a state of chaos, but no one, other than Karma’s agent, appeared harmed. Vee, who I’d learned before the

reading was someone Karma called her FFF, First Friend Forever, was now making a fanning motion in front of Karma's face, and slipping around in the blood while screaming for someone to get water.

"STFU," I yelled at the FFF, thinking about other things the initials could stand for. I then turned to the other women in the room. "Everyone, stay right where you are. Do not get off the floor until I get back."

The shot that had killed Nordquist had come through the window. The glass was shattered, covering the floor and mixing with the blood. I gathered up Bernie, tethered him, and crouched low, heading out onto the patio with my gun drawn.

The night was damp and moonless. The only lights in the neighborhood were coming from Mom's cottage and the amber streetlights that lined the road. In the distance, the city of Hollywood drifted in and out of a fog bank, a shimmering mirage of dreams or nightmares, depending upon your perspective.

I did the calculations, looking from where the bullet had entered the house then back to the neighborhood, and decided that the shooter must have been on the street where it turned and headed up the block.

At first, I thought the shooting might have been a drive-by. But as I headed out onto the sidewalk, I began to wonder if the killer was stalking Karma and had hit her agent by mistake. This was Hollywood and the singer was one of the most famous performers in the world. I cringed at the thought of the press getting ahold of the story. Mom's neighborhood and the city would become a media and paparazzi feeding frenzy.

I turned, yanking on Bernie's leash, as I headed up the sidewalk. My big dog growled and I looked up in time to see something or someone in the shadows hiding behind one of the cars parked at the curb up the street.

"Police," I yelled. "Walk toward me now or I release the dog." I fingered my gun. "Hands in the air."

Silence.

I took a step forward and heard the shuffling sound of someone moving. A car door opened. I reached down to release Bernie, but something in the road caught my eye.

I glanced up just in time to see the car's headlights come on and it jerk away from the curb. An engine roared to life as the car accelerated in our direction. I dove and rolled away from the speeding car, pulling Bernie with me as it rumbled past us.

I raised my Glock, drawing a bead on the speeding car. I was about to fire

when I decided it was too late. There were some apartment buildings beyond the roadway. One errant shot and I'd be up to my ears in hot water with LADP brass again. There was no way I'd risk another go-around with the boys in the *Tower*, as my partner, Charlie Winkler, referred to the LAPD administrators.

I was headed back to my mother's house, hearing the sirens coming up the street, when I stopped. I pushed my brown hair out of my eyes and searched the road where I'd stood a moment earlier. Then I saw it.

At first I thought it was some kind of large playing card. But when I lifted it up by the edge, I saw the image. It was one of those fortune-telling cards that I'd seen psychics use. In fact, I thought I'd seen a similar card in my mother's house and wondered if it belonged to her.

I turned the card over. There was an image of a skeleton riding a horse, carrying some kind of flag. Then I saw the handwritten words at the bottom of the card.

The silence is broken.

About the author

MZ Kelly spent over thirty years in the field of law enforcement. His experience includes dealing with violent felony offenders, making sentencing recommendations to the courts, supervising a detention program for juvenile offenders, running a jail, and developing innovative programs to keep our streets safe. His law enforcement experience was in Southern California, not too far from the famous Sunset Strip, and includes run-ins with some of America's craziest criminals, not to mention a few wannabe actors, and even an Oscar award winner!

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