

The Good Black Night: Los Angeles, 2002

By David Jamison

Chapter One

The phone wouldn't stop ringing. That's the first thing I noticed. It had started as a tinny shrill in the back of my conscious mind and had come blaring through the mist to shriek in my fucking ear. I covered my head with a pillow, but it hardly seemed to make a difference. I waited a minute for it to stop, but it didn't. Wouldn't.

This led to my second problem--I had no idea where I was. I was pretty sure I was somewhere in my apartment, but aside from that, all bets were off for real. So I laid there, with one eye pasted shut, searching in the dark with the other for some sign of where I had fallen asleep and thereby where my still-ringing phone was.

This was not usual for me, people calling at all hours of the night. And normally this wouldn't really trouble me, except for the fact that it had to happen on the one night that I had let myself get drunk for the first time in four months. It occurred to me that whoever it was that was waking me from my stupor probably had a reason to call and was not going to stop now. What was up with the fucking answering machine?

Turning over was a little more difficult than expected. My left arm felt like I had dipped it in Novocain, though I was almost positive that I hadn't. To my surprise I found that I was on my own couch, which, I guess, isn't as bad as it could have been given the circumstances. I didn't remember falling asleep on the couch, and it's not a long way from the couch to the bed in my one-room hovel, but I must have been a lot drunker than I remembered getting—then again, I

wasn't remembering much.

I had just wiped my chin with my sleeve and turned to look for the phone when I noticed that it had finally stopped ringing.

Fuck. Just my luck. Now, not only was I getting midnight callers, I didn't even know who they were. I looked for the red digits of my alarm clock on the faux-oak night table I had liberated from a Dumpster just two streets over. It was four-something-six, the middle digit and the colon obscured by a sock, I think. It didn't matter. I've barely had an hour's sleep and now I was up. Might as well move over to the bed, I figured, as I stood up awkwardly, giving the coffee table an unintended shove.

I decided to empty my bladder before trying to go to bed again, inevitably in earnest. As I reached the bathroom door, the phone rang again.

"Fuck."

There's more satisfaction in saying these things out loud, even if nobody can hear you. I actually believe that expressing certain words helps release some sort of physical tension; the stress of the situation. I noticed the phone's ring had a particular sting to it, something one notices when one is drunk, I guess. Or maybe it just sounded different now that I was standing. I reached for the wall extension in the kitchen, then remembered that I had unplugged it to use my laptop in there, and there was no way I was going to find the plug now. It was then that I noticed that the answering machine had been unceremoniously kicked off my counter and unplugged. The work of some stinking drunk, no doubt. With a sigh I turned back to the living room, holding the wall for balance, and picked up the receiver just as the phone began screaming again.

"What? What do you want?" I mouthed into the phone, sounding more retarded than annoyed.

"El? I'm sorry it's so late."

It was Jessica. If I had given it any thought, I probably would have figured it out. It's the only thing that would've made any sense. Only a girlfriend would think it alright to call at four in the morning.

"It's Melissa, Ellison. She's using again."

It took me a minute to process that. It was the last thing I wanted to hear right now, and the only thing that could've possibly come close to waking me up. My ex-girlfriend was using again – which is to say, my current girlfriend's ex-best friend and ex-roommate was using again. This was sort of a kick in the guts. Melissa was the first white girl I had ever dated and the first girl I had ever fallen in love with. She and I had been drunks together, then gotten sober together, and then I betrayed her . . . with her roommate . . . on her very own couch. The last time I had seen her, Mel was still shrugging off the pain of losing me to Jessica--despite the fact that we had both sworn up and down no shit like that would ever happen. I'll never forget the look on her face the day Jess and I told her we were in love – too cool to be angry about our happiness, she just smiled a sad little smile like she knew it was gonna happen. When I heard she'd lapsed back into drink, then drugs, and then finally descended into prostitution, I saw that sad smile as a bitter shot to my thoughtlessness. But she'd gotten better, I'd heard. Clean as a whistle, I'd heard. Good news unravels fast.

"Ellison? Are you there? Did I wake you?" Jess' voice suddenly sounded small, as if she'd reconsidered the whole phone call. I cleared my throat, but not

for her benefit.

"You called me at four AM to tell me Melissa is using and *now* you want to know if I'm awake?"

"I thought you might be up programming or something. I'm sorry, but we have to do something."

That was fair, at least. Too often I am up in the wee hours surfing off a stupor. "What are you doing up?" was all I could think of to say.

"I was sleeping when I heard a knock on the door. You know how I said I hadn't seen her in a couple of months?"

"Yeah."

"Well, there she was. She was in this really slutty mini-dress and I could tell she was strung out."

"What'd she want?"

"She asked me for a loan, but I didn't feel good about giving it to her, so I asked her what she needed the money for. That's when she flipped out. She said she didn't owe me an explanation and that I wasn't her mother and all that. I just wanted her to sit down and talk, but she was too far gone. Finally she screamed at me and left."

At this point I had to sit down. I guess I was expected to start thinking straight by now, but it wasn't coming very easily.

"I tried to stop her, but she pushed me away. I was going to call the cops, but I figured I should call you."

"That's good. Don't call the cops."

"She's probably out tricking right now. We have to go find her."

"Alright. I'll be downstairs in fifteen minutes. Bring tea."

There was only one thing on my mind now – Thai iced tea. This had become a bit of an obsession of mine since coming to LA. To be honest, I had never even tasted Thai iced tea until I first arrived here from Boston, and I wasn't much of a regular iced tea drinker before. But there's something to be said for the sweet silkiness of the Orient as it glides down your gullet. It makes all your troubles slide away. I had become addicted to the stuff at school during all-nighters while trying to debug some asinine bit of code or writing term papers for classes I had never attended. You know, typical college shit.

Two aspirin and one quick head-dunk in cold water later I was standing at the front iron gate of my building on Schrader, formally Hudson, Avenue in Hollywood. It was a weird experience having your address change without moving. I have no idea how or why they decided to change the name of the street last year from Hudson to Schrader. One foul-smelling old man I got into a conversation with at Popeye's insisted that it was because the street was named after Rock Hudson, but when he turned out to be gay the Hollywood city council wanted to erase him from the past. So they changed the name to the writer of the movie *Chinatown*, Paul Schrader, 'cause he wasn't gay – as far as they knew. One of these days I'm going to look into it, but I guess the old man's explanation was as reasonable as anything else I'd heard. It sure sounded a lot more interesting than what the truth probably was. That's the thing about Hollywood – you can never tell what's more interesting, truth or fiction. And sometimes you can't tell them apart.

The street was not as empty as one would expect at this time of the morning, but then again, this was the Boulevard of Broken Dreams. There was always someone ambling aimlessly down the street trying to find lost aspirations

before packing up and heading back to Kansas. I could hear two men discussing something – probably in the cheap hotel across the street – over the intermittent stream of traffic. Down towards Sunset, the lone night man was washing the sidewalk in front of the YMCA with a garden hose. This was as quiet as Schrader got, though. When I came home a few hours earlier there had been quite a crowd in front of the Hollywood Athletic Club just down the street. Now, even the valets had gone home.

Jessica was late. By the time her maroon Chevy Chevette pulled around the corner, its left headlight flickering slightly, I had almost fallen back asleep on the iron gate. I walked out into the middle of the street to meet her, and she barely slowed to let me get the door open.

"You look like shit. Have you been drinking?"

I started to lean over for a kiss but I thought better of it – she'd smell me out in a minute. She had the heat cranked up all the way and she was dressed in several sweaters.

"I guess the ride over didn't mellow you out any."

"I got stopped."

I looked at her again. "For what?"

"I don't know. LAPD. He said it was the light. . . ."

"Well, you know a beautiful black girl riding around in a luxury car like this in the middle of the night, that in itself is practically a crime."

"Don't try to be funny."

"I'm sorry."

"You know better than that."

"I'm sorry, it's just –"

“What?”

“Nothin’.”

This wasn't going well at all. I guess that's to be expected to some degree. Me and Jess had been in a bit of a tiff since I dropped out of school.

“You could go to school and work,” she had said.

“But who's gonna pay my rent?”

“You could stay with me,” she then said cheerily. Well that was the beginning of it. There was no way I was gonna be able to tell her that I was not about to live with my woman without either offending her as my girlfriend or as a woman in general.

“Look baby, I know I've been kind of an asshole lately and —”

“Ellison, do you think it would be possible for you, for once in your life, to think of someone other than yourself for a second?”

And what's a man to say to that? I said nothing. I'm practical, if not political. She turned left on Sunset and headed for the Strip. Just after Gardner she slowed the car to a crawl and squinted at both sides of the street, paying almost no attention to the road. Out there on either sidewalk a few girls walked the beat. It was November, and a bit chilly at night, but these girls were decked out as if they were heading for the beach. One or two did have coats, but the rest seemed to be freezing — albeit nobly. Most of the girls were not too bad-looking — a few asses that had no business in Spandex here and there. There was one skinny and sickly looking white girl in a tight-pink dress that resembled the second skin of a light-red cat. I couldn't stand it any longer.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"Are you stone drunk? Who have we been talking about?"

"Melissa isn't going to be out here."

"Oh, yeah, where is she going to be?"

"You're not seriously thinking that she would show up here to trick, are you? I don't think Mel would hit the streets. And anyway this is the low-rent district. If Mel were tricking, she'd do it down past Crescent Heights. That's where the classier girls hang out."

"When did you get to be such an expert on where whores hang out?"

"Hey, I live here. I've driven this street to school and back everyday for the last three years, at every hour of the day and night. You see things."

"Sure." She was shaking her head, already formulating something in her mind that I was in no position to deal with. At least she seemed to believe me, as she picked up speed and headed to the "classier" side of the strip. There were fewer girls here but, just like I said, quality made up for quantity. I couldn't help but turn my head at a tall model-looking sister that was all leg and didn't mind showing it.

"We're looking for Melissa, remember?" Jessica slapped me on the shoulder.

"I'm looking! I thought I saw her back there," I lied.

"Yeah, I know what you thought you saw."

"Honey, you don't . . ."

"Don't 'honey' me."

With that, I shut up. This whole evening was going nowhere. My hangover had not eased up, the iced tea had not worked its magic yet, and Jess was in a mood that there was no cure for but time. I knew sure as shit that we weren't

going to find Melissa walking the strip on Sunset any more than you would have found Heidi Fliess out here hawking her ass. Jess had never been one to flirt with the seamier side of these mean city streets. She had met Melissa by responding to an ad for a roommate in the Daily Bruin while we were all undergrads. I was there when Jessica first came to see Mel's apartment, and the electricity that coursed between us that first day was enough to power a small sex factory – which, in fact, is exactly what it ended up doing.

“Is it . . . like that?”

“Yeah, *yeah*, that's it.”

Those were the sounds that accompanied Jess' pussy sliding up and down my dick that first night. A simple gold cross, a half-pulled up sweater, and two huge tits gently caressed my chest as she awkwardly tried to make herself come. Jessica had been overweight as a kid and didn't have nearly the sexual experience of someone like Melissa – but what she lacked in experience she made up for in enthusiasm.

Mel and I had had a study date that she'd never shown up for, and I had fallen asleep on the couch. I woke up to Jess' hand on one of the biggest hard-ons in history. The look in her eyes was not one of treachery or deceit, but of simple innocent lust and love, which I obliged by banging the fuck out of her till she fell asleep on top of me. Till she bounced back up when Mel's keys jangled in the door, that is. I didn't wake up till Mel had slammed the door to her room, but it wasn't long till the end. And the whole affair was only punctuated by the fact that Melissa was superparanoid about me leaving her for a sister anyway.

“You've got your piece up at the Big House – what else have you got to prove?”

she used to say. She was always saying smart-ass shit like that. We were good drinking buddies.

All that notwithstanding, I *had* been just a lousy cheat who couldn't control his dick and that was partly driving my desire to find Melissa this fine autumn morn. I still had something to make up to her, and maybe a nice act of chivalry would be just the ticket.

So Jess took her little maroon speedster twice down the whole strip, slowing at each corner to peer into the more dimly lit side streets, where some of the girls went to minimize their visibility to the cops. But as we approached, each girl would dutifully step out and pull back her coat or peel back her lips into a half smile/half snare and gaze intently into our cheap automobile. I could almost hear them wonder what the hell these two kids were doing out here in the middle of the night. And, truth be told, I wouldn't know what to tell them.

"Satisfied?" I asked, trying not to sound too 'I-told-you-so' with her.

Jess looked at me with that admixture of pity and disgust that only a woman can muster. My attempt to sound not too "I-told-you-so" came out sounding resoundingly like "I told you so, bitch."

Without another word, Jess turned up Highland and headed north. I knew we were going to the highway, and I didn't want to know where we were going from there. The rest of the drive went by in silence. We jumped on the 101 and glided into the wasteland of "Ghosttown L.A."

Now, if you're not from these parts, it's hard to describe the surreal vibe that pulses through downtown L.A. at this hour. After about 8pm on any given

night in this city, the downtown gentry is seemingly made up of two kinds of people – those who are there to see a show or concert, and those who live on the streets. I had lived in L.A. for three years before I'd met anyone who actually lived downtown – and there it was only a temporary loft in the Arts District. That's where we were headed now.

Chapter Two

When me and Melissa had dated my freshman year, her roommate was a big blustery Texan named Lola LaPlonica. And just like the Kinks song, one might actually have mistaken Lola for a man if he hadn't spent night after night hearing her moans of passion in a room next door for seven months. Lola was an Amazonian woman who had a husky voice and a penchant for Marlboro Reds and Mescal. She was all female for sure, the surreptitious glance I stole some mornings as she walked naked from her room to the bathroom notwithstanding.

Melissa always slept on her stomach rather than engaging in the traditional spoons position most women tended to favor with new boyfriends, and so one morning it was no problem for me to climb over her and gently place my ear on Lola's bathroom door. Over the sound of a running faucet I could tell that she was smacking the water against some part of her body, seemingly washing away the filth acquired the night before. She was muttering something unintelligible, but it became more pronounced the longer I stood there, my breath bouncing warmly and moistly back against my cheek. "You're a good

little girl aren't you?" she was muttering softly. After about a minute, my idyll was interrupted by a deep voice from Lola's bedroom.

"Can I help you?"

"Oh, no, I was just waiting to go." This one was a lot older than Lola's usual conquests. I wondered if he knew she was only 18.

"Is there something wrong with the other bathroom?"

"Oh no, it's just that Melissa was using – oh, looks like she's out now."

I went back to Melissa's bedroom, and as I lay back down next to her, I drifted back to sleep to the tune of the male lover detailing my voyeurism to my girlfriend's roommate.

"Yeah, that nigger was just sitting there with his ear to the door. I thought he was gonna start whacking off or something."

We were there – or, rather, here. Lola lived in a big warehouse-type thingie right on the outskirts of downtown proper. Jessica had the station tuned to the Beat while we were in the car, and now the silence outside was positively eerie. I walked over to her to keep her warm as we walked to the front gate, and I could feel her almost-perfect body freeze up.

I can't believe I had gotten so lucky with this sister. She had a dancer's body, all long lithe steely legs, and Vivica Fox's bustline. She had been really overweight as a kid (it took me four months to get her to show me pictures) and now she just wanted a fella who simply loved her for herself rather than for her measurements – for me, this was true. I would have loved Jessica if she was still 5'3' and 180 pounds. But, alas, she wasn't, and my libido and my friends – who got to hang around her sometimes and look at her – thanked me.

“Ellison, this doesn’t feel right. It’s completely silent.”

“Baby, it’s what, almost five in the morning? What is it supposed to feel like? It’s feels late, that’s what it feels like.”

“Okay, okay.”

“Let’s go up.”

The steps to the front gate hadn’t been cleaned in months, and whatever on the steps that wasn’t covered with shit reeked with the stench of rotting piss. Lola always could pick ‘em.

We had to ring several times, and the sound of Lola's voice on the answering machine brought back memories of me sitting up late with a bottle in their apartment pissing away the weekends with Melissa. It had been a long time ago, or at least it felt that way. Finally, a gruff voice picked up.

“Lola? This is Jessica Marchamps. Look, something happened to Melissa and I really need to speak with you.”

“Jessica? This can’t wait till morning? It’s really, really early.”

“I know sweetheart, but it’s very important. Please let me and Ellison up.”

A pause.

“Hey El.”

“Hey Red. Listen, it’s cold out here. Do we get some Southern hospitality or what?”

“Anything for you, stud,” she said dryly.

Jessica winced. I knew she was aching to make some remark as we got into the elevator, so I broke the tension first.

“Man, Melissa doesn’t need the Trust Fund with a mom and dad like you guys around.”

“Ellison, Melissa’s family has been really misunderstood. They’re really nice people, they just didn’t know how to show affection the way Mel needed it.”

“I guess.”

“And I wish you wouldn’t call them the Trust Fund. It always hurt Melissa when you would say that.”

Yeah, and I bet it didn’t help when her best friend jumped me on the couch one night while Melissa was out. Of course, it wasn’t like I was *just* a cheat. That wasn’t the first time Mel had flaked on me and I knew exactly what it was about – she was smoking crack with her friends in Bel-Air and since I wasn’t interested I wasn’t invited. As such, I’ve always told myself that the sight of me and Jes on the couch the next morning had nothing to do with Mel transitioning from casual cocaine smoker to a full-blown crackhead, but a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do to evade taking responsibility for his own actions.

Lola finally summoned the strength she needed to make it to the door and let us in, and she looked like death warmed over – nah, fuck that, she looked cold. She looked like death served cold. I hadn’t seen her in a couple of years, but this kind of change was one of those that you don’t even bring up because it’s so obvious. I mean, this wasn’t a matter of her “letting herself go.” Lola had obviously started to let herself go, lost control, and long ago given up the fight. To begin with, she was but a shade of the voluptuous sex bomb who was nothing but eyelashes and innuendo in the days of yesteryear. She had dropped about 50 pounds – weight she really didn’t have to lose – cut her hair into a Beatles bob, and had taken to wearing an obviously well-used pair of librarian’s glasses, presumably having eschewed contacts altogether.

She led us in and started some coffee, and I cleared away a spot for Jes and

me to sit. The fact that that was also no easy task stayed with me. I remembered how Lola had been almost obsessively clean when she lived with Melissa – and Melissa was no Messy Marvin by any means. How someone could change so much in two short years baffled the hell out of me. And then I heard her talk.

The static of the intercom downstairs hadn't picked it up, but Lola had completely lost every trace of her accent in these past two years. *How does someone completely lose an accent acquired over 18 years?* I asked myself, and decided to store the info for later. Jessica must have noticed. Of course, they had spoken infrequently . . . and they had only had lunch a couple of times over the past couple of years . . . and if the change was gradual – but this was too engrossing to ignore.

“So when's the last time you saw Mel, Lola?”

“Oh, it must have been . . . let's see, it couldn't have been more than . . . would you excuse me for a second?”

“Sure.”

The Changed One retreated to the powder room for a minute and I took the opportunity to case the joint. Essentially it was one big square room, with tall ceilings, and industrial sixteen-pane windows along one wall. By now you could see the early sun start to throw weak light onto the frosted glass. Lola had disappeared into a small doorway just beyond the stairs, which must have led to the bathroom.

I heard the faucet in the bathroom go on, and my mind flooded with a zillion images. Glancing up at Jessica, I was about to inquire into my confusion about Lola's change – and suddenly she was back.

“So Ellison, do you like it dark or light?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your coffee. Lemme guess, you like it dark.”

“No, I enjoy coffee with cream, thank you. And sugar.”

“I always got some sugar for you, loverboy.”

“Lola,” Jessica interjected, thankfully, “have you noticed whether or not Mel’s been acting strange lately?”

“Stranger than usual? No. As far as I know she’s been pretty happy. Since she got canned from the coffee shop, she’s been pretty excited about a couple of good prospects she’s gotten from some nice firms. And she managed to pilfer some pretty good java from that coffee place before she left. That’s why I have all this shit.” She revealed to us a cabinet full of exotic coffees. “I like Arabica best. Don’t know what it means, but the shit’s good,” she laughed.

“I don’t remember you being miss super-duper coffee fan back in the day, Lola,” I mentioned. “Did you get a jones for it one day and never look back or . . .”

“Yeah, that’s what I—you know, I’m sorry. Can you guys hold on for just one more second?”

“No problem.”

This time Jessica did make eye contact with me, if only for a dismissive “That’s Lola” shrug. I didn’t buy it. Again Lola re-emerged from the bathroom, this time seeming more agitated than before.

“Listen, you guys. I’ve really gotta catch some shut-eye before I have to go into work today. Maybe we could get together for lunch or something? I get off at one, you guys could come by the cafe if you want.”

“Oh, I actually have class till two,” Jessica said, “but if you wanted to get

together another . . . “

Jess never got to finish that sentence. Something dropped towards the back of the loft, either in the bathroom where Lola had been disappearing to or perhaps the bedroom above it. Lola's eyes flicked there and back, and her mouth became a flat line.

"Just a sec, OK?" she said, and headed back towards the bathroom.

"We're not interrupting anything important, are we?" I said before she got all the way through the messy living room. She stopped, turned, and without smiling, looked at me.

"You're here, aren't you?"

Then she was gone. I looked at Jessica. Confusion was written all over her face. I shrugged, trying to keep it casual, but already I was thinking of excuses I could tell Lola so I could walk into the bathroom. Jess leaned closer and whispered to me, "Do you think that could be Mel in there, and Lola's hiding her from us?"

I hadn't thought of that, but anything was possible. I decided to take a little look. Quietly I made my way through the living room, exactly following Lola's footsteps. As I came to the tall slit, I could hear voices whispering, but before I could get any further Lola stepped out of the bathroom and blocked my path. She squared her shoulders, looked me in the eye, and waited. The bullshit melted away at that moment, and I figured I'd better play it straight.

"Who's back there, Red?" I said, keeping my eyes low.

She didn't blink. "Nobody. Tell you what, stud, why don't you and I have a heart to heart at lunch? Right now I need my beauty sleep."

I gave her a second to change her mind. I was pretty sure she could sense

that I had heard her talking to somebody, and that I wasn't going to go away just like that. Especially if it was Mel in there. There's no way I was going to have spent the last two hours putting up with all this shit only to walk away when I was within a few feet of what Jessica had me running all over town for.

"Look, baby, I'm really sorry we got you up this early, but the thing is, Jess is *really* concerned about Mel. And I don't think she's gonna be willing to go away until we talk to her."

"You know El, frankly I don't give a fuck what Jessica's going to be willing to do. Melissa's not here, so why don't you guys go off and look for her?"

"Have you taken some speech classes or something?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing. Look, who's in the can?"

She stopped. I guess I put a little more weight into the tone of that last question than I had intended, and I could see her hairs bristle.

"Nobody. None of your fucking business, El. You're not my dad, so fuck off. Now."

I looked over my shoulder at Jessica. She seemed a little freaked by all this, but she wasn't having any part of it yet. Lola saw me waver and she took the moment of weakness to put her hand on my shoulder and escort me out. I took a step back, however, letting her follow me.

"Lola, please, if it's Mel, let me talk to her," Jessica started. "I just want to help. Let me help."

"It's not like that at all, Jessica. Trust me. Please." Lola took another couple of steps towards Jess, and at this point I was almost behind her. That's when I did what any self-respecting, hung-over, sleep-deprived, strung-out citizen

would do. I went straight to the bathroom door and yanked it open. Lola came back screaming behind me, flailing at my back with emaciated fists. Once the door was open we both stopped and stared into the empty bathroom. I looked at her, she looked at me, and I could see Jessica sneak up for a peek of her own out of the corner of my eye.

"Hit me again, bitch," I yelled at Lola, my ghetto starting to rise up.

"Um, listen El, I'm sorry. It's just been a really difficult time for me and . . . I'm sorry I hit you, but look, I told you . . ."

Of course, now I took her moment of weakness to step into the tiny room and yank back the shower curtain.

"No!" Lola screamed as she squeezed past me to the pint-sized tub. And there, shivering, covered with bruises, and naked save for a stained pink towel draped over his shoulder, was a middle-aged white guy. And not a very attractive guy, I might add. At his feet in the tub was a small pool of vomit. He looked up at me without seeing me.

"Mr. Atkins!" Jessica gasped behind me.

"Who is this guy?" I turned around.

"You can't tell anybody about this, okay Jess?" Lola was already speed-talking, "Jess, you have to promise me. Okay?"

"Do you know this guy?" I asked Jessica again.

"Mel's not here, okay? Now will you believe me? Will you two leave, please?"

"Ellison, come on." Jessica had her hand to her mouth. "I'm sorry, Lo. I'm sorry."

Lola had been shoving me hard, and I guess there was no point in resisting

because now Jessica was pulling on me, too. And soon we were back in the hallway, with Lola peering out the crack in the door whispering. "Forget this, okay? We'll talk later."

We rode the elevator down in silence.

As we drove back to my place, the downtown skyline was discerning itself from the light grey glow on the horizon. The air seemed colder than before and the sound of a diesel truck shifting gears could be heard from blocks away. I knew I wasn't going back to sleep today/tonight, and it was probably for the best. I had planned to go job-hunting, but probably would have spent it nursing my hangover if not for this little adventure. Despite the slight bit of insanity I had just witnessed, there was a sense about it that gave me a kind of optimism for the rest of the day. It's got to get better, right?

Chapter Three

The minute I got home I lay down on the bed and woke up around half past three in the afternoon. So much for getting a jump on the day.

After making myself some frozen burritos for breakfast, I decided I'd go and check out Melissa's old address in Boyle Heights in case someone there might have a clue as to where she's got to. When I got there, I was amazed by two things. One, what a shitbag it was, and Two, that I'd never been there before. Seems like once me and Jess started going out, Melissa just kinda fell off the map. She's back on the map now, though. In a big goddamned way. I unlatched the wire hanger that kept the "security" gate closed, and went to Mel's old unit. A

scruffy Chicano in his late 20s opened the door. The smell of weed almost knocked me out.

"Hello, I'm looking for Melissa Jackson."

"Sorry, homes. No one here by that name."

"Listen, if you're Julio, could you just help me out here? I think she's in trouble?"

"I don't give a fuck if that bitch is in trouble, nigga. You don't know me. What makes you think you can come to my house like we pahtnas?"

You betta watch who you callin' nigga, nigga. was the first thing that I thought. The second thing was that Julio had a point. In the hood *or* the barrio, it's bad form to show up at someone's house uninvited and start talking to them like you're buddies.

"Listen, *main*," I affected a *vato* accent, "I'm an old friend of Melissa's. I've got to find her as soon as possible."

"Old friend, hunh?" He looked me up and down. "She likes the brothers, don't she?" He directed that comment to someone inside the apartment. I heard a muffled chuckle from inside. I burned. "Yeah, well. Can you help me out or no?"

"Sorry, *main*." And he shut the door in my flushed face.

"Excuse me, did I hear you ask about Melissa?" I turned to see a grizzled white lady in her mid-50s talking to me through a dangling Virginia Slim. It needed ashing.

"Yeah. You knew her?"

"I know everybody. I run this dump. Is she really in trouble?"

"Yeah." Technically it was lying, but for all I knew it was the God's-honest truth.

"Come on into my apartment, I think she left a forwarding address."

"Thanks." I walked into witch-lady's apartment and was at first affronted by the mess, then the smell. She made no apologies. "Come here, dickums." The fattest cat in history came loping out of another room, and the landlady made stupid cat noises to it for a moment like I wasn't even there.

"You want something to drink, hon?"

"Excuse me?"

"You thirsty? I've got juice, lemonade, and a beer, if you'd like one."

"Oh, no thanks. I'm in a little bit of a hurry, so. . . "

"Too bad. I haven't had a hunk like you in my apartment in years."

Oh my god.

"Oh come on, I don't believe that for a minute."

"Hah! Well aren't you the sweet one. Can't fool me though, sweetheart. I been in front of a mirror lately."

Too bad for the mirror. I took a seat while she rifled through her old files, and looked around. I soon noticed that her apartment wasn't a mess, she was moving. Everything was in boxes and labeled. On top of a stack of books, I saw an old picture of what seemed to be the landlady in days past. She was actually pretty fuckin' hot. Time does not fuck around on a motherfucka, though. Livin' in L.A. probably didn't help much, either.

"Yon going somewhere?"

"Movin' to Arizona. Gettin' outta this shit heap. My sister-in-law tells me it's paradise."

"If it is, drop me a line, will ya?"

"Will do, sweet thing. Ah, here it is: Melissa Jackson, 4321 Berryman Avenue. I think it's in Palms."

I was familiar with the area. I'd lived in Palms for a year my second year at UCLA. The neighborhood Mel was in was famous for being the place where Snoop Dogg's bodyguard shot that guy in the early '90s.

"Thanks alot. You don't know how much you've helped."

"Maybe you can show your appreciation by coming back over for that drink sometime."

"I don't know if I got the stamina, baby. I think you might wear me out."

"Boy, you are a charmer. And you know what? You're right."

"Alright, well, thanks again."

"No problem." As I left I wondered if I was chasing down a wild goose. Right before I got on my bike, Julio called out to me from his balcony.

"Watch out for that bitch, homes. She's cold as ice."

"Hello?"

"Mom?"

"Ellison? Hey baby, how are you doin'? Sheritha, turn down that racket!"

"Sherrie's still into that loud stuff, hunh?"

"Boy, I don't know how she can sit up there in that room and listen to that noise all day. I almost wish she was listenin' to that 'bitch' and 'ho' nonsense."

"You're the one that put her in that private school with all those white girls."

"Don't start, Ellison."

"Sorry. Listen, I got your check."

“Oh you did? Good. I was worried with all those stories of those post office people with their sticky fingers.”

“Yeah, listen, I thought I told you I was gonna be okay this semester?”

“Yeah, I know you did Ellison, but I didn’t think a little extra could hurt. I still don’t understand how you’re gonna be able to pay tuition working at a part-time job.”

“Yeah but it’s a computer-programming job. They pay really well.”

“Well Ellison listen, you take the money and put it in your savings account for a rainy day. I don’t wanna be readin’ about you on the news hacking into some bank and fiddling with your account. I can afford it.”

“*Mom.*”

“Boy, you are just as proud as your father. Both of y’all thinkin’ you’re the Emperor Jones. And look what that got him.”

“Don’t start, please.”

“I’m sorry, baby,” she said now, laughing. “I promise I won’t send you anymore money.”

“You said that last month.”

“Ellison, don’t think I won’t hang up this phone, call my travel agent, book a flight out there, take a cab to your apartment, smack your smart mouth, and fly back the same day.”

“Sorry.”

“Now you deposit that check and make your mother happy.”

“Okay.”

“Or better yet, why don’t you take that nice young girl out to dinner. What’s her name, Melissa?”

“Jessica.”

“Jessica. Boy I can’t keep up with all your girlfriends.”

“I just have one.”

“This month. Okay well I don’t want you to run up your phone bill. Didn’t I tell you you could call me collect?”

“Well I thought that since you’d been having that problem with the phone company . . .”

“You let Evelyn Peters worry about her problems and you worry about Ellison.”

“Yes mom,” I said, but meant, “Yes ma’am”

“Okay, I love you, now gimme some sugar.”

“No!”

“Ellison Peters, I swear to God if I get hit by a bus tomorrow my last words will be, ‘I stepped off the curb because my big-shot son doesn’t love me.’”

“I swear to God you are the queen of drama.”

“Empress, baby. Smack,” she kissed into the mouthpiece.

Sigh. “Smack.”

“Bye, baby.”

“Bye, mom.”

The problem was, she couldn’t afford it. When my parents split up, my mom was too proud to ask for a lot of money from my pops because she didn’t wanna seem like one of those bitter ex-wives – especially since she was the one that ended it. Pops hadn’t been too happy the day she told him she was quitting her job to take up painting again. The arguments that followed only highlighted how much they had grown apart over the years. By the time I finished my first

year in school, dad wasn't even living at home anymore. But how he could sit by in the same town and watch her struggle like this, I'll never know. Too many years in Boston's meaner streets had stripped him of every ounce of honor when it came to women.

"Son, you can consider yourself lucky if you can find a woman who knows her way around the kitchen and can go 15 minutes without chattering about some fool thing," he'd say to me on cool New England nights on the outside stoop. "I got lucky with your mother. She's sensible and she's great with you kids."

Pops never said much about loving my moms. I guess that made it easier for him to go when she got sick of him complaining about her new life choices. And I guess that made it easier for me to stop calling home to have heart-to-hearts with his tired ass.

I thought I might take in a class today, so I packed up provisions and mounted my bike for a road trip to UCLA. Jes was scared that if I dropped out of school completely I was never gonna go back, so we made a deal. If I went to one class a week, at the end of the quarter she would let me perform certain acts that will remain nameless – suffice it to say, they will have a large impact on the use and distribution of her ass. So, I was a very excited and eager student.

It was heaven being able to dodge and weave between the panoply of fast sports-luxury cars and broken Datsuns that made up most Sunset Blvd. traffic going in and out of Beverly Hills. It was funny, sometimes, to think (sometimes) that many of the folks driving the battered wrecks would be washing the sports cars later today. In 25 short minutes, I was pulling up Westwood Boulevard, full

of zeal and zest for learning. I parked the bike at a rack by Murphy Hall and dug my co-ed gear in a window: low-slung backpack with water bottle, baseball cap, sweats, laptop. It was all gravy. I surreptitiously glanced at women I'd had innumerable affairs with before on the way to class. They always greeted me with the winsome look of a neglected bride. *I'll meet you in the next world soon, baby . . .*

I was a little early, so I unpacked my laptop and surfed a bit till the professor showed up. My stocks were down. More beef in the Middle East. Jessica was instant-messaging me.

HEY BABY, WHASSUP?

I WENT TO CLASS TODAY.

YOU GO, BOY. YOU FIND ANYTHING AT MEL'S?

I THINK I GOT A ADDRESS. MET HER CREEPY-ASS LANDLORD.

I MET SARAH ONCE. UGH. YOU COMIN OVER 2NITE?

7PM SHARP. GOTTA GO, TEACHER'S HERE. LOVE YOU, FREAK.

LOVE YOU, FREAK

There is nothing duller than a programming class. Seriously. And I will deny to my dying breath that that was the *only* reason I dropped out of college – but I cannot deny the effect hours of mind-numbing code instruction has had on me.

I got into computers because I saw a whole new way of communication coming. I saw things being done and ideas being spread like they never had before. What I didn't expect (ah, naivete!) was how rapidly the Technological Revolution would be consumed by the corporate sector. By my second quarter at UCLA, I could see the winds changing – within five years, the Internet would be

one big commercial for something. And this just held no interest for me at all. I wanted to be out there making changes, bringing the world together – not selling someone yet another fucking SUV.

The teacher assistants at UCLA thought they were doing us a favor by gearing all of their lectures towards commercial interests. So many departments at schools like this are so deluged with complaints from former students that they never learned anything practical that now it seemed like every class was Real World 101. I can't imagine how corny I must sound saying that I wanted to go to college for those noble reasons – the pursuit of knowledge, the exchange of ideas, inner-growth – yeah, I know, corny. I take these weekly classes always hoping that I'll be inspired by the lecture.

“Okay, so last time we were discussing how binary-based applications open up whole new web technologies for freelance design or starting your own web-based company. Most of the new software out there has simple ether-run base nets, but it's important we examine a few of the new ones coming out of San Jose . . . ”

I made it through 20 minutes, and then I was outtie. I had a cookie at North Campus, and then spent the rest of the afternoon channel-surfing and people-watching. I learned more in three hours than I had in all my classes that quarter combined.

I saw my boy Lorenzo as I was packing up.

“Whassup, playah?”

“Whaddup, Ren? What's goin' on, baby?”

“Chillin', man. Haven't seen you around too much.”

“Yeah, man, I think I'm taking this quarter off.”

“Then I shouldn’t see you around at all.”

“Yeah, I’m in negotiations with myself.”

“Word.”

Lorenzo leaned closer into me. And sniffed.

“The fuck are you doing?”

“Don’t get all salty, bitch. You know what I’m doing.”

I shut up. I knew what he was doing. I was just embarrassed I had ever made it necessary.

“This has nothing to do with drinking. I was even on time for class today. I’m just not as inspired as I used to be, you know?”

“You still with Jess?”

I smiled.

“What?”

“It’s just funny. Sometimes I count to see how long it takes before my boys start sniffing around asking about my girl.”

“Nigga, you know I’m your dog. I ain’t never gonna mess with something you got locked down. I’m just asking, you know?”

“Mm-hmm. I know.”

“With her fine ass.”

“See, man?”

“Make sure you knocking that shit out proper.”

“Aiiight, *nigga*.”

He got up, laughing. “I’m just playing with you, pahtna. I gotta run. Hit me up this week, we’ll go play ball.”

“Alright, Lorenzo.”

"Peace."

"Pacem."

"Hey, baby."

"Hey."

"How was class, today?"

I tried to imprison Jessica's mangy-ass cat with my motorcycle helmet, but she looked behind her in time and flew to the other side of the couch.

"Some knucklehead. I coulda taught that class."

"How long did you last?"

I smiled and sniffed. "Mmmm. Are you cooking artichokes? 'Cuz I *love* artichokes."

"*Ellison.*"

"Baby, I tried, baby." I hugged her for support. "But this kid was so lame I couldn't bear it." I put the back of my hand against my forehead for effect.

"How many times do we have to have this discussion? In order to give class a chance you have to give class a chance. You do not win our little wager if you keep leaving your classes early."

"What little wager?"

"Shut up, I hate you. It's embarrassing enough that we even have your stupid bet." She was laughing by now.

"Oh, you mean the Indabooty Wager?" I hugged her from behind and started making pelvic thrusts in her booty.

"Stop it!"

"Yes ma'am. The last thing I wanna do is give you any second thoughts

about that very sacred pact, ma'am."

"Ellison!"

"All parties involved are very eager to conclude our transaction, or your money back. In your ass."

"Okay, so, you really have to stop because now I'm getting horny."

"Yes, ma'am."

That night, I knocked that shit out proper.

Chapter Four

I left Jess' early-like and took the cool-morning post-coital ride back home. Too jazzed to eat, I mounted the steed early, sitting down at the computer to check on the job situation. There was no way I could let too much more time go by without doing something for cash. I made a mental note to myself to call Jess to see if she'd heard from Melissa. I was sure this whole thing would blow over pretty quickly. Women got all excited about this kind of shit, and then suddenly the next time you talk to them it's like, "What problem?" But I'd better ask her, or she'll remind me that I didn't.

I logged on to the 'Net and checked out some job-posting sites, then a couple of newsgroups that posted job notices for the LA area. I got a couple of leads, but one little ad seemed to stand out – although I'm sure every hacker in Southern California had probably already read it – "Federal agency looking for eager programmers for special assignments. \$50 an hour." There was a phone number in the 310 area code. I wondered what those special assignments were. One evening while I was at the computer lab at UCLA working late, I had heard

these two geeks talking about the fact that one of them had been recruited by the FBI, that the Feds are always looking for the brightest computer minds to do high-tech work on encryption and other technology. Sounded like bullshit, but it reminded me that that's something else I might want to try.

I checked out a couple of my favorite stomping grounds for chat, but nobody I knew was on-line. There was some kid I had exchanged ideas with from Japan, but I didn't feel like trying to figure out his weird "Engrish" today. I checked my email, and double-clicked an address I didn't recognize. It was a response from one of the web sites where I had posted my resume on-line. I scrawled that number and the number of the Federal Agency job on the back of an envelope, logged off, and got up to make myself some more iced tea. I debated whether I should call today or wait till morning, but I figured there's no time like the present.

The first number I tried was for the gov'ment job. It sounded too good to be true and it was – the ad was bogus. However, the Russian that answered the call said he did need a new mechanic. That's the Net for you. You never know what's bullshit and what's for real.

The second number was a detective agency, and this time I got a sweet-sounding secretary. I asked for Mr. Woodruff like the ad said. She asked me who was calling, so I gave her my name. In a moment I heard a loud nasal voice over a speaker phone. "Yes, this is Milton Woodruff, what can I do for you, Mr. Peters?"

"I'm calling about the ad. You're looking for a computer programmer who knows networks?"

"Yep, that's it. Do you know anything about them?"

"Sure, I just graduated from the UCLA computer-programming school," I lied.

"UCLA? I hear they've got quite an outfit. So you're on the West Side?"

"Yeah," I lied again.

"Well, why don't you come in and we'll sit down and talk? Do you know the address?"

"Yeah, it's in the ad. When do you want me to come in?"

"Well it's almost five, how about five thirty?"

"Today?"

"No time like the present."

"Right."

"I'll see you here in half an hour, Mr. Peters."

I thanked him, and started trying to figure out what I would wear. I might as well know if he likes me or not now – although this didn't give me much time to prepare any kind of bullshit resume. But of course, it sounded like this was a guy you could bullshit without one.

In less than ten minutes I was downstairs on my motorcycle and on my way to the Beverly Hills address. It turned out to be a one-story professional building on Durant Drive just behind where Santa Monica and Wilshire meet. It was a few doors down from the famed Creative Arts Agency, one of the biggest agencies in Hollywood. CAA represented people like Schwarzenegger, Eddie Murphy, and the like. I didn't see any famous people, though, which I guess was pretty normal. I had lived in LA for close to four years and had run into several places where they were making movies, but I never have been any closer to a star

than anybody else can get by paying eight bucks.

The white stucco building of the security agency had a very nondescript front door that led to a positively boring '70s decor hallway, right down to the shag rug. There was a plastic surgeon's office up front and an import/export company on the top floor. Suite 234, which was where I was to go, had a sign on the door that read "Sebream & Woodruff Investigative Services" on the door. I immediately conjured up images of Bogart and Mike Hammer.

When I pushed open the door, I was somewhat disappointed. The lady with the sweet voice was about 45 and was rumped, bespectacled, and, from the look on her face, not too happy to see me.

"May I help you?" she managed to get out.

"Yes, I just called. Ellison Peters? Mr. Woodruff asked me to come in."

She forced her face to smile, then she hit a button on the ancient intercom.

"Mr. Woodruff? That young man from the college is here to see you."

"Oh, yeah, send him in," came the staticky reply.

She indicated a door just off to the side of her desk and I smiled at her and went in.

I guess I should have expected it. Milton Woodruff was a tall barrel-chested man who wore cowboy boots, jeans with a huge gold rodeo buckle, a striped navy blue shirt, and, so help me God, a ten-gallon hat. He stood up and extended his hand, trying to keep the smile that was starting to fade on his lips when he saw me.

"Mr. Peters, right?"

"Yes, nice to meet you, Mr. Woodruff." I shook his gruff hand, trying to keep up my end of the machismo.

"You're, ah, different than how you sounded on the phone," he stammered. Yeah, I didn't sound black is what he wanted to say. It's a typical response I get from white people, like I'm supposed to sound "black" on the phone, calling everybody "brother" and saying "motherfucker" a lot. I got the feeling that this was going to be the shortest interview I had ever been to.

"Yeah, I pictured you, well, more nerdy. But I guess everybody's getting into computers nowadays, aren't they?"

"I guess so."

"So how'd you like that program over at U-cla?" I hated when people pronounced "UCLA" like that. Sort of smug and vaguely mocking. It was tired and that school was tired and I almost wish it didn't look so good on a resume.

"It was okay. There are some really talented professors in the program. A few of them are a bit arrogant for my tastes, but—"

"Whoa there, son, you sound like you knew what you were doin' more'n your professors."

"Well, I started out with computers pretty young, and I always had a knack for them, I guess. I think it has something to do with having an analytical mind. I understand how the machine works mechanically instead of being intimidated by all the flash and fireworks."

"Alright, I'll accept that. You ever had to set up one of them network deals, what do you call them? Intranet?"

"Intranet, yes. I've setup both ethernet-based intranets and base-10 intranets as well as Fibrechannel ones. It all depends on the amount of info you need to throughput per second —"

"Whoa, you're over my head now. I just want to make sure you can get us

into this, soup to nuts."

"I can do everything except for burn the custom bios chips, but I doubt that'd be necessary."

"Well, you don't have to worry doing anything too complicated – it's all Chinese to me anyway, and the only thing I know in Chinese is chop suey! Ha-ha!"

He managed to keep himself amused, anyway. I suddenly started thinking about *Blazing Saddles*, and if I was ever going to have to do an insane bit to try to get away from this redneck.

"Now," he leaned back in his chair, narrowing his eyes. Either he was going to talk turkey – money time – or he was preparing to fart. "What about, well, how do I put this? More, sensitive, and creative computer stuff, can you do any of that?"

"What?"

His face soured, and I was sure now he was going to fart. "You want me to say it? Alright, I'll say it – hackin'. Can you do any hackin'?"

Right, now I got it. This was an FBI sting operation and they were looking for all the idiots out there who would be willing to jump at the chance to take a crack at Citibank's vault again. So do I say, "Yes, no problem, I could make arrangements to deposit several million into your bank in the Caribbean," or do I play dumb and miss getting this job? The only thing that occurred to me is that I've got nothing to lose, and my services are going to cost these boys a lot of money.

"Hacking. Hmm. What did you say this position paid?"

He smiled. I guess candor is the best policy. Woodruff grinned, then he

slapped his desk, then he guffawed.

"Why don't you tell me?"

"Great," I get to set my own salary. So shit-talking rules the day. I had been doing these mental acrobatics on my bike on the way down; knowing that this is the question that will be asked of me, knowing that I hate the asking of it. Both because I see it as a test of my integrity versus my arrogance. I guess I knew which would pay off here.

"Sixty." I figured, that's a number and we could figure out from there what I meant by it. I wasn't even sure myself.

"Done." He didn't blink, the son-of-a-bitch. Speaking into his intercom, "Gladys, do you think you could send Julie in here?" And already I'm thinking, *I should have asked for more.*

"Well, Ellison — can I call you Ellison?"

"Course."

"Ellison, I don't think there's any need to beat around the bush. I'm sure it's pretty obvious that I'm very impressed with you. You're exactly what I'm looking for — just the right hint of arrogance."

He winked. I fidgeted.

"I think we're gonna be a good match."

"Well great Mr. Woodruff," I considered calling him Milton, but decided not to push my luck, "is there some sort of test I should take now or —"

"Oh no, son, you've got the job."

"Oh, I, uh, thank you, sir."

"Son, the only thanks I need is you doing your job," he said with a straight face, "and never callin' me, sir," he laughed. "Call me Dick."

A look of puzzlement crept across my face.

“A-Ha Ha! I’m just joshin’ ya, son. Ya get it? Dick? As in private dick! Ha-Ha-Ha! I never get sick of that one.”

“Sir, Julie’s in the vestibule.”

“Then you better get her out! Ha-Ha-Ha! I’m sorry Ellison, I don’t wanna scare you away, son. We actually do do real work around here. I’ll let Julie show you around, then you come in bright and early tomorrow and we’ll get to work.”

The very pretty Julie showed me around the offices of Sebream and Woodruff for the next few minutes – and that’s about as long as it took. As detective agencies went, this was probably about as B-level as it got. There were a couple of clerical people buzzing around a large main work area – all women – and two huge offices on one wall with a couple of doors here and there – one presumably a kitchen; and another a bathroom, co-ed. The only doors with locks were the one I had just left and the one in the corner – presumably Sebream’s.

“That’s Jim Sebream’s office,” Julie said, reading my thoughts. “He’s out on a case right now, but you’ll probably meet him tomorrow.”

“Cool.”

Julie led me to a plain brown door near the entrance way, and I got a chance to have a peek at her from behind. A decent specimen with cool café-colored skin, legs that were muscular, and a proportioned butt. Something about her screamed biracial to me, probably because of the vaguely hippie flair of her almost dreadlocks and turquoise earrings. A majority of the biracial people I’d met in LA were hippies. Don’t know what that’s about. The white suit-dress she was wearing didn’t flatter her figure, but then again, if Sebream was anything

like Woodruff, there probably wouldn't be too much point to attracting any attention to yourself in this office.

"Why don't we have you sit in here to fill out the W-4s and what-have-you," she said. "I'll be back in a few minutes to check on you."

"Okay." She closed the door to what seemed like some sort of small conference room. The room had no windows whatsoever. Faded starving-artist paintings offered views of a landscape with no trees and a flower arrangement that was composed of ten different shades of ugly. I tried to imagine the clients that passed through these rooms – were they greasy businessmen trying to get the dope on their thieving partners? Filthy rich pale-skinned trophy wives wondering if hubby has gone on to play the field? Paranoid suburbanites wanting to know what their irresponsible daughters were doing on weekends? I hoped I got to work on the case of some rich socialite. I'd show her what a New England boy could do, sho' nuff.

"How's everything?" Julie asked, exploding my thought bubble.

"Fine, fine. I'm finished."

She sat down next to me. "Wonderful." She smelled wonderful. "Alright, Ellison, I guess we'll see you tomorrow and I can show you your desk and who you'll be working with."

"Cool."

"Ellison is a beautiful name. Where'd you get a name like that?"

"My mom's a big literature buff."

"Mmm."

"You know, like the author, Ralph Ellison?" She seemed to be staring right through me. "*The Invisible Man*?"

“Mmm. Oh yes, I love him. Well I for one am looking forward to working with you, Ellison. I hope we can be friends.” She extended her hand and I shook it, firmly and innocuously. Women.

It was 8:30. The Lakers were leading by 8, but I knew they wouldn't cover the spread. The Spurs were just too good to get beat that bad, even with Robinson hurt. I shoulda known better. Duncan was playing out of his mind. Duncan was gonna cost me every last cent my mom had just sent me. As Shaq was getting all up in Malik Rose's ass, I got the distinct feeling that I heard a knock at the door.

"Hello?" I projected, walking towards the dark corner where the door was. I unbolted the lock and opened the door.

Nobody. I walked back to the tube, trying to think of somewhere cheap I could go out with Jess to celebrate my newfound job and the excellent wage I was earning; either sixty dollars an hour, or sixty grand a year. Or maybe Woodruff thought I meant something else – sixty bucks a day? Naw . . . Then, I looked up, and there she was, in the open doorway that I had forgotten to close. Melissa. She was so pale she glowed. She looked like hell, yet she still managed to look sexy. Those once perfect legs were skinny now, and there was a noticeable droop to her breasts. Her hair seemed to hang limply, and her eyes seemed to have shrunk. It was like somebody had made a color-bleached photocopy of a beautiful woman and brought it to life. She was wearing a miniskirt and a spandex top that showed she wasn't wearing a bra, but that she should have been.

"Jesus, Mel."

"Lola told me that you were looking for me, El. What's up?"

Then she tried to smile; couldn't quite make it; and dropped like a sack of pebbles, banging her head on the door with a loud CRACK.

Bathtubs Are for Lovers

This is fucking great. I can't even calculate on how many levels this situation is bad news. My white drug-addict hooker ex-girlfriend has just passed out, and is now possibly dead, in my apartment. It really breaks so many taboos that I feel like turning myself in to the NAACP, and then the police, and then God, and then let them throw whatever's left of me to the lions. But, for now, I had to chill and worry about Melissa for a minute.

I picked up my ex-ho and air-lifted her into the bathroom, her head nestled in the crook of my arm. I started a bath and started to undress her. Even through the caked-on make-up, even with the emaciation that only a well-maintained crack habit could afford, she was still a striking woman. As I felt a long-dead feeling arise, I noticed its effects straining on the inside of my sweatpants. This wouldn't do, I thought, and started to think about dead puppies and nuclear waste. It's a funny thing about ex-girlfriends. You always wonder if you could hit it again; if she was truly over you. Most of the time, of course, they were, but they'd usually do it again if the sex was good. And the sexual chemistry between Melissa and I had been great — Melissa could fuck like a thoroughbred. That was about the only thing I missed about her now that I was dating Jessica. All those years as a fat girl hadn't given Jess much practice, though she was certainly enthusiastic to get caught up. I placed poor Mel into the steaming hot bath —

head propped up so she wouldn't drown – and made my way over to make the phone call I knew had to be made immediately.

"Hey Sweet Cheeks."

"Hey Honey Buns."

"I have, um . . . news."

"News?"

"Yes. News. Information. Processable data."

"Ellison."

"Melissa's here."

Dead air.

"Jessica?"

"I'm here."

"I was just – "

"When were you gonna tell me?"

"When was I gonna – she just got here a few minutes ago! She muttered something about Lola and then – "

"She just got there?"

"Yeah, baby, she passed out and I put her in the tub – oh shit, I gotta go check on her."

"You're bathing her?!"

"Jess, I've seen her naked before. Can we worry about Melissa for a minute please?"

Sigh. "You're right, Ellison. I'm being very immature. I'll be over in a minute."

"She's in really bad shape, baby. I need you be to be together here."

"I know, I know. I'll be right over."

"OK, give me enough time to zip up."

"Oh. Oh, that's funny. You're a funny man for someone who's not gonna be getting any for a while."

"Now don't be like that."

"That's what I thought."

"See ya soon."

"Bye."

I jogged in to check on Melissa. She had come to and was even a little ornery.

"Hey, champ. Close my eyes for one minute and you got me naked, hunh?"

"You know I never could resist you, Mel."

"Yes. Well. Let's not get into that. I wanna apologize for . . . all this. I didn't mean to become your charity case all of a sudden."

"Melissa, you're not my charity case, I—"

"I know, I know, I know . . . I just—" Tears began to well up and her voice began to crack. But just barely. "I know my life isn't going too well right now and I know I probably look like shit and I—"

"Melissa . . ." There's nothing to say when a woman's started in on herself, so I just held her until I heard the reassuring jingle of Jessica's key's in my door.

"Well, it's weird, ya know? I mean, it all started innocently. Me and Julio would just get high before classes and it was really no big deal. I don't know when it got out of control exactly. I guess after I got the letter from school saying I had to apply for reinstatement by a certain date and instead I spent that whole

day getting high.

"And when Julio left me . . . I don't know. I just didn't feel like I was worth very much. At first I wasn't turning tricks. I would just meet men in bars. And I turned to older men 'cuz I knew they'd take care of me. I'd make them happy and they would give me presents or whatever. I just told myself I was sleeping around. And then one day I noticed that they were just leaving money on the dresser. I guess it makes sense considering how I must have come on to them. Why else would a pretty young blonde approach a 50-year-old account executive? They were probably just being polite by not asking me how much up front. I wonder what some of them would say if they knew that, in a way, they turned me into this. It didn't make any difference to me, though. I just wanted to get high. Before long, I'd ask them if they had any cash before we even did anything."

By the time Melissa stopped talking, Jessica's face was streaked with tears. I had to admit I almost welled up once or twice myself, except for one thing. It was small, barely perceptible, probably meant nothing, but it gave me back the healthy dose of cynicism that my mom told me to never lose. Halfway through her story, while I was handing Jessica a tissue, I noticed Melissa glance over into the next room. When I got up a second later, I followed Mel's line of sight to . . . my handy Casio alarm clock. Yeah, yeah, I know. It's nothing. Just a casual check on the time. But in the middle of a traumatic story? Talking to your best friend? When Melissa got up to leave I tried to get her to stay a while longer.

"Even better yet," Jessica had her own ideas, "why don't you stay with me for a while, Mel? I've got a fold-out, and we could spend a little time together."

"Thanks, Jess. I'd like that."

And before I could get a word in edgewise, they were both out the door, giggling about shopping.

Now, I have to admit, there is a part of me – a normal, very functional part – that felt a small degree of anxiety at the idea of my ex-girlfriend staying with my current one. But once upon a time they were best friends and, well, it was partly my fault that they no longer were. . . . I guess I just would have felt better if Melissa had stayed, well, with me. And not, as I would normally expect, for the obvious reasons – I honestly felt that Mel would be safe with me; that I could somehow keep the johns and the crack and the misery away.

Back when my grandma would read to me before my mom came home from work, she always used to laugh at the medieval stories with knights and dragons – especially the ones where the black knight would show up to challenge the hero in a big showdown.

"Even in fairy tales they got Negroes up to no good," she'd say.

"No grandma, he's not a black person, just his armor is black," I'd say in my innocence.

"Sure baby, whatever you say."

I didn't get it till many years later. It didn't matter that the story never called the black knights "Negroes," all kids like us heard was "black knight," and he was always up to no good. One summer, I spent my entire vacation in the library looking for a "good" black knight. But, with the possible exception of a couple of kind-hearted Moors (who were usually killed long before the story had concluded), the good black knight was nowhere to be found. I suppose that's why I didn't want Jess to take Melissa away. She was taking away my chance to

be the good black knight.

The next day at Milton Woodruff started out like any other. I was given another whirlwind tour of the joint by a girl named Laura and then she gave me a stack of assignments to finish by day's end.

"These are all of our cases for the past year. First we need a program where we can cross-reference by client, assignment, date, and whatever relevant data you think is, um, relevant."

"Cool. What then?"

"Oh. What then. I forgot about the exuberance of youth. Why don't you just go 'head and get started on that, and come back to me when you're done?"

"Okay."

"Is this your first job outta college?"

"Yeah . . . "

"Howdja like You-cla?"

Burn.

"Fine. It had its moments. Mostly pretentious people trying not to be pretentious."

"Gotcha."

"Where'd you go to school?"

"Oh. I came to work here straight out of Santa Monica College. It's a pretty cool job. And they pay well."

"Yeah, Mr. Woodruff's as generous as he wants to be, ain't he?"

"Yeah, but . . . he knows when to be and when not to be."

"Right, right."

"So, uh, you wanna get some lunch or somethin' later? I can show you all the places to eat around here."

"Cool. Just lemme know when you wanna go."

"I'll do that. Lookin' forward to workin' with you, Ellison."

"Me too, Laura."

I smiled. It was the polite thing to do. Laura flirted a bit, not as much as Julie from the day before, but she liked me. Not my type, though. A little, uh, mature, and a little too holier-than-thou. She'd learn, though.

The first thing I did was set up a cross-referencing database with all of S&W's cases over the past year. There was some pretty freaky shit these guys had gotten into. I must have spent an hour poring over the case of the transvestite who was trying get custody of his daughter and wanted to dig up dirt on the mom. Dreams *can* come true – turned out she was an accountant who had been embezzling thousands of dollars from her company's coffers. S&W gave her up and she was summarily sent to the hoosegow. Now the little girl could have both a mommy and a daddy in one. America the beautiful.

Laura took me to Chinese for lunch. It was an authentic little joint in the mid-Wilshire district, the kind of place that actually had the ducks hanging up in the window outside.

"So how'd you hear about this job?" Laura asked innocently.

"The Net. Seemed like a good opportunity, and I really needed the cash, so . . ."

"Mmm. Well it's a good bunch of people, and the boss treats you well."

"Yeah, Woodruff seems like a nice guy. A little . . . eccentric, maybe."

"How do you mean?"

"Well I just mean the whole cowboy thing and everything."

"Mr. Woodruff might act a little different than you and me, but he's a good man. Don't you think it's a little early to be passing judgment on people?"

Da-yum!

"I didn't mean anything by it, I was just, uh . . . "

"You were just, uh, nothing."

It was at that point that I was wondering if this would turn out to be the longest lunch of my life.

"So, you got a girlfriend?"

What?! "Excuse me?"

"A girlfriend. A sweetheart. A ball and chain."

"Uh, yeah, Jessica. She's a dancer."

"I bet she's really pretty."

"Some have said so."

"I'm married with a little girl. Rayanne. My husband's in real estate."

"What's his name?"

"I forget. So, are you gonna go on any assignments with Sebream?" she asked excitedly.

"Um, I don't think so. I haven't met him yet. But I think I was just hired to do the computer stuff. Doesn't Woodruff go on assignments?"

"Not so much anymore. He's got a bad back, and he can't go in for much action. The last guy tha – nevermind."

"The last guy?"

"Forget I said anything. Put your best foot into the future, I always say. Cheers." She held out her glass of white zin to me, motioning at my bottle of

Kirin.

"Cheers."

When we got back to the office, Milton Woodruff was in his office, feet up on the desk, talking LOUDLY on the phone.

"I don't give a fuck what your accountant said, we had a deal. I am not in the business of doing goddamn charity work. When you gave me this case you said I would get a bonus if I dug up something that could get your client's case thrown out of court. Now if semen on the hairbrush isn't incriminating evidence, I don't know what is. Get your act together, Bob. Fax over your account info within the hour or you're not gonna have to do much investigating to figure where I've stuck that goddamn hairbrush!"

Damn. I looked around the office and everyone was acting as if this kind of tirade was an everyday occurrence.

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it," Julie said, sneaking up behind me. This bitch was getting eerie with that telepathic shit.

I looked back to reply. "I hope so because —"

"Hey, you the new guy?" And just like that, Jim Sebream was standing in front of me as large as life. This was a guy who gave new meaning to the term *hard-boiled*. He was a little shorter than me, but stocky and broad shouldered. He made no effort to cover either a quickly balding scalp but he was otherwise meticulously groomed. I wouldn't have noticed this sort of thing except his clothes looked like he had just fished them out of a "Bad Taste Celebration" bargain basket. I looked back to Julie for some reassurance, but she had disappeared just as stealthily as she had come.

"Yeah."

"You ready to go on an assignment?"

"Assignment? I thought I was only gonna handle computer –"

"Yeah, yeah. Get your coat, we might be gone the rest of the day. I'll take you home when you're off."

Minutes later, I was riding shotgun in James T. Sebrean's drop-top '84 Chevy Caprice. It was sea-green and actually wasn't a bad car to tool around in, considering the fact that it was the LAPD's ride of choice.

"I find it strikes fear into the heart of evildoers when I cruise up in LAPD standard issue. They figure I'm more legit."

"You were on the force?"

"Me? Naw. Couldn't pass the physical. Got what they call an arrhythmic heart."

"Jesus. You take medication?"

"Only when I wanna breathe. Someone in your family got arrhythmia?"

"No, there was an old ballplayer, Hank Gaithers. Died from it on the court."

"That's right. I keep forgetting about that kid. Mean rebounder."

"Led the nation in scoring and rebounds."

"And look what it got him."

Whoa. Guess there's not a lot of sympathy among folks with bad tickers. Before I knew it, we were in Baldwin Vista, parked across the street from a little pink stucco home nestled between two identical stucco homes, one green, one purple.

"Damn, when do the Huxtables get home?" I smirked.

"Oh, this isn't family hour, kid. You see that black Saab parked down the

street? That car is owned by the best friend of the guy that owns that pink house. And right now the best friend is making a deposit into his best friend's wife's account."

"Hmm, real soap opera, hunh?"

"You'd think so, except, you see that red Lexus out front? That's the husband's. By now his pants should be around his ankles and his flag raised."

"He's spyin' on 'em?"

"If you can call it that. Those three have a little arrangement. They do this every Tuesday."

"So who hired us?"

"The best friend's wife. One day she noticed a stain on the back of her husband's pants. The old fart came on his buddy's pants and no one even noticed! This case is gonna pay for a new pacemaker for your partner."

I was fast coming to the conclusion that I would be telling stories about my days working at Sebrean & Woodruff to my grandkids.

When Sebrean took me home, the only thing I wanted to do was take a shower, surf for an hour or two, and watch some hoops. I got through half a shower, when I heard a bump in my living room.

"Who's there?" I said, grabbing a towel and stepping out of the bathroom.

"FTD."

"FT – ?" *CRACK!* A well-placed right sent me sprawling into my bedroom. I rushed to stand, but before I could get my balance, a 6'3" bald brute moved amazingly quick over to me and gave me a backhand that sent me flying into my dresser.

"What the hell? What're you doing in my house?" I looked around to find something to hit him with, but a right underhand to the gut shut my eyes for the next five seconds.

"This is a message — "

A roundhouse to the jaw

" — from some friends — "

A shove into the wall, banging my head on my Bearden print.

" — of Melissa Jackson — "

an open-handed pimp slap

"Tell Woodruff that you're off the case, and that alot worse is gonna happen to the next one of his cronies he sends out lookin' for her. Good day."

Through teary eyes, I watched the thug step over some laundry I hadn't folded yet.

"And straighten this place up, will ya? How do you expect to ever get a girlfriend livin' in a sty like this?"

And with that, he tidily closed the door behind him. I made my way into the kitchen to look for some ice to put on every part of my body that hurt, but I only had one full tray cuz I had forgotten to fill the other. I put some into a kitchen towel and banged the towel on the counter to break up the cubes. As I applied the soothing cold to my chin and cheek, I dialed Jessica's number.

"Jessica, it's me. Could you come over here, please?"

"Oh my God, Ellison!"

"Yeah."

"Who did this?"

"I don't know, Jessica."

"Well, what did he look like?"

"He looked like a huge fist in my eye, that's what he looked like."

"How can you make jokes right now, Ellison? You've been assaulted!"

"How can I not make jokes, Jessica? Some stranger just walked into my home – into my own home – and proceeded to beat my ass. I've gotta make jokes, baby. I've gotta make jokes `cuz if I don't I'm gonna go out and kill somebody."

"It's okay, baby. It's okay."

I didn't hear whatever else she said, because I had buried my face into her shoulder and launched a few tears of shock and pain into her blouse. I did notice, though, when she cradled my head in her arms, kissed me, took off her clothes, and made the sweetest, most tender love to me that I had had in a minute. My girl sure knows the right thing to say at the right time.

Chapter Six

"Son, I don't know what you're talking about and I'll thank you to lower your voice in my office."

"First of all, don't call me 'son.' Second of all, I don't give a fuck who knows what kind of outfit you're running here. Maybe I should tell everyone in your office they're in danger of having some asshole come into their home and beat the living shit out of them!"

People in the office now started peeking their heads over their cubicles to try and figure out what the new kid was talking about. Milton Woodruff slowly pushed back from his desk with a look that could freeze water. He seemed to use

every ounce of self-control to walk over to his door, close it gently, and then swing around to sit on his desk, facing me. "Mr. Peters," the good ole boy facade was gone now, "I am going to excuse that outburst because I know you are very upset. Believe it or not, I've had my share of . . . run-ins with these types of people. They're hired help, and their job is to make you think they can terrorize you whenever they please. That, however, does not have to be the case.

Woodruff must've seen the look of confusion on my face.

"You haven't put it all together yet, have you? I was like you once – the only way I knew how to solve a problem was to get in as many faces as possible until someone came clean. The only problem with that particular methodology," he leaned in real close now, "Is that you usually end up getting your face kicked in a few times before you find all your answers."

And for the first time since getting my face kicked in yesterday, I actually started using my head. I had spent the night at Jessica's, afraid to go home. When I woke up, the only thing that was in my head was giving Woodruff an excuse to have me knock his redneck ass out. But now, as he really laid it on the line, I realized this guy might actually know what the hell he was talking about. I was starting to believe that under all the Southern posturing, there was actually a mind there, one that seemed to be genuinely interested in getting to the bottom of things. My mom always said that my biggest fault was sometimes not knowing my friends from my enemies. I decided to hear the guy out. I could always whoop up on that ass later.

"Now, it seems to me you have two options. One, you can leave here believing my agency is part of some conspiracy to first hire and then rough up

young computer experts. It's an interesting way of doing business, but you'd have to admit it's a lot of trouble to go to considering the payoff."

Smartass.

"What," I said through still partially swollen lips, "is number two?"

"Think for a second, Mr. Peters. If indeed I really don't have any idea what's going on here, what better job is there for you to have right now? You work for a detective agency! I would urge you to ask around and find whether or not Sebrean & Woodruff takes care of their own. When this fella came into your house, as far as I'm concerned he came into my office. And I don't take kindly to unwelcome guests. Take the day, Ellison. Next time you come in here, we'll start from a clean slate."

"Julie, you got lunch plans?"

"Ellison, it's only ten-thir – " I must have been a sight to see, because as soon as Julie looked up into my eyes, she didn't say another word. She grabbed her purse, checked out with our receptionist, and gestured towards the elevators, giving me a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder before we left the office.

"Julie, I gotta know what the story is with this company. In two days I've been beaten, chastised, and apparently lied to about what exactly I'm gonna be doing for you guys. I need some answers, Julie, and you seem to be the only one around here from Earth."

Julie nervously bit her lip, and played with her California field greens. And for the first time, I noticed a hardness in her expression. When I first met her, I dismissed her as some sort of flower-powered black hippie, the type who never

actually had any real interaction with the people they were always fighting for. You can always tell the type. The downtrodden hold a strange fascination for them until they get a real taste of oppression – and that's usually as long as the love affair lasts. But I was seeing something new here. I don't know why, but something told me her journey hadn't been so easy. I decided I'd better stop trying to bully her, cuz I didn't think it was gonna get me far.

"Julie, look. I'm scared outta my mind. I've never been in real trouble before. I'm normally not like this. I consider myself a pretty together person. But I'm completely lost. What's the deal with Woodruff? Can he be trusted?"

At that point Julie looked up into my eyes and I could've sworn I was seeing her for the very first time. That hardness I'd sensed hadn't been imagined – and it looked like I'd just forced the door open.

"Can you trust Milton Woodruff?" she seemed to be smirking now. "Well, I can't really answer that for you but I can tell you a bit about him." She wiped her mouth and signaled to the waitress for more coffee. "He'd kill me if he knew I was telling you this. "

"That's a figure of speech, right?" She looked confused before noticing my smile.

"Wha – Oh, yeah," she said, her eyes brightening a bit, "No, that's a total figure of speech. He'd never do anything to hurt me."

"You in particular?"

"Mostly me. You didn't know? Mr. Woodruff is my father."

By the time I crossed La Cienega, my mind was swimming. What a goddamn saga. Woodruff had found Julie on the streets of Hollywood when she

was a 13-year-old prostitute. She had run away from an abusive stepfather in Kansas, of all places, and one of Woodruff's investigations had abruptly ended with her pimp's Bowie knife shoved in his own throat, courtesy of the a young Woodruff. Woodruff had wanted to foist Julie over to child services, but my girl was an obstinate little rugrat. She figured that if Woodruff had rid her of her only means of support, she was his responsibility now. He thought she'd eventually be turned off by his unapologetically bachelor lifestyle, but after a year he gave up the fight and adopted her – and along the way found an untapped yearning for fatherhood. When Julie graduated from Cal-State L.A., she went to work for her pops' firm as his number-one assistant and all-around do-everything girl. I wouldn't be surprised if they had a butler named Alfred. She was, in all things, completely convinced I could trust him.

When I got home, I started to try and put this puzzle together. The thug had given me a warning for Sebream, but he had mentioned Melissa, a case that S&W had nothing to do with. This didn't make any sense. Why would this guy think I was looking for Melissa for S&W when I started working there two days later? I headed over to Jess' house as soon as I had gotten out of the shower.

"Jess? It's me. Let me up."

Bzzzzz

"Hey sweetie, how are you feeling?"

"A little better. Say, where's Melle Mel?"

Two mistakes here: One, I asked about my ex-girlfriend before I had asked how my current girlfriend was doing. Second, I'd called her the pet nickname I had for her when we were going out. The hurt look in Jess' eyes let me know she hadn't missed either flub.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. How are you."

"I'm fine. Why do you need to see Melissa?"

"Some foul shit is going on with this new detective agency I'm working for and I think Mel's the key."

"What's the scoop?" She seemed genuinely concerned. Now, I had two options. One, I say "I'll tell you later," never do, and keep her out of the loop in case this shits gets really hectic. Two, I tell her, she insists on tagging along, and she generally bogs down whatever momentum I've got going. My decision turns out to be a big mistake.

"I'll tell you later. I don't wanna involve you in this unless I have to. I don't want some asshole coming in here and trying to hurt you. Once I find Melissa, I'm sure this mess will clear itself up."

Of course, I was sure of no such thing. But Jess respected my wishes and I think the empty threat of some thug coming to her door made it easier for her to.

"She's not here. When I woke up this morning she was gone. She left a note, though."

Dear Jess,

Thanks for everything. You are a lifesaver. Had to cut out early this morning. I've got a job interview ! Call ya later,

M

"A job interview. When did she go on a job hunt?"

"I don't know. She was on the phone all day yesterday, though. I figured she was getting back in touch with old friends, but maybe she was doing something productive."

"Maybe."

Luck must've decided to tag along with me from the East Side, because Melissa was walking out of her apartment in Palms just as I was walking up.

"What's up, hot thing?" I said, trying to sound casual. She looked at me as if I was about to smack her. Which made me think I should have a reason to.

"Ellison! Hey. I didn't know you knew my address. Um, listen, I was on my way out."

"Yeah, well, it's important, Mel."

"It's really not a good time, Ellison. I'm late for a job interview."

"Another one? Wow, your prospects are piling up, hunh?"

The look she gave verified that she didn't know that I had seen Jess' letter. The problem is, I never could figure out when Mel was handing me a load of shit. I flipped a coin in my head. Tails, she lost.

"Melissa," I grabbed her arm, "enough lies. I don't know if you get your kicks from hurting people that care about you, but I got my ass kicked for my efforts yesterday, and I mean to find out why."

"You *what*? Oh my god. Come inside."

Her apartment was a postage stamp, but at least it was her own – which meant no more smart-ass *vatos* I had to deal with. I sat down on her couch and opened up her fridge. I grabbed a beer, sat back, and she let me have it.

"By the way, Ellison, I do not appreciate being manhandled by you or anyone. You know that."

She was right. I did.

"Oh, and also, who the hell do you think you are talking to me about hurting people who care about you?"

I knew I'd pushed my luck with that one, but I was playing the odds. Tails, I lost.

"When you and Jess started dating I was totally the understanding friend, and you guys shut me out of both of your lives. Now I'm sorry you got beat up, but I can assure you it had nothing to do with me."

"Mel, the guy mentioned your name."

"What happened?"

I told her the whole story and she got very agitated the more I told. When I got to the part about the guy mentioning her name she rolled her eyes, but she was far more intrigued by my new job.

"When did you start working there?"

"Yesterday. Are you familiar with the agency?"

"Um, listen. I have to make a call. Excuse me."

She went into the bathroom, and then turned the water on so I couldn't overhear. I heard her voice rising a few times, though. And my name was mentioned at least twice. When she came out, she seemed even more agitated than she was when she went in.

"Listen El, I'm gonna get to the bottom of this, but I have to ask you to trust me."

"Melissa?"

"I know it's gonna be hard, Mr. King of Control, but you're gonna have to come off your noble steed sooner or later. Where are you staying?"

"I don't know. Probably Jess'. Why don't you just leave messages on my machine and I'll check them."

"Alright. Take care, Peters."

I decided to trust her. Life of iniquity aside, my ex-girlfriend was a strong, intelligent, driven woman. I knew she could get me some answers if she really wanted to, so I kept out a sliver of hope that she still cared for me as much as she once did.

Chapter Seven

"C'mon, kid. I need your help on this one."

My second day at Sebream and Woodruff was much like my first one. After about an hour of doing what I was actually hired for, Jim Sebream scooped me up and took me on one of his ridealongs. Woodruff had assured me that he was making my case, the Case of the Mysterious Guy Kicking My Ass, a top priority, so I felt a little better about giving something back to the company.

"Heard about what happened to you," Sebream started in. "Bad break. You look okay, though. A mug like yours could take a few shots and still look better'n mine."

I snickered. This guy was growing on me. Something told me I could trust him, so I decided to rely on my instincts instead of keeping him at arm's length.

"Yeah. Scared the shit outta me. Never had anything like that happen before, ya know?"

"Yeah. I once had an angry husband take a cheap shot at me in front of my own apartment. The crud actually tailed me from work. How's that for a switch? Had to get my tooth capped."

"What happened to him?"

"Whudduyou think happened to him? I called the cops. They picked him up and I haven't heard from the guy since. I've moved since then, though. And I watch my rearview mirror more often now. Which reminds me, have you filed a police report yet?"

"No."

"Well why the hell not? I thought you went to college."

It was a good damn question. And truth be told, I didn't really have a reason. I guess it just comes down to the basic facts: I don't trust cops. A black man in L.A. telling them he'd got assaulted in his own home? I figured they'd try and plant some drugs in my apartment to make the complaint go away. I knew it didn't make any rational sense, but I also knew, in this town, it made perfect sense.

"Yeah, I'm gonna get around to it," I lied.

"Hell, kid, it's your life. One thing I know though is the longer you go without reporting stuff like this, the less likely you are to ever report it."

"Like battered women, hunh?"

"Exactly."

"So where we goin' today?"

"Some fancy-schmancy high-tech corporation. The board of directors has asked us to make sure their CEO is an alright guy. Corporate image and all that."

"Funny I've never heard about that before, but it makes perfect sense I guess."

"Kid, you don't know half of what you ain't heard of before."

Sebream's hooptie pulled into the parking garage of a high-rise in Westwood. He told the guard he was visiting a "Mr. Kline," and brotherman just waved us right on through. Sebream's been doing his homework. Rent-A-Cops only know the bigwigs by name.

"So how're we gonna spy on this guy in the middle of the day?"

"There's a utility closet right next to his office. I'm gonna install a minicamera through the wall."

"It seems so easy. Most of these places have so many doors with access codes on them you can't get anywhere without knowing the secret password."

"That's where you come in, Circuithead."

I knew there was a reason I hadn't had a good feeling about this. So this is what it has come down to – high-tech espionage. Sebream's idea was that I use one of those "fancy-schmancy" lock pick programs to gain access to the utility closet. Problem was, it wasn't nearly that simple. The only programs of any use in situations like these aren't "lock-pick" programs, they're random-number sequencers – and they took skill to use; a lot more than I had had creating database enablers at "YOU-cla."

"Jim, I don't know if I can do this."

"Fine time for you to tell me now, kid. We're already here and I think the next shift comes on in ten minutes. "

"But Jim, I had no idea we were gonna — "

"Ellison, this isn't one of your institute-of-higher-learning exercises. This is the Real World. Now we went to a lot of trouble to find you and — oh, shit."

"What? WHAT?"

"Our target. He's coming down the hall. I'm gonna have to do some undercover work later on in this investigation and I can't let him get a good look at me. Talk to me about something electronic."

"What?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean, Rodney," Sebrean began in a loud voice, "I'll go check on the third floor to see if we have that kind of adaptor." And he was gone. And just like that, it was me, standing next to the utility closet of some office building I had no business being in, holding my laptop in one hand and my own guts in the other as the CEO of the company comes walking down the hall towards his office, right next door to said utility closet.

All at once, a million thoughts came flooding into my head. Is this what I came to California for? To be some half-assed corporate spy? How would that have gone over with my mom? *Yeah, mom, I figure in about three or four years I'll be breaking into some of the largest corporations in town. Literally.* No. That wouldn't have gone over too well at all. How did I get into this mess? For a split second I considered doing an about face, heading for the elevator, catching a cab home, closing my bank account, and buying a coach ticket back to New England. But something made me stay. At that moment, something welled up inside me — pride, excitement, immaturity, I don't know — and I did something that's come easy to the hustlers of my people for over two hundred years. I bullshitted.

"Excuse me. Do you work here?"

"Uh, yeah, " I said exasperatingly. "We're trying to get the new codes on these access doors synchronized but you people are gonna have to stop creating new codes."

"Excuse me?"

"Well it's obvious some a-hole's been jimmying with the system, creating new security overrides and PIN numbers. My boss told me to tell you people that we're not gonna be able to keep coming up here and cleaning after you. Med-Cor's a great client but we don't have the manpower or quite frankly the inclination to — "

"Listen, I'm not the person you need to be speaking to. Why don't you go to the seventh floor and speak to one of the tech-support reps? I'm just a working stiff like you, buddy," he said with a smile.

"Uhh . . . alright. I'll just finish with the locks on this floor and then my boss and whoever's in charge over there are gonna have to have a real sit-down. "

"Sounds like a plan."

And with that, the CEO of Med-Cor went into his office and shut his door tight, hopefully to forget this encounter by mid-morning latté. Almost immediately, Jim Sebream stepped out of one of the offices. I hadn't noticed where he had gone, and obviously Mr. Big-Wig hadn't either.

"You were in there the whole time?"

"Nice job of keeping your cool, kid. That was just the kind of mindless drivel that people like him don't wanna be bothered with. I bet you could come right back here tomorrow and he wouldn't even remember you."

"Yeah, well, I hope neither one of us are gonna have to worry about that again. Why'd you leave me high and dry?"

"I told you, kid, I couldn't have him get a good look at my face. When I start the meat of my investigation, I'm gonna be tailing him, hanging out at his bars. I have to wait as long as possible before he starts to notice that he's been seeing me around."

"Alright, whatever you say, man. Let's just get this done and get the hell outta here."

"No problem, kid. I think I found another way into this utility closet."

I followed Sebream into the office he had just come out of and around the corner and on the far wall of the private washroom was a small door leading. . . guess where?

"Gimme a hand with this, will ya, kid?" I stopped looking out for passersby long enough to go over and help Sebream. We tugged and tugged until the door came screeching open.

"Why don't you jump on this suit's computer and see if you can get into Kline's e-mail. It shouldn't be too hard."

It wasn't. Corporate email accounts are the easiest to get into because no one trusts anyone enough to not install at least a couple of passkeys into the system. If they have an inkling someone's up to no good, they can get into his correspondence and easily confirm or deny.

"Jesus, Jim. Why are we tracking this guy, again?"

"They just wanna work up a personality profile, make sure they haven't hired a freak. Their last CEO died in his sleep and this guy was the result of a nationwide manhunt. Used to run the East Coast corporate office of Disney."

"I smell a rat."

"Very funny, kid"

"What a Mickey Mouse outfit this joint is."

"Alright."

"This job really cheeses me off sometimes."

"Alright already! Did you find anything?"

"I found something, alright. Messages from a wipemeraw@aol.com, a pussykat.net, a darknystress@hotmail.com. He tried to erase them but I found the file markers."

"You're kidding me."

"I couldn't make up some freaky-ass shit like that."

"Well, go ahead and download all his mail in the past month. We'll sort it out back at the office. Are you almost done in there?"

"Yep." But as Jim came out of the office, a shadow appeared right behind the office door.

"Mr. Guzman? Mr. Guzman are you in here?" I looked at Jim in a panic. He put his finger over his lips as if to shoosh me, but my body wasn't havin' it. No sooner did I stand up than I knocked Mr. Guzman's picture of his lovely wife and three kids off his desk and into his very noisy trash can. The door came open with a crack as it hit the adjacent wall, and guess who I should feast my eyes on but the hulking brute from my apartment a few nights ago. As soon as we made eye contact, I knew that he'd recognized me.

"Jim. . . "

"Yeah, listen, maintenance sent us up here to do some work on the air conditioning system, but it's gonna take a lot more work than we — "

"Jim. . . "

"If you could just go down to the second floor and tell them we'll be a little longer than we'd - "

"Jim!"

"What?"

"Oh, nevermind."

If it ever becomes a matter of public record, that's when I swung. Not when the thug went for his holster, not after he radioed for help, and certainly not after he'd had all the exits in the building sealed. That came later. No, I swung before Muscles could get his bearings, and I figure that saved our lives. I never knew how devastating a sucker punch could be when you planned on taking it. Like, usually they're spontaneous, a way to get out of a jam. But as soon as that door swung open, I started positioning myself in a way so I'd have leverage behind my blow. I had leverage, alright. Once I'd struck, the guy's nose erupted in a fountain of blood, and he was almost unconscious before he hit the floor.

"What the hell are you doing, kid?!"

"I'll explain later. Help me drag him into the office."

"You realize this entire investigation has been compromised now? When he wakes up - "

"Jim, do you think I would have done this if I hadn't had a good reason? Now help me carry this asshole into this office. I'll explain everything later.

Los Angeles has a funny haze to it at sunset. Because of all the smog, the light in the city looks artificial; almost as if, ironically, everything was being filmed on a movie set.

"You got anymore napkins?"

From the Sunset Grill in Hollywood, sometimes you can get a pretty cool view of the West Hollywood skyline. Most of the time, though, you just see hookers.

“Yeah . . .” Jim said reaching into his bag, fishing out a napkin. Before he gave it to me, though, he started in again with the third degree.

“So you knew for sure this guy recognized you?”

“No, I don’t know for sure, Jim. I didn’t ask. But I thought I’d better do something.”

“Well, you’re probably right there. I just wish to hell I knew what was going on.”

“You and me both.”

“You still staying at your apartment?”

“No. I can’t bring myself to go back there.”

“Well, you sure as hell better not go back there now – in fact, I’ve got an idea.”

“What?”

“Get in the car.”

“What?”

I shoulda known. If there’s one thing working with Jim Sebream had taught me so far, it’s that you’ll never crack a case playing it safe. I thought going back to my apartment would be the last thing I’d do, given the fact that not only did Thug No. 1 know where I lived, but now he probably had a serious itch to whoop up on Mrs. Peters’ favorite son.

“Dude, Jim, can we park a little farther away?”

“What’re we gonna use, the Griffith Park telescope? I’ve only got a hundred-yard lens. Just keep slinking down there like a little girl and you’ll be fine.”

“Hey man, it wasn’t you that got his ass —”

“*Shhhh*. Some guys who got out of a red Camaro just walked into your apartment.”

I shut up. For a second.

“Heywaitaminnit, I can’t hear —”

“ . . . *the foggiest idea what we’re looking for . . .* ”

“Oooh, is that one of those long range microphones?”

“Kid, you’re killing me. Can we be girlfriends later?”

“ . . . *anything with an address on it or a phone number. You know, something someone would write down their friend’s new info on. I’ll check his answering machine . . .* ”

Melissa. Was her address written in my apartment? No.

“ . . . *BEEP! Hey, Ellison, it’s Lola. Listen, Melissa contacted me today, if you’re still looking for her. She gave me her number, so give me a call if you need it. Or if you wanna come see my performance tonight at Frisch Rost in Culver City, I’m reading some of my work. I should be there till about 11:30. So, talk to you later. BEEP.* ”

Fuck.

“Jim, we’ve gotta do somethin —”

Jim was outta the car. He trotted over to the Camaro, made a couple of swiping gestures at two of the tires, and was back in the Caprice before I could say “Slash Gordon.”

“You know where this Frisch Rost place is?”

“Sho' nuff.”

“Good. Now we hope they don't call any of their buddies to head out to Culver City.”

I hadn't thought of that. “But they don't even know what Lola looks like, right?”

“She's your friend. How well do you know her?”

“Let's move.”

Culver City was a low-rent suburbia trying to milk its lost days as a movie-studio destination. As such, most of the shit out there closed early, with the exception of a few coffeehouses that catered to the heavy student population taking advantage of gentrification rent swoons. Petersen's Frisch Rost was just such a joint, just far enough away from anything to not have any relevance whatsoever. With Jim flooring it, we made it to Culver City in 20 minutes, give or take. When we pulled up, I took the lead.

“So we don't attract attention, I'll take a quick look in and see if she's inside.”

“And you don't think whoever's looking for her knows what you look like?”

“Maybe, but I'm sure gonna draw a lot less attention here than a dirty old man in a cheap suit.”

“That hurts, kid.”

“I'll be right back.”

Jim was right, though. For all I know, the guys from my apartment could have called my old punching buddy, and he could be casing the joint for Lola

right now. I slipped in the front door, keeping in the shadows. Some lame white girl with mousy brown hair and a lime green dress was ranting about how much parking sucks in LA. She sometimes punctuated her tirade with a hip “spoken word” inflection, but mostly she was a whiny daddy’s girl who knew as much about poetry as she probably did about coffee – namely, if its packaged alright, it was good enough for her. I sat at a back table and carefully scanned the crowd. No Lola. After a few minutes of waiting to see if she’d walk out of the bathroom, I stepped to the *fineass* counter girl and gave my most charming smile while asking if she’d seen anyone that fit Lola’s description. She almost yawned her answer.

“No, not tonight. That girl usually does comes in on Fridays, though.”

“Thanks.”

Deflated at my first bit of solo sleuthing, I walked dejectedly back to the car to give Sebream the news – when I saw her. She was arguing with someone in the parking lot. Someone turned out to be – this can’t be for real – Thug No.1, doing his best dejected boyfriend bit.

“C’mon, Lola, you know this is my job. Now, I don’t wanna have to take you in, but if you don’t tell me where Atkins is –”

“Okay, fuck you Vaneesh because I know why *you* want to find Oliver and I can guarantee you it’s not gonna change anything. If you’re gonna take me in, take me in. You guys can’t do anything to me you haven’t done before.”

As strange as it sounds, I kinda felt sorry for the guy. When I first saw him, I knew I was gonna clock him again. The fact that he was harassing Lola, well, that just made the game sweeter. But when he started to grab on her elbow? I had a full-blown justification.

I considered just jacking him up without letting him see me, but I got his attention first for three reasons: (1) Basic honor. I just don't like cold-cocking someone before they know what's going on. They at least deserve to look into the eyes of the man who would be serving as their personal escort to Knocked-The-Fuck-Out Land. (2) Intimidation. I thought maybe, just maybe, if he started to build up a healthy neurosis about me running up on him, maybe it would give me a precious second the next time we encountered each other – which, if things kept going as they were, I figured wouldn't be too long. (3) Revenge. Come into my house and punk me again, bitch.

This time I used a broken skateboard near the Dumpster.

"What's up?"

He turned, and for split second I saw his eyes get big with dread.

CRACK! Again, blood-spattered from his recently bandaged nose.

"Let's go, Red."

"Oh Ellison, you shouldn't have done that."

"It's not the first time. Let's go, baby."

"Seriously, Vaneesh is not someone to fuck around with."

"Lola, unless you wanna explain all that to his friends, let's get the fuck out."

I shoved her into Jim's car, who couldn't fucking believe what I was telling him.

"Waitaminnit. You broke this guy's nose twice *in one day*? Remind me not to be one of the bad guys."

"Deal. Drive."

Sebream drove.

We ended up at the Sunburst Motel, a little dive of

phone. None were within eyesight, but you better bet Mr. Chang's BBQ was calling me from a strip mall down across the street from the hotel. I got a large cool Styrofoam cup of Thai iced tea and let the cool spicy milk rock me back into a healthy state of mind. A few blocks down, I found a working pay phone with some sort of goo on the back of the receiver. Ah, the glamorous world of private detecting.

Melissa had called. I called back the number she left and the phone was answered by a sleepy-sounding brother about my age.

"Is Melissa there?"

"Who dis?"

"This is a friend of hers," as if I had to explain, "Ellison."

"Hold on."

"Ellison?"

"Whattup, Melle Mel?"

"I been trying to get at you. Have you not been home?"

Here's again where my decision-making becomes questionable at best. Again faced with the option of hiping a woman to my troubles. Again the decision to keep her out of it – though I knew she'd figure in big later.

"Yeah, I've been running around like crazy."

"Hmm. Well, I just wanted to let you know that I found out about what happened to you the other day."

"Melissa, what do you have to do with all this?"

"These guys work for this corporation I used to work for called Med-Cor."

"Did you say Med-Cor?"

"Yeah, they been under investigation for a few weeks now by a detective agency called Sebrean and Woodruff."

I swallowed hard.

"What'd you do for them?"

"Just a little P.R. work. Freelance, though. Totally temporary. Anyway, when they heard you were looking for me, they assumed it was for the detective agency. They're very paranoid about their trade secrets or whatever."

"Must be."

"Anyway, I'm really sorry all this had to happen. Call me if you get into any more trouble."

"But why would they want to stop me from looking for you? And how'd they find out, anyway?"

"I don't know, El. Why don't you call up Sebrean and Woodruff and put 'em on the case?"

Her Name Was Lola, She Was a Call-Girl

Knockknockknockknockknock

"Wake up, Red. I got coffee for you."

"Oh, you are an angel of mercy."

"Yes. Also a computer programmer. Did you sleep alright?"

"I tried. I was tired as hell, but I was petrified. I wish you could've kept me company like you did in the old days."

Fucking Lola. As cool as I was, she had always been just a step cooler. She let me into her motel room and I set our coffees on the nightstand. She looked ragged and nervous, but pretty in the early sun; the way all women do, really.

“Are you hungry? Jim wants to go down to the diner downstairs and have a little tête à tête.”

“Sure, lemme change my clothes.”

I chilled.

“You gonna watch?”

Here’s the thing: When Lola says shit like that, she always expects you to punk out. For the past few days, I hadn’t felt like much of a punk.

“Yeah, I’m gonna watch.”

To her credit, Lola didn’t punk out either. She slipped off the sweater she’d worn to Petersen’s last night and put on the sweatshirt I’d given her the night before to keep warm. Then, she slipped off her jeans (she smiled at me while doing this part) and put on some shorts.

“Ready.”

“Let’s roll.”

“Did you enjoy that?”

“Yeah, it was alright.”

“Just alright?”

“Just alright.”

It was a little rainy today. L and I rolled into the adjoining Sunsplash Diner and found Sebrean already pulling on a hot cup of Joe, chatting it up with a tall big-haired waitress who looked like she was a little sweet on him.

“I went ahead and ordered. I didn’t know how long you two would be.”

“That’s fine.”

“So what’d you find out from your girlfriend last night?”

“Ex-girlfriend. It looks like that guy that broke into my house used to work with Melissa. But the funny thing is, I think they both work for the same company we were investigating yesterday.”

“What company is that?” said Lola.

“Med-Cor. Seems a pretty weird coincidence that I would get a job with a detective agency that’s investigating the same company my ex-girlfriend used to work for. Don’t you think, Jim?”

“I heard weirder.”

“You have?”

He looked dead at me now. “Sure.”

“I see. Anyway, they thought I was looking for Melissa for Sebrean and Woodruff.”

“Well here’s the deal with Med-Cor,” Jim chimed in. “Last month they went public and a lot of people made a lot of money. Turns out they’re into gene research and they were one of the first American companies to claim some success with cloning animal cells.”

“Whoa,” I said.

“Right. This is the big leagues. Med-Cor’s stock jumped \$83 per share its first day of trading and they haven’t looked back. That CEO we were surveying, kid? He makes five grand before breakfast. Now, the rest of the blanks –” He turned to Lola now “ – are up to you.”

“Well, I don’t know what you want from me.”

“For starters, why don’t we start with that schmoe that’s been staying at

your place?" Sebream said.

Lola and I looked at Sebream in disbelief. How could Jim have possibly known about – what was his name? Atkins?

"Jim, how could you have possibly known –"

"I wanna keep him out of this." Lola's demeanor had changed once again. All of a sudden, she was the mousy nervous Lola from our reunion last week.

"Who is he?" Sebream lobbied.

"He's . . . he's . . ."

"Lola," I reasoned, "the way I see it, we're all in this together now. If we weren't before, we sure are now that I clocked that guy last night."

"I know, it's just . . . he didn't mean anything by –"

"WHO IS HE?!" Sebream and I said in unison.

She took a deep breath.

"His name is Oliver Atkins. He's a scientist for Med-Cor. One of THE scientists, to tell you the truth. I met him through Melissa. He was the top guy at Med-Cor's biggest rival, BioSign, and Med-Cor stole him away. He came to my house the morning before you and Jessica came over, El. He knocked on the door panicky, like he was terrified, and begged me to let him in. When I looked through the peephole I could see that someone had beaten him up or something. I felt bad for him, so I let him in. He was throwing up all day and I was taking care of him. That's why I didn't wanna let you guys in."

"So wait," I said, "does this company just go around sending heavies everywhere beating up on people?"

"I don't know, Ellison, but Oliver was scared to death."

"How well did you know him?" said Sebream, suspiciously.

“We were friends. It’s been hard for him adjusting to LA and a new environment, so I used to show him around, take him places.”

“And why you think he thought to find you after he got beat up?”

“I don’t know. He’s only been over once before. I guess he thought he could trust me.”

“When did he leave your crib?” I asked.

“He was there when I left to go to the poetry reading.”

“Let’s roll,” said Jim.

As we sped down Beverly, a few things were occurring to me. Namely, if Atkins had just gotten his ass whooped, he’s probably gonna go to someone he knows will take care of him. Most guys would let the machismo keep them away from a casual acquaintance. I could tell Jim was thinking the same thing, but neither of us said anything. Second, how did Lola know the Med-Cor thugs? Did Melissa introduce her to them, too? I don’t know if she either forgot or didn’t know that I overheard some of her conversation with Vaneesh before I turned his head into a half-pipe, but I decided to save that conversation for later. If Lola wanted to keep something to herself, fine. If she was gonna trust us, we were gonna have to let her open up at her own speed.

We sped through Hollywood and Silverlake, careening down Virgil to 6th, and then east off into Downtown.

Daytime Downtown is a different matter. It hustles, bustles; rocks, man. Of course, it’s barely an iota compared to its sister city in New York, but L.A. wasn’t built that way. Manhattan is built up and down, piled on top of itself, smushing

people and dreams in the funk of the summer heat. L.A. has been pulled taut, laid flat, spread out over a canopy of mountains and desert and a river basin. So the people move freely over the panoply of L.A., with only a fraction ever congregating in a place so remote as Downtown. But yeah, since it was Downtown L.A., people who worked there during the day did their level best to give it the energy of New York, walking with a fierce pride as if to say *We know what you're thinking, that we're laid back and passive, but the tentacles of our city snake through you, too.*

We swung around to the Arts District only to find that stinkin' red Camaro out front with brand new shiny-ass tires. Jim parked on the other side of a park, broke out the ultra long-range binoculars, and we watched the mugs rifling through Lola's apartment through some of her broken blinds.

"Hey Lola, was Jessica at all involved with Med-Cor?"

"You nervous, stud? Scared you're little Tootsie Roll ain't as innocent as she lets on?" Vintage blowsy Lola, the air hanging thick with her slow sexy drawl.

"She's exactly as innocent as she lets on."

"You sound pretty sure."

"I've seen her be no-so-innocent."

I coulda sworn I saw Jim smirk with that one, and the air countered-snapped with my bust. I decided to take advantage of my advantage.

"So how did she know Atkins?"

"Have you tried asking her, Ellison? She's your girlfriend."

"Fine. Whatever. Hey Lola, what's up with the multiple-personality review?"

“What?”

“Well you got the new clothes and the hair and you been trying out new accents. Are you trying to convince somebody you’re a good girl, now?”

Lola didn’t answer me. When I turned back with a half-smile to let her know I was half-joking, she was looking out the window with an expression of deep pain—I had really hurt her on that one, as if I’d dredged up a deep insecurity. A lot of times I say stupid things to women. I looked over at Sebream and he was grimacing like a disappointed Miyagi. I completed the turn into a side-view mirror that showed my young features turning into those of an old man. And then I saw Thug No. 1 (code name: Vaneesh) walking up to my side of the car. I saw him swing up, and then I saw blackness.

When I came to, Jim, Lola, and I were laying side by side, hands tied behind our backs, in the back of an Econoline van. My head was pounding from the blow Thug No. 1 had given me outside Lola’s apartment. I think he loosened a tooth, unless it was already like that. Nice shot, enemy mine. I could see out the window, and I could tell by the Silla architecture that we were in Koreatown. Thug No. 1 and Thug No. 2 were arguing about directions. Apparently Thug No. 2 had missed the exit off the 110 and now we were lost.

Oh, the way I woke up was by Lola squeezing my ass. We were all spooned and she was facing away from me, face-to-face with Jimmy.

“You up, lover?”

Her saying that to me while facing another man was, well, sexy. I squeezed her ass to let her know I was.

“Good. These geniuses put our backs to each other, so I can reach your

ropes but my hands aren't strong enough to untie them. Can you do mine?"

I started to fiddle, and she was right as rain. They had placed my hands within untying distance of her ropes. Nope, Vaneesh and friend weren't going to sweep the Genius Olympics this year. I fuddled some more, and after about ten rocking groping minutes, I got her ropes loose. She used the leverage to have me free in seconds.

Seconds later we were stopped. Jim reached up to see our captors arguing with each other, in front of the van now. I craned my neck to see if these criminal masterminds had actually left the key in the ignition for us as a going-away present. No such luck. But with my newfound hand independence, it was only seconds before I had freed both my compatriots and ever-so-gently opened the back door.

"Jimmy, you got your gun?"

"Naw, they took it."

"Okay, on three—" I needn't have bothered. Before I could start the countdown, Jimmy had turned the handle and we were off, bursting through the foothills of the Santa Monica Mountains.

A note about this hood: In this part of town, various studio bigwigs and midwigs live nestled right above the city that has become their protected cur. Far from the madding crowd, the Hollywood Hills have become the aristocratic center of LA, snug as a rug in the bosom of their cash cow. They have snaked themselves along the hilly expanse, creating an undulating and bizarre architecture of cliffside bungalows and wooded winding streets. It was into this urban vista that Lola LaPlonica, Jim Sebream, and I made fast our escape.

Thug Nos. 1 and 2 were on us almost from the outset, and all three of my

crew took turns leading the escape whichever direction their instincts told them. Jim led the cautious first leg, taking us between two faux Spanish-tile homes, along the narrow brick footpath above a chain-link fence, and over a stone-embedded embankment, emerging from the trees relatively unscathed in front of an olive-green Hummer. As the driver honked and swerved, nearly clipping a mailbox, we could hear the goons crashing loudly behind. Lola took a more radical lead, taking us laterally down an alleyway lined with flowers, only to dash suddenly THROUGH SOMEONE'S BACK PORCH WINDOW AND INTO THEIR HOUSE. Now, yes, there was an old lady home watching TV. . . it was the *Young and the Restless*, I believe . . . but she really wasn't disturbed by us, as we sped through her living room so quick that she hadn't gotten up from her chair until the last of us had sped through her front door. I would imagine our erstwhile host had more trouble with our pursuers, as I heard her yammering and then a smacking sound behind me over the sound of the neighbor's yipping terrier. Don't get ghetto with gangsters. We fled over the yard and then over the tiled roof of a quaint cottage, jumping down into an abandoned lot – unfortunately, the gate leading out of the lot was locked, and we were trapped. It was now that I took the brash initiative and lifted the fence to the side to allow Jim and Lola to slide under. Bullets One and Two almost nipped my fingers as I finally snaked my way underneath. I led them up, up, perpendicularly from our pursuers, hoping the rough terrain would slow the behemoths down. I bet that my trio was swifter, and we proved it as we scrambled up a wooded trail, down a winding street, and over a fence into a backyard in which a German shepherd was digging for doggie gold on the opposite end from us. By the time I had reached the midpoint of the yard, the dog was up; after Lola had past, the dög

was halfway to us; and he was nipping on Jimmy's heels as we pulled him over the opposite fence. Our tormentors weren't so lucky. Häund was perky and bloodthirsty by the time they fell into the yard, and they spent the next few minutes running around trying to not get mauled by the dog before Thug No. 2 iced him while he was incisor deep in Vaneesh's nuts. I imagined Vaneesh having nightmares about what would happen the next time he saw me.

Jim, Lola, and I jogged into Silverlake, and took a bus downtown where, amazingly, the Med-Cor brain guild had left our car in fine working condition. If that weren't enough, their Camaro was still in front of the house, they apparently figuring it made more sense to have someone bring them over a van. Jim ambled over to their Camaro, slashed the new tires, and we took off after he had hotwired his car.

The ride in the setting Southwest sun was quiet. To be honest, we had plenty to talk about, but it was just sort of more fitting to shut up and appreciate the bold panoramas the sun played against the mountains and skyline. In Hollywood, all good views are southward, and from some streets you can see all the way to Compton.

And then, all of a sudden, we heard Lola scream, "Stop the car!"

Jim Sebrean soon did so, and before we knew it, Lola was sprinting across the street screaming "Ollie!" at a man sitting at a bus stop in a baseball cap and hunter's vest. It was the man from her bathtub, and this was no casual greeting between friends. Lola had obviously been worried sick about him, as the way in which she screamed his name screamed relief, elation, affection. His resultant expression upon recognizing the gorgeous redhead sprinting towards him was a

mirror of those sentiments.

I think Jim and I saw it at the same time. Just as Lola got halfway to Atkins, the Econoline van pulled up right behind him. Then Lola saw it, and screamed Atkins' name again, this time more urgently. Your friendly neighborhood thugs jumped out of the van, grabbed Atkins, and one of them wrestled him inside while the other went for his piece. I sprung up out of the Caprice, sprinted for Lola and managed to tackle her and roll to the side of a building just as Vaneesh opened fire. I breathed the perfume of Lola's hair as bullets whizzed past us, only paused by Jim unloading his 9 millimeter back at 'em, which gave us a chance to slip into a nearby office building. Outside, I saw Vaneesh and friend return Jim's fire for a second, before finally getting a hold of Atkins and spiriting him away. Lola's back racked with sobs.

"At first it was innocent, you know? Just take these guys out for drinks, laugh at their jokes. At first it was just enough for them to be out with pretty girls."

Lola was finally telling us what the fuck was going on with her and Med-Cor at a greasy spoon south of downtown. The place was famous for steaks like the ones Jimmy and I consumed, but the girl just had a plain bowl of oatmeal.

"But then . . ."

"But then your boss started asking for more," Jim said.

"One day, Steven Kline, that's the CEO of Med-Cor, he tells me he wants me and my friends to be a little friendlier with the clients. I knew what he meant. My first impulse was to walk out the door and never come back, but . . ."

"But what?"

“Well, by then, I had seen things. By now I’m sure you can tell Med-Cor is not what you’d call a family corporation. Like that guy you hit, Ellison? Vaneesh? He’s like, third-generation Armenian mafia. I think Med-Cor recruits from his neighborhood. The first time I met him, he had someone's nose in his hand.”

I felt sick, but tried to act cool. “G - Go on,” I said.

“Well, anyway, I was scared. I thought if I could do this just a few times, I’d be okay with Kline and he’d move on to the next girl. I didn’t imagine I’d just become more valuable to him.”

“How is Jessica involved?”

“Once I told her of Kline’s new requirements, she wanted nothing to do with it. It was okay for her because Kline had never met her. He knew Mel, though, and asked for her specifically.”

“Oh shit.”

“Yeah, we were partying with some of the biggest corporate heavyweights in California. Living the high life. I wanted to get out, but I didn’t know how. I was sure they would kill me. Anyway, one day Kline asked me to get some information from a venture capitalist. It was a guy I had been with a couple of times, and Kline seemed convinced he would tell me anything I wanted to know. He was right. One night, this guy told me exactly where Med-Cor was in the race to come up with a new recombinant gene therapy and how far along other companies were in their cloning technology. Before you knew it, I was high-tech spy and a high-priced call girl.

“You think Atkins knew something he wasn’t supposed to?”

“Thanks to me.”

“How could you have stopped it? Looks like he just chose the wrong company to make him rich.”

Lola smirked. “When I first met Ollie, he had a job and a family he loved in Palo Alto. Kline asked me to ‘persuade’ Ollie to jump ship to Med-Cor. I thought it was just gonna be a routine job but . . . but . . .”

“But what?” Now, I was anxious.

“She loves him.”

“You LOVE him?”

“You know Ellison, the ‘multiple-personality review’ as you call it isn’t an act exactly. I’m really from Texas, but from a poor Jewish farming community in Waco. But I always saw those beautiful Southern princesses always getting their way and getting all the boys during high school – when I moved to California, I guess I just became one of them. All those men you saw me with in college, most of them never got past second base. The first client I slept with at Med-Cor was only the third man I’d ever been with. And I’d never been in love . . . until I met Ollie. And now God knows where he is.”

The tears started to flow and I gave her a handily dispensed napkin.

“So that’s why he was hiding out at your crib?”

“He knew something. He said Med-Cor was into some real freaky stuff. Like, experiments with human embryos.”

“*Live* embryos?”

“Yeah. Really fucked-up shit. Ollie once told me that if what Med-Cor was doing got out, their entire board of directors would be spending summers in Soledad. He wanted to get out before he could be implicated in anything. He was so scared they were gonna try something.”

“What were they gonna do?”

And, well, it's not like her head *exploded*, but she just sort of slumped forward, like she had decided to take a nap in her warmed-over oats. I immediately ducked behind the table, and tugged on Jim's leg to join me. Instead, he slid out of the booth, and tried to get in a position to return fire, except he didn't know where the shots were coming from. They had used a silencer, so the place erupted in a haze of gunfire, hitting mirrors and chocolate cream pies and barstools and fake-flower holders and vats of pancake batter all without a sound at all. And in fact it was only when they heard a lady scream, after the third shot, that any of the other people in the restaurant started to duck for cover.

I saw Lola's blood spread through the oatmeal, the strawberry milk carving a majestic impression of meandering peaks and valleys through the crags of the cereal when it finally hit me – I wouldn't be seein' Lola, no more, no more. Goodbye, prairie farmgirl; so long, Vegas bombshell.

Chapter Nine

Jim and I spent all night at the LA Ramparts Division. It is at this point in stories like this that you get to know the local cops, their habits, idiosyncrasies, and sometimes even a little bit of their story. Our prime interrogator was Luther Allison, a Louisiana trailer rat who had moved to Southern California to clean up LA after watching too many episodes of *The Rockford Files*. Allison had sandy blond hair and bad breath. That's all you need to know of him right now.

“So you two have no idea who the shooter could have been?”

“No, sir. Ms. LaPlonica was a longtime friend of my associate, and we were having a social dinner.”

This was Jim Sebream talking, using his years as a private-security interrogator to give the detective just enough to ease up off of us.

“And you have no idea who might have wanted Ms. LaPlonica to come to harm?”

“Well, as I said, Ellison told me later that she had been involved with prostitution in the past, but we have no idea why someone would want to take her out like that.”

“Wait here.”

And then he'd leave, and then he'd come back and ask us different versions of the same questions he'd been asking us all night. Finally, Woodruff's lawyer had had enough. He had been willing to cooperate initially to show that we wanted to help in the investigation, but the coppers' lack of proof was vexing and glaring. They released us at 4:15 AM and I prepared to head home.

“Where you going, kid?”

“Home. Sleep. One of my college friends died tonight.”

“You wanna see her murderer caught, don't you?”

“I would have, but you juked and jived around the truth so much tonight I doubt if the cops will be able to find her car keys.”

“Kid, lemme tell you a little something I've learned about big-city cops. Firstly, only a little more than half of them are interested in cleaning up the streets. Then you got that 40% that are just bucking for a promotion. The other ten are crap, and there's no use ever telling them anything that they'll be able to sell to someone else.”

“You think that guy was dirty?”

“Naw, Allison’s on the up-and-up, he’s just a little too desperate to prove himself. Those types are dangerous, because they take chances to get the bad guys. And sometimes those chances get innocent people killed.”

“And we’re innocent people?”

“Until someone can prove us different, we are.”

It was 4:50 AM, and Jim and I were cruising in front of Melissa’s, looking for signs of life. Lola implied that Melissa was the only person that might’ve been as involved as she was, so we figured Mel might be the only person on our side that would be able to help us find Atkins. Mel’s blinds were shut, the lights were off, but I had a feeling, so we waited in the car while my hunch played itself out.

“So, you gonna try the door?”

“Well, here’s the thing – I don’t think Melissa’s home,” I said.

“So you don’t wanna try and see?”

“Well, the way things are going, if I go and try her door, I’m not sure if I’m gonna make it back to the car in one piece.”

“Gotcha.”

“I mean, don’t you think this place might be being staked out by someone else?”

“No, you’re right, good thinking, kid. Let’s give her a call.”

At this hour, we could hear both her phone ring and the short and simple answering-machine message from the car. We called four times before a tricked-out black pick-up blasting Biggie Smalls turned around the corner. Jim and I slouched down and watched as Melissa came climbing down the cab’s elevated

steps. She drunkenly walked around in front of the truck and began passionately kissing the driver through the window. He must have been the one that answered the phone when I called the other day, and now here he was decked in a bandanna and a diagonally placed FDNY cap. I wondered who this player was and I felt—what was that?—deep down, in the dark recesses of my gut, the slightest twinge of jealousy that Mel had moved on to another brother, as if I was the only black man that could turn her head. But did this Mean Something? Like, was her relationship with me just acting out a racial fantasy? Who knows? Who cares? I was tired.

Mel keyed her lock—after looking both ways, mind you—and her new boyfriend took off. I started to get out of the car, but Sebrean held me back.

“Just a second . . .”

What do you know? Less than a minute after she got into her house, a heavy-set figure came to her door. When she opened it, the look on her face was similar to the one Lola had on her face when dealing with Thug No. 1—the look of continually encountering a past that just wouldn’t leave you alone. She resignedly pulled the door open and walked away from it.

“So what do we do now? Do we go in?” I said, anxious to save another damsel in distress.

“Hell, no. Relax. Why don’t you go to that donut shop up there and get us some coffee?”

I thought it was a good idea. I thought the walk would clear my head and the coffee would revitalize my juices for whatever was ahead. As I walked, I tried to process all that had happened to me in the past week. I had been beaten, shot at, kidnapped, and seen death close up. Was I a different man, now? Would

I have nightmares? Was I “hard?”

In all, the biggest change was that I was a little less hopeful about what people were capable of. My grandma always taught me that the human race was God’s favorite experiment because, when given the choice between wrong and right, most of the time we chose right – and if we didn’t we sure did make it interesting. She had the idea that God created people as sort of a living theater, and that He probably watched us from On High, eating popcorn and drinking beer with His buddies like earth was the best show in town. Like, tune in to Channel Earth and dig Caesar conquer Western Europe! Watch as African peasants stave off their conquerors! And the romances! All-access, all the time. And she said that what made humans different from angels was that God never knew what we were gonna do next because he had given us freewill. So each night, the show was different.

I had always carried that idea with me, and took comfort in the fact that, in the big picture, we were a good species, and that all our faults and petty jealousies could be balanced by our acts of compassion and clarity. But now I wasn’t so sure. I didn’t like what I was beginning to suspect – that a major corporation was not only putting profits before human lives, but that it might actually be explicitly taking lives. It’s enough to make you fucking depressed, and I was halfway back to the car before I realized that Jim wasn’t in it.

“Hey kid, finally caught some sleep, hunh?”

I awoke to the last thing I’d suspect. Jim and Melissa were climbing into the car, thick as thieves. Mel climbed into the back and was laughing at my tired ass with Jim.

“Do you know that you frown when you sleep?” Jim said.

“Yeah.”

“He’s done that ever since I’ve known him. But when he wakes up, he never remembers having any nightmares.”

“I don’t have nightmares.” I was pissed.

“Lucky you.”

“Jim, how come you didn’t tell me you were gonna go visit Melissa while I was at the coffee shop? Here’s your coffee, by the way.”

“To be honest, I could tell you were getting a little agitated, kid. I wanted to talk to your girlfriend before your noble instincts mucked up my interrogation.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” said Melissa.

“As it turns out, we both discovered a shared appreciation of opera.”

“I could never get Ellison into Puccini.”

“How do you not be into Puccini?”

“I can interrogate subtly, ya know.”

“You’ll have to prove that to me, sonny.”

“Goddammit, Jim, I think I’ve shown a little resilience in the past 24 hours, don’t you?”

The smile crept off of both Jim and Melissa’s faces, and Jim’s whole bearing hunkered down for a minute.

“Kid, how long you been doing detective work?”

“Well, I just – “

“You just started. I know what it is to be young and think you’ve got everything handled, but our continued survival during this case will depend on

one thing. Do you believe that I know what I'm doing more than you do?"

"Of course I do, but—"

"Then trust me."

"Yeah but—"

"If you can't trust me, I'm taking you back home and Sebrean and Woodruff are off the case."

I looked at Jim. I looked at Mel and felt humiliated, but I knew Jim was right. This was his life, and he was doing me a favor by showing me the ropes.

"Here's your coffee."

"Thanks."

"You seem in pretty good spirits about Lola." I was still smarting from Jim putting me in my place in front of Mel, and I wanted to throw a little salt into their new love affair.

"What about Lola?" she said.

"You didn't tell her about Lola?" I suspected he hadn't. Sebrean had taught me that you always want to keep your interviewee in good spirits—looser lips that way.

"Naw, I figured since you all knew each other . . ." He'd leave it up to me. Nice save.

"What happened to Lola, Ellison?"

I was silent. And my silence spoke volumes.

"What happened?" she asked again, this time her voice cracking.

"Let's step out of the car for a second."

"WHAT HAPPENED?!"

"She was shot tonight."

“Is she in the hospital?”

“No.”

I stepped out of the car and slipped into the back seat next to Melissa. I thought it was funny that she didn't seem at all surprised that Lola got shot. She sat looking out of the window for a second, and then turned around and put her head into my chest as she cried. But I remembered this cry. She cried the same way when she first told me about her drug problem and the other night in the bathtub. It wasn't one of grief, this was fear for her own safety.

Jim started up the motor and we headed back to the office. LA was just waking up again, and the morning had that optimistic fresh-air feeling like maybe the smog wouldn't catch up with it today, like maybe some good would be done in the City of Angels under the new sun.

By the time we got into the office, none of us were talking. We sat Mel down in a conference room and I went and had a talk with Jim.

“That wasn't too smooth, kid. I think you might've freaked her out a bit, there.”

“Probably. What's the plan for today?”

“Well, first we brief Milton – he should be in in a few. Then we'll put together a plan for the next phase of the investigation. You might wanna try and call your other girlfriend and see if she can come in.”

Other girlfriend. That's funny. Asshole. I hadn't spoken to Jessica in a couple of days, which was very unusual for us.

“Jess?”

“Hey baby, where you been?”

“I been working.”

“For two days?”

“Yeah, it’s been pretty hectic. I got some bad news for you, sweetie.”

She paused and steeled herself. “What is it?”

“It’s Lola. We found her and then . . .”

“And then?”

“She’s dead, Jess.” Again, silence. Like it was no surprise. “Can you come in this morning before work?”

“Lemme call my boss and I’ll be right in.”

By the time Jess got to our office, Milton Woodruff’s big Texan personality was charming the pants off Melissa – figuratively, of course. He even got a smile out of her in the early sunrise, something I hadn’t been able to do all morning. When my girlfriend walked in, I was sitting next to Melissa and facing the door to the conference room. The look on Jess’ face told me she was just about tired of seeing me and Melissa together.

“I shoulda known.”

“Shoulda known what?”

“Nothing. How can I help you all?”

“Shoulda known what?”

“*Nothing.*”

She gave me a look and that was it. During the uncomfortable silence Woodruff and Sebrean exchanged a look like the new kid was gonna get it when he got home. The kid agreed.

“Miss Marchamps, my name is Milton Woodruff. Now, I don’t want you to be too hard on Ellison, here. As you know, he’s been through the ringer the past

few days.”

“Thank you.”

Thank you said: “He’s my boyfriend, and I’ll tell you when I want your opinion on how on how I should treat him.”

Woodruff read between the lines. “Of course, my wife never thought that was an excuse to take it easy on me.” He half-chuckled. “So here’s where we are, now. We’re gonna need as much information as you two can provide on Med-Cor and Steven Kline. As you probably know my two men here are prime suspects in your friend’s murder — “

“I didn’t know that, actually,” said new-to-the-scene Jess.

“Well, we’re all pretty concerned with clearing their name. That’s why any information you might have would be very helpful.”

“Well, I don’t how much I could tell you that Melissa already hasn’t. Lola got us in working for Med-Cor ‘cuz she said we could make some easy cash dressing up and keeping these businessmen company. I thought it was a little sleazy, but I had to eat, ya know?” She kinda said that part sentence to me, as some sort of explanation as to why she never told me. I told her with my eyes we’d talk about it later. At least that’s what I hoped I told her. Part of me was thinking I needed to smack that bitch and ask her what the fuck she was thinking.

“I knew from the beginning Med-Cor was bad news,” said Melissa, reanimated. “Kline was such a sleaze. One time he showed me this black whip he had in his office, as if that was gonna impress the freak in me or some shit.”

“Yeah,” said Jess, “he was creepy. But he always said we had no obligation to do anything with these men, so I thought it was harmless. Sometimes I wished

I'd never answered the phone the day Lola called."

"What can you tell us about Oliver Atkins?" asked Jim.

First Melissa and Jessica shared a look, then Melissa spoke. "He and Lola were in love. She told me he was even thinking of leaving Med-Cor so they could move away together."

"Did he seem like a good guy to you?" asked Jim.

Melissa nodded. "Definitely. He just got caught up with some shady characters."

"That's for sure," said Milton. "Did she ever tell you anything Atkins said about Med-Cor?"

"Just one," said Melissa. "Don't fuck with them."

For many reasons, a trip back to Med-Cor was the last thing I thought I should be doing. Before I was secret agent black man, I was a reasonably good citizen, and thought the best way to stay out of trouble was to stay the fuck out of trouble. Now, I found myself driving to Med-Cor with my ex-girlfriend who used to work there, Woodruff's secretary/daughter, and my mentor, the low-rent Sam Spade.

"Dude, Julie, I didn't know you did detective work."

"Neither did I till Mr. Sebrean took me to work undercover one day last year."

"What did you play?"

"A hooker."

Silence reigned. No one had to mention the fact that there were not just one, but two former ladies of the night in the car, and what's more they were

now striking out to fight crime. Call them the Dynamic Ho Duo. Or maybe Wonderbra and Push-up Girl. There were lots of stupid-ass names. They sho 'nuff had our backs, though.

"We're here. Here's the plan," Jim started out. "Julie, you're showing Melissa around like she just got a job at the office. If anyone tries to speak to you, introduce Julie and move on. Kid, you and I are going up to the roof. We'll monitor Melissa's progress with these two-way radios, that way, Melissa, we can keep track of where you are by you explaining it to Julie. We've got schematics for the building, so be sure to tell her what room you're in. And don't use real names."

"What are we looking for?"

"Leave that up to me," said Julie. "Just get me near as many locked doors as possible. I'll do the rest."

"What if someone recognizes Melissa?"

"We're banking on it, kid."

The Caper

As soon as the girls had disappeared into the exit, Jim and I parked at the loading dock around the side of the building. You gotta love blue-collar folk — they don't give a fuck what you're doing if you're not trying to give them more work to do. Decked out in nondescript delivery gear, we got as far as the main lobby before someone stopped us.

"Can I help you gentleman?" He was a young heavysset Latino with a buzz cut, very congenial and businesslike.

“Yeah,” said Jim, pulling out a worn clipboard with a generic order form attached to it, “we’re supposed to get up to Utility Room 3C to check out your air ducts, but I can’t find the service stairwell.”

“Alright, lemme just make a call to verify and I’ll be able to help you. Can you wait right here?”

“No problem.” The kid walked away. I looked at Jim in a panic, but he didn’t say a word. Didn’t even look at me. He did, however, whisper something out of the corner of his mouth.

“Kid, they have cameras in every inch of this building. If you keep looking at me like we’re getting away with something, I’m gonna pull your balls out through your throat.”

I occupied myself with tying my shoe. In a minute, our helper was back.

“Yeah, I called maintenance, and they said they had no record of a service call today.”

“They didn’t?” said Jim, rechecking his clipboard, cool as a cucumber. “Fuck. Fuck, fuck. They got the order wrong. Look at this, kid.” He showed the clipboard to me. “On the processing sheet they have us out here today, but on the service form we’re supposed to be here tomorrow.”

“We’re supposed to be out here *tomorrow*?” I said, sounding exasperated.

“Yeah, listen,” said Jim, to the lobby attendant now, “we’re coming down here all the way from Lancaster, and this is our only service call in LA today. You think we could just go ahead and check it out today instead of coming all the way back tomorrow? We shouldn’t be long – if the seals in the ducts are tight, we should be in and out in 20 minutes.”

“Umm,” he looks around, “sure. Go ahead and check it out. If anyone asks,

tell them you're supposed to be out here today though, okay? I don't wanna get in trouble."

"No problem, thanks a lot man," I said, trying to give him a pound. He didn't reciprocate.

"No problem. Just hurry up, okay? To get to the service stairs you go to the end of this hall, take a left, then another left, and it's two doors on your right."

"Okay."

We were off. As we headed up the stairs, Jim laid into me.

"What'd you try to shake his hand for?"

"I was just trying to show my appreciation."

"He wasn't one of your homeboys, he was just doing us a solid cuz we're all working stiffs. Never overestimate your target's motives."

"I was just trying to—"

"Ellison, I've done this a hundred times. When you're trying to be inconspicuous, you want to do as few things as possible that would make someone remember you. How many people do you think tried to shake his hand today?"

"Good point."

"Of course it's a good point. Check to see if the radio's working. And be sure to turn the volume down first."

I checked. The Cleavage Commandos were making their way to R&D, Melissa showing Julie the finer points of fire-escape procedure.

"All go. They're in the elevator heading up to research and development."

"Good. We have time to do a little recon ourselves. If I'm reading these floor plans correctly, we should be just on the other side of the main security

office. If my hunch is right, that's where we'll be able to find our old playmates."

And before I could say another word, Jim shimmied down an air-conditioning shaft and was off into the guts of Med-Cor. I checked on Julie and Melissa again. I heard silence, so I could only assume Melissa had gotten Julie to a main security door and Julie was using the random-number sequencer to get the entry codes. After a few minutes, my fellow air-duct serviceman reappeared into the stairwell.

"What'd you find?"

"Bingo. Not only did I find that Vaneesh character, I can even tell you what he's eating for lunch. Wanna know?"

"Umm . . . no."

"A veggie burrito. I bet he's a vegetarian. It'd make sense if he was Hindi."

"Ah."

"Not much into world religions?"

"Not much, no."

"Alright, let's get up to the roof where we'll be able to talk freely."

"Check."

We continued our climb, until eventually we reached our intended destination: a door marked ROOF ACCESS. The door was locked, but only to the law-abiding. Jimmy quickly jimmed the lock and we were out into the Southern California sunshine. I squinted my eyes for balance, and followed Jim around the roof as he checked channels for clearest reception.

"Okay, Melissa, if you can hear me I want you to ask Julie about her hair."

"I think you'll really like working here, Dawn. The last place I worked, the only thing my boss cared about was how my hair looked. But they really appreciate a job well

done, here. It's more than just looking good and smiling nice, you know? Some people never leave the Stone Ages."

"Okay, I guess she can hear us okay. You sure know how to pick 'em, Peters."

"Tell me about it."

"Okay, Melissa, I want you to take 'Dawn' to Room 4217. It's on the northwest corner of the building."

"Okay, lemme show you the rest of the building."

"You think Melissa's gonna be alright?"

"She'll be right as rain, kid. I wouldn't have asked her to help if I thought she couldn't. Is there any reason why you don't think she's up to it?"

"I don't know if I mentioned it, but Melissa's got a bit of a drug problem."

"Well, she's either got a drug problem or she doesn't. There's no such thing as a 'bit of a' drug problem."

"She's working on it, ya know, but she had a relapse recently."

"Do you trust her, kid?"

I didn't answer.

"Ellison?"

"I used to."

"Well we shoulda taken her on a caper then. There's no use worrying about it now, though. They're in."

"And here we have some of our labs and research facilities. I think you'll be interested in – Oh my God!"

"What?"

"Guys, you are not going to believe this. Julie got us into this room. It's a lab filled

with – What is that?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you see?”

“Beakers. Some of them have labels . . . but”

“What?”

“These are people’s names, with dates.”

“Okay, write down as many as you can and get out of there.”

“Check.”

“Think that’s what Lola was tellin’ us about?” I said to Jim.

“I don’t know, but I’m wondering what they could possibly be doing that they’d have beakers with people’s names on them.”

“Where to now?”

“One floor up. Room 4308 should be a records room. Maybe we’ll find some answers there.”

“Excuse me, how did you get in there?”

“We are so lost, can you tell us where the cafeteria is?”

“You’re not supposed to be in there.”

“I know but . . . Alex . . . it was an honest mistake. You’re not gonna get us in trouble, are you?”

“Wasn’t the door locked?”

“No. You wanna come in here and check it out with us? Alex is cute, hunh, Dawn?”

“April!”

“I know, I just – “

“She just broke up with her boyfriend and she’s . . . easily excited.”

"I've seen you around the building a couple of times. Wanna come in here for a sec, Alex?"

"No . . . I'm gonna get in trouble."

"You think I would turn you in? I bet you've got a great body underneath that jacket. Aren't Latin boys the cutest?"

"Maybe I could come in for one second."

Silence.

"Hey, what're you doing? Come back here!"

"I think they're in trouble, Jim."

"Hey, you two, what're you doing up here?"

"We got our own problems, kid."

With that, a mad dash started on the roof of Med-Cor. Jim and I jumped to a smaller building next door, and proceeded to climb down the fire escape with two hulking brutes in hot pursuit.

"Julie, put down the numbers thingie, we have got to go."

"Excuse me, you two, can you come here for a minute?"

"Run!"

"Where is the exit?"

"Stop!"

"Hey!"

"Ow, FUCK!"

"What did you do to him?"

"Just a little judo. Let's move."

"Guys, you didn't tell me Julie was a badass."

"Kid, down here. Swing over onto that ledge and then help me over."

“What?”

“No time to think. Just go!”

As Jim the Madman ordered, I reached up onto the ledge above us and climbed up. I was now in front of a window behind which a woman was cleaning an office. We made eye contact, I smiled, she smiled back, and then I reached down to help Jim up. Below, we heard the sounds of our pursuers looking for us. The only problem was, we were practically dangling off the side of a building 30 stories from the ground. Our goons got close enough so we could hear their radios:

“Do you got ‘em?”

“No. Dispatch, we’ve got two women on the loose in the building, both dangerous. They took out a man in the stairwell between the 41st and 40th Floor. Detain them at all costs, but don’t cause a panic in the building.”

As the boys drifted off, the sound of their CBs faded.

“We’ve gotta get back and help them out!” I screamed to Jim.

“Exactly what I was thinking. Where are you guys?”

“We’re in a utility closet on the 34th Floor. 3412, I think it is.”

“Alright, step out of the room and head to your left. There’s a service stairwell at the end of the hall.”

“I see it.”

“We’ll be there in a minute.”

We climbed back on the roof and jumped over to the Med-Cor building. Once we got there, we saw two more security guys on the opposite end by the entrance to the stairwell.

“How do we get in?”

“Air shaft.”

Jim dislodged a broken air vent and we crawled inside. We shimmied for about 30 seconds as Jim tried to direct us using the schematics and a penlight.

“This shaft should let us out in the same stairwell as the girls. Alley-oop!”

After checking for life, Jim kicked out the vent and we emerged in a stairwell on the 42nd Floor.

“Are you guys there?”

“Here we are!”

I looked down the middle of the stairwell to see Julie waving from a few floors below.

“There you are!”

“Oh shit!”

Just then, two security guards entered the stairwell on the 40th floor – right between us and the girls. As we rushed down, I heard the sounds of the struggle, but couldn’t tell who was getting the upper hand until I saw Melissa firm in the grip of one, and Julie kicking the other in the balls.

“Pablo, you dumbass!”

Jim reached the goon holding Mel, and delivered a karate chop to the neck.

“Let’s roll.”

We started descending the stairs, but ducked into the 22nd floor when we heard another door open below us.

The cafeteria. People. Nirvana. Jim and I quickly ducked into a bathroom and ditched our clothes in a nearby trash can, revealing the business attire he suggested we wear underneath. We fit in like lemmings.

“What now?” whispered Julie.

“Lunch,” said Jim.

They were serving lasagna, so I helped myself to a heaping slice, all the time trying to look as if I wasn’t being pursued by building security. We each took seats separate from each other, but in positions where we could all make eye contact. It wasn’t long before the stormtroopers strode in. We all followed Jim’s lead and tried to make conversation with the people at our tables. I was seated next to an elderly woman in purple.

“Is that cake any good?” I asked, really wanting to know.

“Good as most days. Kinda dry. You new?”

“Yeah, I’m in programming.”

“Oh that’s nice. I like to see when black people have those technical jobs. When I was younger, they always looked at you funny when you even tried to take classes like that. I went to school to be an engineer, but only got to second year before they told me I didn’t have a future in it.”

“How were your grades?”

“My grades were good, but they told me no one would ever hire me because I didn’t have the ‘amplitude,’ whatever the hell that meant.”

“Did you fight it?”

“Naw, I dropped out and had babies. Two beautiful sons. Wouldn’t trade them for anything.”

“Gotcha.”

Lunch went on pleasantly for another 35 minutes, until Jim made the signal we should move. He left first, then about five minutes later, Melissa put up her tray and left. Soon after, it was Julie.

“Well, I gotta get going. It was nice to meet you.”

“What’d you say your name was?”

“Ellison. Ellison Peters.”

I dumped my tray, and made my stealthy way to the busiest elevators on the floor. I went all the way down to the lowest parking level, and asked the nearest attendant for directions to the nearest pedestrian walkway. Twenty minutes later I was on the 305 bus headed back to Westwood.

Chapter Eleven

When I got there only Julie had made it back.

“Is Melissa with you?” she asked.

“Fuck. You think she got snagged?”

“I don’t think so. Jim’s sitting outside Med-Cor now with his radio scanner, and none of the security there has mentioned anything about finding any of us.”

“So where could she be?”

“She’s *your* girlfriend.”

“Ex-girlfriend.”

Melissa was lost again. Isn’t this where we started? After calling everywhere I thought she might be, I headed over to Jessica’s after work for dinner, a talk, and relaxation. I got a talk.

“Ellison, I don’t know why you felt you couldn’t tell me about what was going on with your work, but I’m very hurt that you could be doing things involving my friends and not say *anything*.

“I wanted to keep you out of it, baby. There’s some crazy shit goin’ on.”

“But Ellison, an old friend of mine died in your company while you were investigating this crazy shit. Don’t you think you could’ve let me in on some of this a little earlier?”

“I thought I was protecting you.”

“Ellison, I don’t want to be your responsibility. I want to be your partner.”

“But if I’m involved in something dangerous, I’m not gonna involve you.”

“And that includes keeping me in the dark about it?”

“Sometimes, yeah.”

“Well, you know, I don’t think I want a boyfriend whose gonna shut me out. Did you ever consider the fact that maybe I could have your back?”

“Jessica.”

“Jessica what? You know, that’s always been your problem, Ellison. You think women are so helpless that they can’t handle any stressful situation. Maybe you should take some time to reconsider your attitude about relationships.”

“Are you serious?”

“Are you?”

“Why is this different than you not telling me about your working for Med-Cor?”

“It just is, Ellison. I was never doing anything that could hurt anybody.”

Says you, I thought.

I spent the night alone at my new apartment with a bottle of whiskey. After complaining to my landlord about how easy it was for someone to break into my house, he moved me right down the hall into a new apartment. Was the lock on the door newer, you ask? No. How did that improve my situation? Not at all.

Welcome to the half-assed 21st Century. I was stone drunk by 12:30AM, when Jim called.

“Kid, I’m going on a run. You game?”

“I’m sorta out of it, Jim.”

“I’ll be by in 15.”

Jim had checked the names on the beakers Julie had given them, and found those names on a list of abortive fetuses at Beth Israel Hospital.

“So how do you think Med-Cor got those fetuses? You think the hospital sold them?”

“You been drinking, kid?”

“A little bit. I’m alright, though.”

“Drinking home alone is not a good sign.”

“Jumping from rooftops is bad for your health, but what’re you gonna do?”

Jim shot me a look. “Suit yourself. I was thinking we could go by the hospital and see what we can find.”

“They’re just gonna let us check their records?”

“Umm . . . no.”

The night clerk at Beth Israel couldn’t have been more bored by her job.

“Hi, I’m looking for a patient named Jonathan Brand.”

“Lemme check.”

Check Check Check

“Hm. That’s funny.”

“What?”

“We don’t have a patient by that name, but it does come up on another list that should’ve been deleted.”

“Oh?”

“Your friend was a sperm donor?”

“Yeah, but he had some complications and he told me he had to stay over.”

“No record of that here.”

“Hmm. Okay, thanks . . . is that a picture of your daughter?”

“Yeah, Ashley. She’s six.”

“She’s beautiful. She hogged all of mommy’s good looks, hunh?”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

“Well, thanks for your help.”

Just then, I saw Jim exiting the room I had seen him walk in while I distracted the clerk.

“Excuse me sir, can I help you?”

“I took a shortcut, I’m sorry, how do I get out of here?”

“Right down that hall. That door wasn’t locked?”

“This one was, but not the one on the other side. I came from obstetrics.

Thanks!”

Jim left.

“I know that door was locked. Can you wait just a second?” She went to check it.

“Sure.” And I was out.

“What’d you find?”

“Nothing good. The names were on a list of embryos in the hospital’s sperm bank, but all of the records of the names Julie found were marked ‘salvageable.’

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Kid, this mystery is getting more mysterious by the minute.”

“So what do we do now?”

“We gotta find Atkins.

“And how are we gonna do that?”

“You’re not gonna like it.”

A few minutes later we were in front of the headquarters of my favorite corporate bio-engineering company.

“Fuck. Med-Cor again?”

“If we’re gonna find out what happened to Atkins, the answers are gonna be here.”

He was right, but I was petrified. We had had too many close calls, and I didn’t know how lucky I felt.

“Jim, I don’t know how lucky I feel.”

“Kid, I haven’t felt lucky in 15 years. Somebody’s gotta do the job, though, right?”

“I guess.”

We headed around the back of the building until we got to the alley. Halfway up, we came to a nondescript door marked DELIVERIES IN BACK ONLY. Above, a single light shone down like a beacon of accountability.

“Alright, look out for me, kid.”

I peered up and down the alley, looking for signs of life. Aside from a street soldier huddled up against a chain link fence, we were alone.

“You think my man over there’s got some info for us?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. Why don’t you go pump him? Here’s 20 bucks.”

I took the initiative.

“Hey man. HEY MAN!” The bum shifted around until he could see me. I held the 20 in my hand like a dangling carrot.

“You ever see anything suspicious going on back here?”

“Man, I don’t know what you talking ‘bout, brother. What are you *talking* ‘bout, man?”

“Back here, round that door. You ever see anything shady?”

“How am I supposed to know what’s shady?”

“Don’t play stupid with me. You want this 20 or not?”

Silence, and then. “Sometimes they be coming around here late at night. I thought that was kinda funny, but it wasn’t none of my business.”

“This your alley?”

“Damn right. I been here for six years.”

“Six years?” I tripped on that for a second. Usually when you see homeless people, you don’t consider their history; like, how *long* they’ve been homeless. They always seem to you like flashes in time, refuse that’s disappears as soon as you drive by. The thought that this man had been living this life – looking for handouts, always wondering where the next meal was gonna come from – for six years, was sobering.

“What did the people look like?”

“White people. They came by in an ambulance. I didn’t see no emergency,

though.”

“What’d they do?”

“They just unloaded some boxes and then they moved on. You know I thought something else was kinda funky, though.”

“What’s that?”

“They weren’t wearing paramedic uniforms. They had scrubs on, like they was doctors.”

“Gotcha. What was your name?”

“Clarence.”

“Thanks, Clarence.” I gave him the 20, and went back to meet Jim, who, by the way, was just getting the security door open.

“Just a second, kid.” The door came screeching open and we slipped inside. “Did you get any info?”

“Yeah. Seems they be making deliveries here late at night.”

“That’s not that unusual.”

“In an ambulance, by people in doctor’s scrubs.”

“That’s a little less usual. Let’s see what we can find.”

The hallway we entered into was unlit, except for an exit sign at the end of it.

“Is that where we’re headed?”

“I don’t think so.”

Jim instead led us down a side corridor until we came to a stairway entrance. We headed up in complete darkness, and I have to admit that by now my heart was racing a mile a minute. With the security they usually have here, I was expecting someone to come grab us at any second.

“Here we are.”

We got off at the 22nd floor again. I was sick of climbing stairs, and ready to find what we were looking for already.

“Here’s main security. You got the lock codes?”

“Yeah.” Julie had given me the codes she had decrypted for safekeeping, as the offices of Sebream and Woodruff were slowly becoming a prime candidate for sabotage.

“Just a second.” Jim’s digits flashed and rattled on the keypad until the door snapped open with a click.

The first thing I saw was a dull blue light. A dozen mini TV screens broadcast from behind a large black console. Each TV was constantly changing views; now, the cafeteria; now, the men’s washroom; now, the 35th floor elevators, and so on.

“I think you can see the whole building from here. Even outside. Look, there’s Clarence!”

“Use this lockpick on the drawers underneath that console. I need you to find anything that might refer to a storage space or a warehouse.”

I rifled through folder upon folder of incident reports, equipment requisitions, and take-out menus. The next drawer had a loose scattering of papers, many of them weeks old.

“Man, these fools need to clean out this desk.”

“Who’s Clarence?”

“Oh shit.”

“Shit what?”

“U-Load Moving and Storage. There’s a receipt here for rental of a storage

space for Tuesday.”

“The day Atkins was nabbed.”

“For sure, for sure.”

“Perfect. Let’s get outta here.”

“Cool.” Anxious to leave, something told me to take one last look at the bank of TVs.

“Oh shit.”

“What now?”

“Clarence’s alley.”

“Who’s Clarence?”

“That cat I talked to outside. Look. An ambulance.”

An ambulance had pulled up next to the delivery door. Jim and I took a seat, the proverbial eyes in the sky. We watched as two men in doctor’s scrubs unloaded three boxes each and entered the door. On set #4, we saw them walking down the hall where we first entered and continue down the direction I had thought Jim and I were going to go. Set #16 showed them enter the service elevator, and set #3 showed them inside the elevator. They were talking and joking, as if they couldn’t believe they were getting away with whatever they were getting away with. As they exited, they popped up on set #7, walking down the hall of the 42nd Floor.

“That’s where Julie and Melissa got spotted.”

They entered a room at the end of the hall, and then disappeared.

“What room was that?” I asked.

“4219. Figures there’s no camera in there.”

“Do we check it out?”

“Not tonight. I’m beat and you’re still drunk.”

“I’m not drunk!”

“Suit yourself. I’m beat. Tomorrow we find Atkins.”

Tomorrow was an eternity away. After being dropped off at around 3:45, I fell like a brick onto my bed, kicking my shoes across the room in a one-two maneuver that took out the phone and an old baseball glove on my desk. Jim was right. Although my adrenaline was up, my senses were as dull as a programming class. As I drifted off to sleep, I tried to retrace the path that led me here. As recently as three weeks ago, my only goals were to get a good enough job to pay rent, take Mel out once in a while, and have enough left over for an occasional bottle of Scotch. *Occasional*. Now, I was involved in a corporate scandal full of intrigue and suspense, and a murder investigation that could haunt me for the rest of my life. I had never been more excited.

Chapter Twelve

The next morning, I had my usual breakfast of eggs and coffee, and sped off on my bike to Sebrean and Woodruff. As soon as the elevator doors opened, I could smell trouble.

Alright, the cops scouring the place was a big tip-off. But I had learned to trust my nose, and that was what was most speaking to me now. It said “scapegoat.”

“Mr. Peters, can you come in here for a second?”

It was our old friend, Lieutenant Allison. It looked like he had had a bad

morning, but something told me he always looked like that. He ran a tired hand through his shock of sandy-blond hair, and let out a long sigh that was a celebration of coffee and cigarettes. All around the office, patrolmen were going through files and carrying around boxes. Woodruff was on the phone, yelling at someone as usual.

I strolled into the conference room that Allison had indicated – the very same one Julie had shown me to my first day at this crazy detective agency – and tried not to betray the fact that my heart was beating out of my chest. This was the real deal. If Jim or I were implicated in Lola’s murder, we were looking at serious jail time. No more traipsing on rooftops, no more high-tech stake-outs. This was prison, and some brother doing a number on your *ass*.

“Dude, Allison, you know we were with Lola when she got sho –”

“First of all, boy (*boy?*), it’s Lieutenant Allison.” He got right up in my face. “You show me respect, and maybe I’ll show you a little. I know you think you’re a big-shot detective now, but trust me, I been doing this for eight years, and I know a thing or two myself.”

He took a long slow walk around the conference table.

“Now, we been looking into your relationship with the deceased Ms. LaPlonica, and you won’t believe what we turned up.”

I eased back in my seat and prepared myself.

“What was the nature of your and Ms. LaPlonica’s relationship?”

“I told you, *Allison*.” He winced. “We went to college together and I looked her up when I thought she could help us with our investigation.”

“An investigation that just happened to be your very first one at this agency?”

“Yes.”

“We examined the sweatshirt she was wearing when she died. Would it surprise you to know that there were two types of hair on the inside of that shirt: long red ones and dark curly ones like yours?”

“No, I let Lola borrow that shirt the night before. We had been out all night and she didn’t have a change of clothes.”

“I see. Would it surprise you to know that we have a witness who saw you two leave a motel room together earlier that morning?”

“They didn’t see me enter? I had just come to bring her coffee.”

“And a shirt.”

“I had given that to her the night before.”

“I see. Do you know this man?”

The Cajun Detective pushed a picture of Thug No. 1 (code name: Vaneesh) across the table. I felt my throat tighten.

“I think he’s a security guard at the firm we’re investigating.”

“You think he’s a security guard, hunh?”

“I think so.”

“Were you aware of the fact that this man and Ms. La Plonica had been in a two-year relationship?”

“No.”

“We have it on good authority that the reason their relationship ended was that Ms. LaPlonica had started seeing someone else. Do you know who that could be?”

Atkins.

“No.”

“Then why would some of your neighbors talk about you having an altercation in your building with someone fitting this description two weeks ago?”

“I – I -” I had never reported the beating. Suspicious, suspicious.

“Lemme tell you what I see, Ellison. I see a little love triangle, here. I see you and Ms. Lola doing a little down-low tango, and when you didn’t wanna break it off, I see a very jealous boyfriend making a visit to your house.”

I hoped my pupils didn’t dilate noticeably.

“Now, I understand how it is. A bitch sets you up to get beat down by her man, you wanna get a little revenge. I understand how it is. Can’t no bitch set you up like that, right man? See, I understand.”

“You understand?”

“Yeah . . .”

“Well I don’t. Only a sick bastard would do something like that.”

Allison smiled a little and walked another circle around the desk. It was as if he was trying to think of the next thing to say. I took advantage.

“Listen, if you know this other guy beat me up, why don’t you check out his history of violence? I’ll bet he’s got a rec - “ I stopped short.

“Why would you say that? Why would you automatically think a security guard would have a record? What do you know about this individual?”

“Only what we’ve turned up in our investigation.”

“It’s quite a coincidence, if you ask me.”

“Quite.”

“You know, Ellison? I don’t like you too much. And it’s not for the stupid reasons you probably think I don’t.”

“I don’t care why you don’t like me.”

“Well, you’re gonna hear it cuz I’m the cop and I say so. I could tell you had me pegged the moment you saw me. Some redneck cop who was out to get you or your people or some shit like that? What your people don’t seem to realize is that redneck cops like me can smell that fear a mile away. And it’s not all black people that have that smell either.” He got up real close to me for this last part. “It’s only the guilty ones.”

It took me half the morning to get Sebrean in a room by ourselves.

“When did this happen?”

“I tried to call you this morning, but you might have already left.”

“I might have knocked the phone off the receiver. I do that sometimes.”

“Well anyway, they got here around six, they had a warrant and everything. Funny thing, though.”

“What?”

“Well, they got you and me dead to rights, but you’re the only one they seem to be focusing on.”

“I noticed that, too. Allison was feeding me some tired line about a romantic connection between me and Lola. Did you know Lola and that Vaneesh guy had been involved?”

“I had my ideas.”

“How?”

“There was a picture at Lola’s house of them together at Disneyland.”

“Hey, Jim, how could you have possibly known about Atkins before Lola told you? I met him before my first day here.”

“Kid, maybe it’s time we let you in on a little something.”

I was kinda prepared for this all to start making sense, but not in the way that it did. What followed was a meeting with Woodruff and Sebream that made me redefine my perception of reality.

“You were staking out Lola’s that morning?”

“Yeah, she’d been a target of mine for a little while,” said Jim the Deceiver.

“And what made you think I’d be a good fit for your company?”

“Well, we didn’t at first. We did a little snooping on your site history and uploaded some files from your computer, though, and were very impressed,” said Woodruff, suddenly cybergeeky.

“Impressed with what? The fact that I wanted a job?”

“And your interests - logic problems sites, looking into penal law - those are all good signs for potential investigators.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“No, I’m not kidding you.”

“And you know web code?”

“Actually I teach it over at Orange County Community College. That’s why I wanted to see what you had to say about those hacks at You-Cla.”

“It’s U-C-L-A.” It was all I had.

“Whatever. Anyway, we needed a programmer and you fit into our ongoing investigation, so . . .”

“So you responded to my resume.”

“Yeah . . . no hard feelings, right kid? It’s business, is all.”

My mind was swimming. Turns out, Jimmy Sebream had been

investigating Lola's connection to Med-Cor from before the time that she'd even met Atkins. In fact, it wasn't even Lola they were investigating.

"Atkins? You were looking at him all along? That's why you were pumping Lola so hard?"

"Remember when I told you we were looking at Med-Cor CEOs for info that could be used against them? That was mostly true. It was actually BioSign who hired us to find out if there was anything dirty with the way Med-Cor stole away their top research biophysicist."

"Which led you to Lola," said me.

"Which led us to you," said Jim. "You and your girlfriend paid your late-night visit just hours after Atkins showed up at Lola's place all beat up, so I thought you had something to do it. All Milt had to do was get your Internet account info, and the rest is mystery."

"And imagine my surprise when I saw you knew programming," said Woodruff. "I been looking for someone for weeks to ease some of the load of implementing our new systems. Once we cleared you as a suspect in our case, we thought you might be helpful."

"Also, I needed a new assistant."

"And Jim needed a new assistant."

"That reminds me," I said. "What happened to the last guy who did my job?"

"Listen kid, we don't have to suss this whole thing out right now. Why don't you go home and get some rest? You been through a lot today," said the suddenly evasive Jim.

"It's only 11:30."

“Well, so it is,” said Woodruff.

We all sat in awkward silence. Jim spoke up.

“Well nobody’s gonna be able to get any work done here with all the pandemonium. Go on home and we’ll call you when the fuzz is out of our hair.”

“Okay.”

I don’t remember walking to my bike, putting on my helmet, or even starting up the motor. I guess I couldn’t really be mad at Woodruff. It’s not like he outright lied to me. It’s just that when he said he was putting aside all the firm’s cases to take mine on, he was really just taking one they’d already had. Gotta love the City of Angles.

The next thing I remember is heading down Santa Monica toward Jessica’s house – which made absolutely no sense because I knew she was in class. I went up anyway, absent-mindedly grabbed a water from the fridge, and turned on the History Channel. It was an old war show. I imagined myself amongst the scrambling frantic soldiers clinging to life. I was Corporal Gutshot, pleading with my buddies to go on without me. And now I was Sergeant Steelnuts, single-handedly charging the enemy bunker before lofting that last grenade of the day. I sat shell-shocked, covered with mud and blood, missing my beautiful dancer girlfriend back home and her long legs around me.

I woke up with Jessica’s keys jangling in my ear.

“Oh, hey sweetheart. I tried calling you earlier. How was your day?”

“It’s been better.”

“Do you wanna talk?”

“I wanna apologize.”

“Buy me dinner.”

We ended up at El Coyote in West Hollywood. It has always been Jessica's favorite, and I dug it because they didn't mess around with a lot of pretense – they served good Mexican food well. It was time for me to come clean.

"I'm not sure if I know how to put my trust in you, Jess."

"That's a little hurtful. You sure know how to put other things in me."

Fucking *ouch*. I sure do know how to pick 'em.

"See, that's fucked up because you know I had this thing when you first met me. Do you remember what we talked about that first night on the couch?"

"I remember."

"And though I've gotten a lot better since I've been with you . . . I'm going through some shit right now where I don't know what I should be doing."

"What's confusing you?"

"I guess I was just always taught that if I end up in a situation that I can't handle, then it's my fault and I gotta figure a way to get out of it. I think I'm a man, but that's easy to say when you're dealing with boys."

Jess was looking at me with understanding and patience; so I continued. "I'm starting to feel now I'm mixed up in some shit that's gonna be with me for life. And I didn't wanna get you caught up in all that."

"But Ellison, don't you realize that no one can do everything by themselves? I mean, the point is, we're supposed to help each other, and when I need help, you get my back. Is that so hard for you?"

"I can't help but feel weak if I ask for help, especially –" I stopped short.

"No, go ahead. I know what you were gonna say. Especially from a woman."

"It's just always been seen as a sign of weakness for me. Ever since I can remember."

"Do you remember feeling this way before your father left?"

"No . . ."

"When's the last time you talked to him?"

"The last time he needed computer help."

"When was that?"

"Let's see . . . Peters Furniture did a new-product upgrade in May so it's been, umm, seven months.

"And the only thing you guys ever talk about is his business?"

"That's the only thing he's interested in."

"Ellison, have you ever considered that maybe he doesn't know *how* to ask about your life? You're not always the most open person . . ."

"Jessica if he wants to know about my life, he'll ask about it. I don't see what's so hard about that."

"If they don't think that it's welcome, some people won't pry."

"How can it be prying? It's my father!"

"Sometimes that's the problem."

"So, listen, I want you to help me work on this problem that I have."

"You want me to help you with trust?"

"Yeah, you know, just - when you see me doing some knuckleheaded shit just, you know . . ."

"Call you on it?"

"I think it'll help me grow."

"I'd be glad to."

"I'm not open?"

"Maybe a better term would be 'forthcoming.'"

"I'll buy that."

"And it's HE'S my father, by the way."

"What'd I say? 'It's'?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Hmm."

She grabbed my hand from across the long table.

"Thank you for this talk, Ellison. I feel honored that you're asking for my help. I love you."

"I love you, too."

Proper and then some.

That night I lay awake in bed thinking of how I had deceived Jessica. Not by lying to her, which I hadn't done, but by omitting some of the truth. At first going off on capers and shit was just fun, but now part of me needed that thrill to keep me alive. I had been living underwater, going about a completely normal existence but doing it on auto-pilot. Although I had wonderful people around me that loved me, I didn't care a whit about the life I had been living. I felt like I had been betraying my birthright, focusing only on personal success and stability. For me, there was no honor in the rigid scholarship of scribes, or the bleating platitudes of your local merchant. I was a warrior by nature, and would have been so in any country, at any time. Fighting to the last sunset, only resting when the innocent were safe. When those bullies were chasing me, Jim, and Lola, part of me wanted one of those bullets to connect, to put an end to the life that

was being wasted by me.

Now, lying in the dark, I realized what had really been drawing me. I didn't have a death wish, I had a life wish; a wish to live properly, and with some stinking nobility, for God's sake. I wanted to *be* somebody. That was the truth that Sebrean and Woodruff had awakened in me. Before, I was *dying* inside, Jess.

Chapter "Fourteen"

I titled this chapter Fourteen even though it is the 13th chapter mainly because I wanted to stave off as much bad luck as possible for the events that are about to occur. Fat lot of good it did me, though.

I spent about an hour sitting on the edge of the bed wondering if I should go into work the next morning. I sat as Jess showered, powdered, prettied, and primped herself up; sat as she dressed, dried, flitted about, gave me a pat on my head, gave me a quick lick of my dick; sat as she fretted about me, and fussed over me, and became frustrated that she couldn't make it all better before she had to go. I told her I was fine, and gave her a gentle nudge the fuck out the door. Then I got to work.

I hacked my way into California social security. I got family records, medical histories, and vital passwords. I downloaded bank records, checked balances, and noted spending habits. I found out every iota of information on Jim Sebrean and Milton Woodruff that my hacking skills allowed. By the time I was done, I had a handy little dossier on each, and decided to ride the bus to work so I'd have time to look them over. By the time I walked into the S&W Detective

Agency, I was as well-armed as an army cyborg from the future. With twice the personality.

“Ellison!” Jim Sebrean beamed, “we weren’t sure if you were gonna make it in. It’s half past eleven.”

“Yeah. I’m late.”

“Well that’s fine, son, I was just concerned, that’s all. You up to going on any stakeouts, or would you rather ride a desk, today?”

“No, let’s go on a caper. I could use the air.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Instead of looking for Atkins right away, Jim figured we should locate Melissa first – it’d probably be easier for him to trust us if the first person he saw wasn’t the same person Lola had to force out of her apartment the week before ago. At least that’s why he said we were gonna find her first. I got the feeling that, like me, he wanted to make sure that the caper at Med-Cor didn’t get her into serious trouble.

So, I roamed the streets for Mel again, but this time I did it Peters’ style. In my waning days with Melissa, she took me to a couple of the crackhouses she used to get her stuff at, presumably to let me know how safe it was. I think she thought I might find it somehow less unacceptable since I was stone drunk half the time.

We cruised past one of those places today -- a condemned townhouse near Hoover and Olympic -- with all the aplomb of a charging bull. The problem was, I simply didn’t know crackhouse etiquette. If you wanted to score, how do you do it without looking like a cop? As I was to find out, not being a cop was my

best cover.

“Yeah, um, can you help me out?”

“What you need?”

“I want, um, I want a ball.”

“Just one?”

“Yeah.”

“Go on over into that alley and drop a 20.”

I did, and did, and in a minute the 30ish cat in faded jeans and an old Member’s Only jacket joined me.

“You ain’t got to keep looking around, man, there ain’t no police around here.”

“You got X-ray vision?”

“I got people within a three-block radius. We know who all the undercovers are in this ‘hood. And believe me,” he said as he simultaneously picked up my cash and dropped the rock, “if you were new on the job, I would’ve heard about you already.”

As he was leaving . . .

“You seen Melissa?”

“That trick don’t mess around here no more. She goin’ out with that rapper, now.”

“Ah.”

Melissa was goin’ out with a rapper? Probably that cat she was all kissy with at her house that night. That girl always knew how to party. I met back up with Jim and shared the scoop.

“So where to, now?”

It wasn't so hard to find a list of all the black Navigators that had been sold in L.A. in the past month. Making sense of all the names was a little tougher, though.

"Alright, so we can eliminate anyone's whose driver license's birthdate has them over the age of, say, 35."

"Check."

Jim and Julie were with me on the floor of Jim's office, going through a list of recent car registrees.

"And we can also probably eliminate anyone who's financing, or who paid with credit."

"Why?" said Jim.

"Remind me to have a talk with you about black people and credit."

Julie snickered.

"What now?"

"How many people do you have?"

"Six," said Julie.

"Three," said Jim.

"Give your lists to me."

"Mom?"

"Hey baby, how's it going?"

"It's going pretty good, I have to say, mom. I really like my new job."

"Oh really, the people you work with are nice?"

"Very nice."

"And they're paying you well?"

"Good enough. I don't have many needs, you know."

"I know. I am so glad you didn't get that need to surround yourself with possessions from your father."

"Mom."

"I know, baby, I'm sorry."

"Hey, can I speak to Sherrie for a second?"

"Oh, I'm so glad you want to talk to your sister. She'll never admit it but she really misses you, Ellison."

"I miss her, too."

"Sheritha!"

"What!"

"Ellison's on the phone!"

A second.

"I got it!" A pause, a click, and then, "Whattup, nig-GA?"

"Whattup, freak. What's goin' on?"

"Oh, you know, you know. Keeping it rizzy."

"Right. 'Rizzy.' You're going to college, right?"

"Fuck you, Ellison. Get a job."

"Hey, I need Miss Musical Encyclopedia."

"Just a second." A series of whirrs and clicks came through over the phone, and then a mock-automated voice: "Hello, Miss Musical Encyclopedia, how can I help you?"

"What does the name John Plowman mean to you?"

"Um . . . nothing."

“How about Jack Blades?”

“Wasn’t he the singer with Night Ranger?”

“Um . . . I don’t know. What about Sam Washington?”

“I don’t know. Ellison, are these names supposed to mean something to me?”

“Bear with me. How about Alex LeGros?”

“Alex LeGros? He’s with Fear Chamber. He goes by the name Full House.”

“Fear Chamber. They do ‘Party in My Lexus,’ right?”

“Ignorant-ass song. Them niggas don’t do nothing but talk about how many bitches be givin’ it up to them.”

“Hey, where are they out of?”

“I think they’re from out around your way, actually. Pasadena or Inglewood or one of them places.”

“You’re my girl, Peters.”

“You my nigga, dog.”

“A-I-I-ght then, peace out.”

“Peace out.”

“I can’t believe you talk to your sister that way.” It was Jessica, looking fine, eating carrots on my bed.

“She likes it.”

“She is a young lady, and needs a good example to be set for her.”

“That’s what my mom’s for.”

“That should be what you’re both for.”

I couldn’t wait to call Jim.

“I have to call Jim.”

“What did the Little Thug have to say?”

“That cat Melissa’s been running around with is the dude from Fear Chamber.”

“Which one?”

“The short one.”

“Oh, he’s cute.”

“The *short* one?”

“Yeah, the short one. What’s his name? Full Deck, Full Suit?”

“Full House.”

“Yeeeeeah, Full House. He’s kinda rough, though. Doesn’t seem like Melissa’s type.”

“You ever met Julio?”

“Julio’s all talk. He’s from Pacific Palisades.”

“That little runt is from Pac Pali? And he was in my face trying to get all ugly? I should’ve knocked him out.”

“So where are you from? Brookline? Bunch a roughneck niggas up in there, hunh?”

“You know, woman, I think you could be doing something a little more useful with that smart mouth of yours.”

I eased onto the bed and straddled her torso.

“My mouth *is* smart. That’s how it knows better than to put nasty things inside of it.”

“You didn’t think it was so nasty half an hour ago.”

“It was nasty, but it was useful.”

“Why don’t you make yourself useful?”

It was no use. After several more attempts to procure oral sex, I gave up the chase and made the call that I knew would send me dashing into the night.

“Jimmy? I got the name. It was on Julie’s list. An Alexander LeGros.”

“You got the address?”

“In black and white.”

“You ready to roll? Top villain’s got the engine warm and the Cristal chillin.”

“I’m sorry, can I speak to Jim Sebrean, please?”

“You like that one, kid? Julie taught me that one.”

“Yeah, you’re funky. Be here in a half.”

“See ya then.”

“Bye.”

Full House lived in a decked-out two-story crib in Baldwin Hills. Me and Jim parked on the street, away from nosy neighbors and streetlights, and looked for signs of life. The Navigator was absent.

“Well, if she’s in there, she’s sleepin.’ I don’t see any lights, and most of these old houses were made so that every room had a window.”

“Why?”

“In the ‘40s, part of the appeal of moving to the West Coast was the sun. What was the point if your house was all shut in?”

“You used to live around here, hunh?”

“Yeah, that was a long time ago. They were offering reduced mortgages to

newlyweds.”

“That was your first wife or your second?”

Jim was silent for a minute.

“I don’t mind you checking up on me, kid, but I would remind you to remember who your enemies are.”

“And you can tell me, Jim?”

“Kid, have you ever wondered about the fact that this multinational company has you on their hit list and you’re still wandering around smelling flowers?”

“I know I had something to do with it.”

“Have you ever considered the fact that your friends might be more dangerous than your enemies?”

“Fuck you, Jim.”

He chuckled. “You know, kid, if you don’t think Sebrean and Woodruff is right for you we can go ahead and start the paperwork in the morning.”

We both sat, too proud to admit that we liked working together. I didn’t want to cross the line, only show that I didn’t like being manipulated. I gave my answer to Jim’s suggestion with three words.

“There she is!”

And there she was, opening one of the 2nd-floor windows, and then retreating back into the dark house. I slipped out of the car before Jim could get a word in edgewise, and made my way up the outer trellis, a bootleg Romeo. Once I had balanced myself on a tree limb and a drain-pipe, I pressed my face up to the glass to see what I could see.

The room was empty, but a flicker of light in one of the mirrors caught my

eye. The mirror was turned towards a bathroom, where I saw Melissa taking a long drag off a crack pipe.

“Melissa.”

I could see her rush to hide the pipe and pull out . . . a gun. I retreated behind the trellis, so as not to become the victim of an unfortunate household accident.

“Melissa, it’s me.”

“Ellison? What are you doing out there? How did you find me?”

“Long story. You look good.”

“Yeah, right.”

She did. Despite the smell of cocaine on her breath, her dirty blond hair formed a perfect halo around her face.

“We were worried about you. Weren’t we gonna meet back at the office that day?”

“Yeah, you know, that whole scene freaked me out. I know I should’ve called but, I was just so petrified.”

“And you wanted to get high?”

She was quiet.

“So how can I help you, ex-boyfriend-who-has-no-right-to-judge-me?”

“I was just worried, honey. No judgments.”

“How can I help you?”

“We still need you.”

“Fuck that.”

“Dude, you saw what these people are doing. And who knows what happened to poor Atkins?”

“Why don’t you call the police and tell them?”

“The cops aren’t so inclined to believe me these days. I’ve become sort of a suspect in an investigation.”

“What investigation?”

“Lola’s death.”

“What? I thought you were with her when she got – nevermind. Listen, I’d really like to help you, but –”

“You won’t even have to do anything. Just sit in the car.”

“Sit in the car?”

“Mostly.”

She looked back in, nervously. I could tell she wanted to smoke.

“It’s good for you, baby,” I said.

I don’t where that came from, but it came out before I could make sense of it. What I really meant to say was “It’s good for you to hang out with me and do something that will make you feel good about yourself, rather than hiding in a bathroom trying to smoke the demons away. You’re better than that, baby.” But what I said was, “It’s good for you, baby.”

But, amazingly enough, she heard what I meant. She always did. She closed the window, and in a few minutes was face-to-face with me at the front door. I put my arm around her, led her to Jim’s paddy wagon, and we hit the night running.

We decided to hit U-Load Moving and Storage first, because late night was the time we figured the crack Med-Cor security team would be most likely either watching TV or sleeping off a pizza high. We rolled around to the back entrance

and were greeted by a ten-foot-high gate and a double-bolted lock.

“You got any lockpicks that can handle this?” I asked, just in case.

“No. You know how to use a blowtorch?”

“You’re kidding.”

“Of course I am. We are going to proffer a bribe.”

Jimmy went around back and left Melissa and I to the awkwardness of the moment. Melissa shifted weight to her left leg, chewed her fingernail, and looked up into the October sky. We didn’t know how to be detectives around each other. We didn’t know if we should talk about a strategy or talk about how weird it was that we were doing something that needed a “strategy.”

“When’s the last time you been outta the city, Ellison?”

“Jess and I went to Malibu last month.”

“Does that count?”

“I don’t know.”

What I needed was a stiff drink. I imagined how the cool liquid goes down your gullet, exploding icy-hot in your tummy. You nod off gently, cool in the knowledge that your warm buzz was vibrating in synch with the universe. I looked over as Melissa mooned wistfully at the horizon. Funny. She wasn’t feeling awkward. She had gone to her happy place of smoke-filled rooms and nighttime flights, just like I had. All of a sudden I couldn’t wait for Jim to get back.

“We have to be veddy, veddy quiet.” Jim had jogged up from inside the complex. “Sherron went to get a burrito, and if we’re here when he gets back he’s calling the police.”

“Fair enough.”

Jim led us around to a door in the gate and let us in. We stealthily made our way around the complex full of railway car--sized storage bins until Jim stopped short behind one and motioned for us to "shush." He waved me up to have a look. Marked quite conspicuously was the end of our journey: Number 24. I could hear canned laughter and see flickering light coming from underneath the door. Jim pulled me close and whispered.

"When I give the signal, throw a rock at the bin, *But don't throw it too hard.* When whoever's inside comes out, go in, get Atkins, and get back to the car."

"Check."

Jim took position next to the door of the bin and gave me the thumbs-up. I gently lofted a nearby rock, which landed with a dull CLANK on the side of the car.

All of a sudden, the TV was off and a gun was cocked. I have to admit that at this point I was a little nervous -- but Jim had gotten us this far. The door opened, and the first thing to come out was a gun, snub-nosed and ornery. Then, a member of Med-Cor's security team finally pulled a move that garnered my respect. Instead of just slowly eeking out the door and hoping not to get popped, this fool sprang out and leapt to one side of the door. Whoever was there would have been taken completely by surprise and by now probably dead. Fortunately for us, Jim was standing on the other side of the door.

"Freeze, badass." Jim stuck something in his back and the thug threw his hands in the air; he did not wave them, he did not care. Jim reached around and grabbed the thug's gun, and tossed the stick he had been holding on him to the ground. He moved my man over into the light, but it was no one we had ever seen before.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“You go on without me.”

“What? Melissa, the whole reason you’re hear is to convince Atkins we’re friends.”

“You can just tell him I’m outside.”

“We don’t have time for this. The last time I saw this guy I did not make a good impression. Let’s just get him and go.”

Mel muttered something under her breath, but she brought up my rear.

“Jackson, is that you? Is this your new boyfriend? Say, homeboy, I hope you keep her in good supply, cuz if you don’t she’ll shit on you in a minute.”

“Fuck you, Ahkmed,” Mel says.

“Already had the pleasure, thank you. But I’ll take sloppy seconds this time if my man’s already paid for the hour.”

I didn’t see it coming, but I suppose if I had the ability to foretell the various machinations of the female mind, I’d be a much saner man. In a second, Melissa was on Ahkmed, clawing and scratching at him like she was creating a piece of modern art. Unfortunately, the momentum of her attack knocked her, Jim, and this Master of Mind Games to the ground, sending the gun sliding underneath one of the cars. Then, in one move, he elbowed Jim in the jaw and reached around and grabbed Melissa around the neck. Jim was out cold.

“Alright, motherfucker, now go inside and grab my cell phone, or I’ll snap this bitch’s neck.”

This directive was directed at me. For a second I froze, my mind not accustomed to making life-or-death decisions. I then walked into the storage bin, and looked around for the cell phone. In the corner, in a shivering, huddled

mass, was a dark figure with his hands behind his back.

“Don’t worry, we’re here to help.”

“O - okay.”

I walked back out with the phone. The situation outside remained as grim as before.

“Alright, put it on the ground, and kick it over to me.”

I reached down to the ground, and then I looked up.

“Jim, no!”

Jim was out cold. Unfortunately, the thug had to turn around to see that, which he did obligingly, and I was on him. By the time he had turned back around to me, I was two strides from him and running. The force of my Sunday-afternoon tackle knocked Melissa free, and I was on top of this guy wailing without abandon, hoping to knock him out quick and clean. This was a fine plan, except for the fact that he was stronger and a better wrestler than me, and in a second he had switched me around to the ground, and had his hands firmly around my neck.

Choking . . .

Choking . . .

Ch- chok . . .

BLAM!

And just like that, Ahkmed was slumped on top of me, dead weight. I rolled him off and grabbed the gun from Melissa, who was shaking and crying.

“Wh - What do we do now, Ellison?”

“Go get Atkins and take him back to the car. I’ll get Jim.”

“I didn’t know what else to do.”

“You did fine. Go get our man.”

“He was hurting you, right?”

“Melissa, baby, you saved my life. If you hadn’t have acted I’d be dead now. But we need to keep our senses for a little while and make this okay. Be strong for me now. I need you.”

“O - okay.”

I stepped over Ahkmed to my silent partner and tried to will him to consciousness. Also, that’s when I started to hear the sirens.

“Jim! Jim! Wake up, buddy, we need you.”

He was slow to rouse.

“Ne - need medicine.”

“What?!”

“Heart. Heart medicine.”

Fuck. I reached into Jim’s jacket and fished out his bottle of pills. I ran into the trailer and got him Ahkmed’s bottle of Crystal Geyser. Melissa was helping Atkins to his feet. By the looks of things, it seemed he had been in that position for a long time and his legs were not interested in the urgency of the situation. Anyway you slice it, this was gonna be a close call.

“Mel, we gotta move, baby.”

“I know. I can hear.”

I ran back out and helped Jim with his medicine. The sirens were breathing heavily in my ear. After a minute, Jim had caught his breath.

“What happened to the girl?”

“She’s fine. Dude, we gotta move.”

He sat up and rubbed his jawbone. When he saw Ahkmed, he snapped to

attention.

“Fuck!”

“I know, go get the car started.”

“You got him?”

“I got him.”

Jim ambled off, still woozy and clutching his chest. I reached over to sling Ahkmed’s big ass over my shoulders and started to slowly make my way to the back gate. As I did that, Melissa and Atkins sidled past me with Atkins stopping every few steps to rub his legs. This was the most broke-ass getaway I had ever seen. As I heard cruisers pulling up to the front entrance, I prayed it’d take a minute for them to make their way through the maze of this place.

When the eternity of this escape had ended, Jim had the chariot blazing, and he was at the ready to help me load Ahkmed into the car; he had already put plastic on the backseat for the blood. As we sped off with Jim and Atkins up front and me, Melissa, and Ahkmed crowded into the back, I saw two patrolmen running up to the back gate in hot pursuit. Jim had parked in an alley leading onto a busy intersection, so our only hope now was that it had been too dark for them to get a good look at the car.

Chapter Fifteen

The ride back was not a pleasant one.

“What were you thinking going after him like that?”

Jim yelling at Melissa.

“I don’t know. I’m sorry. I – I just snapped. I’m sorry.”

“How is he, Ellison?”

“Not good.”

“Not good like what? Like he just might pull through?”

“Not good like dead.”

“Fuck.”

In a minute, Jimmy had pulled up to Beth Israel, the same hospital where we had gotten the initial information on those black-market embryos. Jim parked in a darkened corner of the turnaround, and he and I dragged Ahkmed over to some bushes. Jim wiped the gun clean, put it in the corpse’s jacket, and we were off again into the night, her arms warm and inviting.

“Okay, kid, here’s what we’re gonna do. I’m gonna take you back to the Starburst. Tell the front-desk guy you want a room for Michael Hammerstein. That way he’ll know not to ask for an ID.”

“Okay.”

“When you get to the room, close the windows and stay there till I call you. When you get hungry, order room service. And no outside calls. The fewer people know where you are, the better for you and them. If you need to call me, call the office number and leave a message asking for Darlene, that way I’ll know it’s you.”

“Gotcha.”

Jim picked up his cell phone and started to dial.

“Milt? It’s me. Listen, how do you connect the office phone to my beeper? Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Okay wait—you press what now?”

“I can do it.”

I grabbed the phone from Jim and stepped into the big wide world of Milton Woodruff.

“Hey there, son. In a bit of a pickle, hunh?”

“You could tell?”

“I knew the minute I heard Jimbo’s voice. I’ve been in a couple of scrapes with him myself.”

“Yeah.”

“Listen, son, you just do as he tells you and you’ll be fine.”

“Okay.”

“Now call the office and push *83 when the machine beeps. Then enter Jimmy’s beeper number. That’ll do ya.”

“Alright, Mr. Woodruff. Thanks.”

“Call me Milton, son.”

“Right. Milton. Bye.”

“Mr. Atkins, my name is Jim Sebrean. I’m gonna take you back to my place. You’ll be safe there.”

“Melissa?”

“Yeah, Ollie?”

“Who are these people?”

When Melissa and I got into the room, the tension went over to the bed and made itself comfortable, and had neither the courtesy nor the inclination to make room for either of us.

“Melissa – “

“Don’t, Ellison. Please.”

I didn't. I knew when my empty words of comfort weren't wanted.

Mel went straight for the bathroom, and in a few seconds I could hear the shower running. I clicked on ESPN, but you wouldn't know it, since after about 15 minutes I couldn't tell you a single story I had seen on SportsCenter. I leaned over and grabbed the Bible from the nightstand drawer. Flipping through it, I wondered what lessons it had to teach me for the situation I was in now. What ancient parables could it show me that made sense of back-alley drug deals and an illegal trade in human life? It seemed like a children's book, with color-by-numbers prophets and a trite list of the Top Ten Things Not to Do to Your Neighbor.

"Looking for inspiration?"

Melissa was standing in the doorway of the bathroom, wrapped in a bathrobe I was sure didn't come with the room.

"I guess. Maybe some answers."

"You won't find it in there. That's one of the most violent books ever written. My dad used to quote a parable a day to me from that book. And somehow he still found justification in there to give my mom the backhand every time he thought she wasn't listening good enough."

"Mr. Jackson hit your mom?"

"Not George Jackson, my biological father. But George is my real dad as far as I'm concerned. He married my mom a year after my other dad left and adopted me a year after that. And he just picked right up like I was his own. Used to take me to the park every Sunday morning, just me and him."

"Where's your biological dad now?"

"Prison."

Damn. She had never told me. No wonder she hated when I called her battered-wife mom and cool-ass dad the Trust Fund. I am an asshole without equal.

“I can sleep on the chair.”

“No. If you don’t mind. I’d like you to sleep up here. No hanky-panky.”

I switched off the light and she cuddled up to me, saying goodnight with a sweet kiss on the area just between my cheek and my neck. I lay there, fully clothed, dreaming of a day tomorrow with no violence, no running away, no shooting.

Jimmy didn’t call the next morning. We ordered up some breakfast, and watched the tube till 2.

“I’m getting antsy. Maybe Jim has some news for us,” Mel suggested.

I knew Jim hadn’t forgotten about us, but I made a call to make her feel better.

“Yeah, I’d like to speak to Darlene, please. She recently gave me some advice on a case she could help me with and I’d like to know what to do now. Thanks. Okay, I’ve left a message. Hopefully he’ll call back.”

“Oooh, I have an idea of what we can do.”

“What?”

“Pink Dot. We could play Hi-Lo.”

My stomach fluttered. An afternoon with Melissa in a small motel room with a bottle of Scotch? It was a recipe for disaster. I made the call.

“Yeah, I’d like a bottle of Dewars, a pack of cards, and two pints of Ben & Jerry’s Chunky Monkey to the Sunburst Motel, Room 8. Thanks.”

I looked over at Mel. She was all hearts and flowers.

“Nice call with the ice cream, El. You spoil me.”

“You slay me.”

The next few hours were a blur of shots, laughs, and card-flipping insanity. Melissa and I had first hooked up by playing this game in the dorms at UCLA. We were always the last two people in our circle of friends playing after everyone else had passed out.

By 6pm, Mel and I were sprawled on the bed, lit out of our heads, with hands lightly grazing other body parts. I thought of Jessica. As great as she was, we seldom had straight up fun together like this. She was more like a grown-up girlfriend. Mel was like a homeboy. With good tits.

As I stroked her back, I could feel it arching out to me in that old familiar way. I could feel her breath blowing hot on my chest. I imagined her eyelids drooping lazily.

“Are you drunk?” she said to me.

“Are you kidding?” I slurred.

She leaned up lazily. “So what do you wanna do now?”

The phone rang. Or, rather, the phone walked in and caught us, and demanded to know what the hell we thought we were doing. I hesitated a moment, and looked at Mel. Weirdly, she seemed relieved, too.

“Hello?”

“Hey kid. I’m on my way over. Tell your girlfriend she’s off the hook. Lola was right -- our friend from last night was big into the Armenian mob -- the cops probably won’t even investigate.”

“Sweet! I mean, you know.”

"I know. I'll be there in ten minutes." I hung up the phone.

"Jim's gonna be over soon. He says the cops think Akhmed was killed because he was part of the mob. So it looks like you're safe."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Wow."

"You look disappointed."

"A little. In our police department."

"Yeah, well. They're just trying to make a living, I guess."

We started to clean up the room and ourselves, but it wasn't enough to prevent the broad look of distaste on Jimmy's face when he walked in.

"I don't know how you kids do it. All this in one night?"

"And most of a day. Shut up, Jim. At least you've seen the outside world in the past 24 hours."

"Good point. Okay, so here's the deal. Melissa, we're taking you back to your buddy's house in Baldwin Hills. I still suggest you stay low-profile for the next week or two. Ellison, you and I are going to work."

"How did I know?"

"You're psychic, I guess. Let's move."

You won't believe where we went next. Well, actually, you probably will believe it because our next move made as much sense as any of the other ones we've made in this crazy case. So, today, the skies over Med-Cor were a screaming crystal-blue, the weather practically an advertising brochure for Southern California. I hoped it was a portent of good things to come, but I had

my doubts. Jimmy tossed me a business suit that Julie had gone by my house to pick up. As he suspected, she had noticed two cars outside my house with men inside sitting around. Only us three could grasp the irony of both the thugs and the cops staking out my house, but both being too sly to notice the other while Julie smelt them both out like bad fish. She was a jewel, that one, and I'd have to remember to give her a smack on the ass for her good work – done in a nonthreatening manner in the spirit of appreciation towards a coworker, of course. Anyway, it was clear by now: either we crack this case with Med-Cor or I was going to wind up either dead, in jail, or some unimaginable combination of both.

Oh, you may ask what the business suit was for, but you really shouldn't. It confirmed my worst fears and more than likely your keenest suspicions: Jimmy had decided to go to the top. He had made an appointment today with the president of Med-Cor, Steven Kline, the very same schmoe I had run into my first day on the job.

“How'd you make the appointment?”

“I had Julie call saying I was the head of BioTech. Remember that day she was in there? She put a transceiver on his phone line. As soon as his secretary called back to confirm that it really was Douglas Strand, the call went straight to our office.”

“So he thinks he's meeting with the head of BioTech today?”

“Kinda neat, hunh?”

“Yeah. Neat.”

Naturally, this time we had no problem getting in. We had been given so much executive clearance that we practically had to wipe the troop of executive

assistants off our shoes. When we got to the waiting area, Kline kept us waiting for a total of 48 seconds. He then welcomed us in with smiles, handshakes, and the kind of warmth that only befits corporate sharks of our stature.

“Doug, nice to finally meet you.”

“You too, Steven. This is our head of business operations, James Paulson.”

“How do you do, James? Boy, you look like you’re right out from college. Have we met before? Something about your face is very familiar.”

“Ever been to Boston?” I answered. “I was with Chemical Mass Pharmaceuticals for six years up until last December.”

“As a matter of fact I lived in Salem for a year, but that was way before your time. Where in Boston are you from?”

“Brookline.”

“Nice neighborhood. So what can I get for you two?”

“Bourbon for me. Kid?”

He kept up the “kid” schtick. “I’ll have a Scotch rocks with a wedge of lime.”

Kline got up and actually made the drinks himself rather than having a secretary do it. Classy. He was buying our ruse hook, line, and sinker.

“Steven, I want to thank you for meeting with us on such short notice. When I found out I had to come to LA today, I just had to meet the man who took away my top biophysicist.”

“Well, you know business.”

“Sure do. How’s Oliver working out for you guys?”

“He’s a credit to the company. We really lucked out that he decided to relocate. Have your been people been getting the kind of research sharing that

we agreed to?"

"Very definitely, I have no doubt that when either of our companies finds a way to refine the gene-enhancement technology, the market will be large enough for both of us to profit handsomely."

Whoa. Jim must have been up rehearsing with Atkins all night.

"I have no doubts. Doug, I hope you'll forgive me for saying so, but you sound a little different than you do on the phone."

"That's bronchitis. It flares up every once in while and I started smoking again last week, so . . ."

"Oh, you can't do that."

"I know."

"The head of a health and medicine corporation?"

"I appreciate the irony. I plan to stop again soon."

"So," he got down to business, "is this purely a social visit?"

"I wish I could say it was, Steven, but I am having a small problem I hope you can clear up."

"What's that?"

"It has to do with our acquisition of research materials."

"Yes?"

"Well, since the new FDA regulations, we simply can't supply our research teams with enough viable stem cells to perform thorough research. I thought you might want to let go of some of the secrets on the sheer volume of experimentation you've been doing. My people tell me you're pumping out two or three studies a week. The best we can do is three every two weeks and that's if we cut down our control groups by half. Care to let an old scientist in on your

secrets?”

It was a bold move. Jim knew it, Kline knew it. Even if Jim had been the CEO of BioTech, it was amazing gall to inquire into practices of a rival, cooperative research aside.

“Well, as you know, Doug, we only hire the best to work in our research department. Andrew O’Neill has innovated quite a brilliant method for speeding up response time in our gene cultures. He synthesized a protein that acts as sort of a DNA-strand bypass, reading every other base pair and coming up with 92% accuracy. I’d be happy to call him in if you’d like to get technical. I’m just a numbers guy, myself.”

“If we have time to fit it in. I’ve actually got a 6 o’clock tee time.”

That was my cue.

“Can I run to the restroom real quick?”

“Sure, James. Down the hall and to your right.”

I headed down the hall and to my left and into the utility closet of our first visit to Med-Cor. There, I grabbed the tiny camera Jim had left there for this stage of the investigation. Since tech guys usually have so much hardware on them, they don’t send us through the metal detectors, so we were able to bring some equipment up there that day and leave it in the closet on a shelf by the back wall. Today, of course, we were thoroughly scanned and processed, but now we also knew the best place to plant the cam thanks to Julie’s and Melissa’s caper. I was in and out in the time it takes to take a piss.

Then I went to the lab. I punched in the keycodes Julie had downloaded and, voila, I was in. Now, I had to remember what Jim told: Act like you’re supposed to be there. The first thing I saw were stacks of the same boxes we saw

them unloading from the ambulance. I found a convenient place to stick the microcamera in a plant on the counter. Just as I was lifting my hand out of the potted plant, a cat in a white lab jacket walked in from another room.

“Can I help you?” He was surprised to see me.

“Have you seen O’Neill? Kline needs the order numbers from Beth Israel.”

“You know about— Are you new? I’ve never seen you before.”

“No, I’ve been here for seven months. Are you new?”

“Relatively, I guess. Three months. This company’s so big, I see someone new everyday. But I know most of the people that have this level clearance.”

“I’m probably the last one. I usually work in the 12th floor lab, but they sent me down here today because the other guy got sick, I guess.”

“Oh. Anyway, let Mr. Kline know I’ll send the order numbers up in about 15 minutes. We’re still logging in all the new cells.”

“Cool.”

I was in and out in the time it takes to take a dump.

When I got back I couldn’t believe what was coming out of this fucking guy’s mouth.

“So James, Doug here tells me you’re looking for a little selective gentleman’s entertainment.”

“He did, hunh?”

“Turns out Steve here’s into that whole scene, too. I say, whatever floats your boat.”

“If you’re really interested, James, I can take you to a club tonight that will blow anything you fellas have up north out of the water.”

“What, like, where they pull people out of the crowd and dominate them?
'Cuz I've seen —“

“James, you have no idea.”

Chapter Sixteen

“Why do I have to be the freak?”

“Frankly, kid, he trusts you. I could tell. Old businessmen love taking young execs under their wing. He was flirting with you the whole time.”

“Don't put it like that.”

“You know what I mean. You shoulda seen his eyes light up when I told him I couldn't keep up with you because of your, ahem, exotic tastes.”

“Great.”

“You get the remote on the camera working okay?”

“I think so.”

“Okay. Let's back to the office and watch the show.”

And what a show it was. The camera showed the lab techs pulling out beakers from the boxes clearly marked “Beth Israel” with serial numbers and the names of the never-born children that were about to become experiments for gross capitalism. One fellow took the beakers out, another logged and catalogued them, and another arranged them in the company gene fridge. Just before the camera's focus faded into perspective, we spied some fellas injecting some sort of fluid onto a slide before analyzing it with a microscope and recording the results. Over to the left, I could see a row and columns of beakers on a huge shelf. Each row had the same name, i.e. Johnson, and then each successive beaker was

labeled Johnson A; Johnson B; Johnson C, etc. The next row was labeled Weinstein A; Weinstein B, and so on. But here's the kicker. At least three times in the 15 minutes we watched tape, we saw someone drop a beaker or a box that said "Beth Israel" into the "Hazardous Waste" bin. That's a clever way to destroy evidence - lump it with a bunch of other crap that no one would wanna touch with a ten-foot pole. That's one part of our plan down. There's no way either company could possibly explain a documented relationship that wasn't on either of their books.

When we had seen all we could see, Jim entrusted Julie and I with the task of taking Oliver Atkins to the train station. We were to see him on the train and the fuck out of Dodge. He had given us the 411 on exactly when and how to catch Med-Cor doing their shady-ass shit, and it wouldn't do to have him within the city limits for the concluding phase of our investigation.

All in all, he was a pretty nice guy. He made a couple of dry jokes on the way to the station, and his easy laugh and gentle smile made it easier to see how Lola could've fallen so hard for him. He never mentioned her on the drive, but I saw him freeze up when he saw a half-empty pack of Marlboro Reds that she had left on the floor of Jimbo's ride.

"You can have 'em," I said.

"Thanks," he said, apparently a little embarrassed to covet such a keepsake, but he put the pack deep in the inside left pocket of his sportscoat.

On the ride back home, I brought back up a subject that had been nagging me.

"Julie, what happened to the last guy that did my job?"

"Oh. He sort of . . . died on a case. Last year. For a while Mr. Woodruff

wasn't thinking of hiring anybody, but we really needed the help."

"Died? He 'sort of' died? How did this 'sort of' happen?"

"Well, it was on a case, you know and - " she stopped "Milton and Jim have been doing this a long time, you know, and when people don't pay attention to them . . .

"Well, this young brother that started working here was very arrogant. One day Jim and him were on a stakeout and the guy got spooked when their target spotted them and started heading for the car. Jim was trying to tell our guy, Terence, to stay calm, but Terence got out of Jim's car and got in the target's face like he was gonna back him down or something."

"What happened?"

"The target stabbed Terence in the face. He was this crank fiend who was having a psychotic episode and thought Terence was an alien come to take him to Neptune."

"Are you dead-ass serious?"

"Dead-ass" Milton Woodruff's adopted sidekick exclaimed.

"No wonder no one ever wants to talk about the guy."

"We were all kind of shook up for a while. He was handsome."

"What a way to go out."

"Out like a sucka," she said.

This was a fucking bust. Kline gave me an address to meet him and it was at a huge office building in Hollywood that was now closed and dead to the world. The only people around were runaways and street cleaners. Right when I was about to bone out and call a cab back home, a limo pulled up, with Kline and

two girls and another guy laughing and falling out of the limo.

“James, over here!”

I walked over and he ushered me in, scooting everybody aside.

“Hey Steve, who’s your friend?”

“This is James. He’s an old friend from out of town.”

“Doesn’t look like your speed. You been holding out on us?”

I smiled and demurred.

“Giovanni, be nice.”

“Where’re we going?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“Just around the corner. The party’s upstairs.”

I looked up. No lights. No sweat. We pulled around into the alley behind the office building and next to a metal security door. With three sets of knocks of three knocks each, the door screeched open, and our nocturnal escapade had begun.

A hooded figure shrouded in black led us down a darkened hall holding a lit candle. In silence, he pressed the elevator door and we all climbed in, anxious and made-to-order. When the doors opened, we stepped out into a darkened hallway with candles set on desks and cubicle walls. Our host led us down the hall, maintaining his stony silence. The people in my group – Kline, a hot blonde in a tiny pink cocktail dress (Stace), a fine-ass sister in a tinier black number (Cheryl), and a fey fop in a pin-stripe suit and outrageous scarf (Derek) – maintained the air of solemnity. This was weird. I didn’t know how I was gonna get Kline to open up to me in this brotherhood of freaks, so I decided to relax and enjoy the evening; let my game come to me.

We were led around the labyrinthian office complex until we started to see people milling about and laughing. A white couple in business suits flitted past us, high and drunk and all over each other. Another white gentleman in his 50s was sitting at a cubicle desk, masturbating. I noticed the pictures arrayed on the desk were of a handsome young black man and two cherubic children. We made eye contact for a moment and the man started to put his dick away, and then decided not to bother. I didn't blame him. *Handle yours*, I thought. Soon, we got to a gathering of people who were looking at something with a single light on the otherwise dark floor. They were all dressed to the nines and leaning on each other, trying to get a better peak. A sister in a pink sequined leotard with a matching harlequin mask was greeting the guests. A sister with dancer's legs and Vivica Fox's bustline. A sister I had just fucked the stuffing out of four days prior. Fuck.

"Greeting and welcome to the —"

That's when she saw me. At that moment, a million calculations were going through both of our heads. We both had a lot to lose if we betrayed our recognition, but the awkwardness was intense.

"Excuse me. Welcome to the Dawn of Time. I am your host, Mistress Keisha. If you have any concerns or questions, please ask me. Who is your dom?"

"That'd be me."

Kline stepped forward and whispered something in Jessica's ear.

"Thanks, Reginald. I hope you all enjoy your evening."

My eyes locked with Jessica as my party sidled by. Right as I got up to her, she looked down and looked up again in time to welcome the next set of guests. Neither of us hesitated. I followed Kline in a daze.

What I saw, though, snapped me right the fuck back out of it. The single light shining down was illuminating a show. And not any old show, either. There in a makeshift pit made of three large mats and bordered by four-sided knee-high black partition, a huge ripped Mediterranean guy and a skinny brother were fucking the stuffing out of a teeny-weeny Asian girl, all in caveman masks. The girl was straddling the brother, while the Mediterranean was handling his from the rear. From the look on the girl's face, the place should have been echoing with her squeals, but she had a ball gag in her mouth that muffled her ecstasy/torment.

Kline led us to a little seating area right at ringside where four seats were set up in two rows. Around the pit, men and women of all ages were arrayed, some jacking off, others gawking in glee, still others staring intently and ominously. In one corner of the crowd, someone was fucking a 40ish Latina businesswoman from behind as she watched the show. Two seats down from me, a blonde was fucking a brother cowgirl style, but in a detached way like he could've been anybody. We locked eyes for a moment but it became clear she was seeing right through me, her pleasure congregating right between her legs. I was astounded, delighted, shocked, and discombobulated. I didn't even notice when Cheryl started grabbing my dick from behind.

"You wanna spank me, baby?"

What do you say to a question like that? I bent back and bit her on the neck. She squealed like a fucked lamb.

“In a minute, sweetheart. I wanna check out the show.”

She gave me one last squeeze and leaned back into her seat. I was a pimp. Next to me, Stace had taken a seat on Kline’s lap and he was absentmindedly fondling her breast, captivated by the action in front. After about ten minutes of the DP, the Asian stood up and began dominating the men. She grabbed a riding crop from I-don’t-know-where – it’s probably best I didn’t know where – and had them both on all fours, asses up and prone for love. She then began inserting a delightful variety of anal beads into both of the men, as they grunted in pain/pleasure. The brother started banging on the mat he was liking it so much, and it almost started to sound like he was crying. She then pulled all the foreign objects out of the asses, as the audience clapped with each new revelation. She then hooked them both up to dog collars, and led them out of the pit, ashes to ashes and dust to dust.

I thought I might have to appease Cheryl, but I looked back to see her making out with some frat boy, his hands deep inside her dress. She made the same sound with him that she did with me. For a second, I wondered if I was I out of my league. I just didn’t know if I’d be able to hold my own amongst a band of world-class freaks like this. You can think you’re the mack, but until you are in a situation where nobody gives a *fuck*, you don’t know.

My mind flashed back to Jessica. I considered going up to that ho and dragging her out of there by her hair, but I was stayed by an even bigger surprise.

It might not come as a surprise to you, but in that context I was only prepared for small increments of shock, not the kind that would be tested by the sight of my former girlfriend, the junk fiend crack ho amateur private dick,

walking out into the pit with a huge dildo and redhead in tow. They were both dressed in elaborate tribal costumes, with gold dangling earrings and necklaces made of animal bone and mother of pearl. No, I certainly was not prepared for the sight of Melissa sprawled on her back as the redhead took it to her. Melissa squirmed and panted like she meant it, which she might have, and had that telltale glazed-over look that I knew from so many late-night arrivals home.

“Hey Mel.”

“Hey.”

“Did you remember we had a study date tonight?”

“Oh shit. I’m sorry, baby, lemme make it up to you.”

“Nono nono no. Stand up. Let go of my dick. Look me in the eye. What did you say just last night about smoking?”

“I said one more last little time?” she laughed.

“Melissa, I wouldn’t be your friend, let alone your boyfriend, if I let you keep doing shit that you yourself tell me you don’t want to do. I’m gonna go home now. I’m not gonna see you again for a week. If at the end of that week you can tell me that you haven’t smoked, I’ll come back.”

“No, no, Ellison. I need you now more than ever. Let’s just go to bed. That was my last *last* time. I was just so stressed cuz of finals —”

“No, see, baby, cuz life *is* stress. I don’t know what else I can do except separate from you and see if you care.”

“I do care.”

“We’ll see.”

It never lasted, though. I always came back and she always fell off the wagon, pleading and crying and protesting in a coke-stained stupor. I had always blamed myself for our relationship failing when she saw me and Jess together, but in truth she had been cheating on me for months before. She'd had a White Mistress for two years now, and she wasn't about to give her up for no man.

So there's how I find myself watching one of the best friends I ever had humiliate herself in front of a gaping crowd. It was a scene to turn my stomach, knowing the history and all. I decided to get down to business in this fucked-up setting.

"Where do these girls come from?"

"You know, James, you'd be surprised," said Kline. "You'd think you'd have to get these girls from a service, but you can get people to do a lot of things with a little leverage."

"Leverage?"

"Sure. People that wanna make a good impression. People that owe you a favor. Everybody's got that hidden side."

"I guess so."

"I had this one girl. A redhead. She'd do anything, man: girls, guys, fucking *farm animals*, man. She was wild. And she'd get all her friends in the act, too. Like a little Charlie's Angels. That girl in the front? That's one of her friends."

"Does she ever do shows?"

"Nah. She's just a showpiece. Good girl. I'm gonna break her in before long, though."

I fumed.

“What happened to the redhead?”

“The key to this whole thing, as I’m sure you can imagine, is secrecy. If you can’t keep a secret, no one comes, everything falls apart. Some of these people would be very disappointed if it got out they came to an event like this.”

“Yeah, but how can you make sure people keep the secret?”

“Lemme tell you right now, you can relax about anyone letting out that you were here. I honor loyalty very highly.”

“It just seems to me there’s only one way to guarantee someone’s silence.”

“That’s right, James. This is the big leagues, brother. If you play, you gotta be prepared to make sacrifices.”

“Wow. So the redhead’s not talking, hunh?”

“No. You talk to the wrong people, we take you out of the picture. Know what I mean, paizan?” he was elbowing me now, good-naturedly inviting me into his mafia persona. “It sets an example. None of these girls are gonna squeal, now. Good riddance, as far as I’m concerned.”

I leaned back in my seat and let Kline enjoy the show. He didn’t have much more time, anyway.

“I know the girl in the green.”

“What? How?”

“She’s my ex-girlfriend.”

Kline looked at me with a mixture of surprise and concern.

“I thought you said you were from Boston, James.”

“I am, I but I go to school down here at UCLA. And call me Ellison.”

Well, I can tell you he wasn't too high on hearing that one. That, coupled with the sounds of people yelling and rushing away from the pit really lit a fire under Kline. He continued staring at me as Allison, Jim, and a dozen of LAPD's finest crowded into the viewing area. Melissa jumped up and grabbed a jacket, but she was soon manhandled by a big burly boy in blue. Even as he was lifted to his feet and handcuffed, Kline still looked at me with disbelief and betrayal. I knew how he felt, but still didn't have much sympathy for him. Play in the big leagues, and you gotta be prepared to make sacrifices.

In the hubbub, I managed to make my way over to Jessica, who was crying and giving a statement to an officer.

"Oh god, Ellison, can you help me? Did you know about this?"

"Did you know about this?" I said, pointing to the pit.

"Ellison, he said if I didn't do it the same thing that happened to Lola was gonna happen to me."

"Still? You're *still* working for Melissa and these people and you couldn't tell me?"

"I was scared. Kline is big on people keeping secrets, and you saw what he does when people break his trust. Please tell them I'm not involved in all this."

"Did you know it was him who ordered them to beat me up?"

"No."

"Jess?"

"I suspected, maybe. But he said he had nothing to do with it."

I was amazed. My voice now came out feeble and small.

"You still shoulda told me what you were involved in. I might've been able to help."

“There you go again, the valiant hero. I’m getting so sick of this shit, Ellison. You can’t save the world. What were you gonna do? He got to Lola while she was sitting right next to you!”

My face stung like it had been slapped by reality. My girl sure knows the right thing to say at the right time. She softened once she saw me burning.

“Look, El, I was scared. I’m sorry. Are you gonna get me out of this?”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

I made my way over to Jimmy and basked in the glory of my victory.

“Well, we did it, kid. Cracked the case. Med-Cor’s going down, Kline’s going down. How do you feel?”

“Like a superhero.”

“Don’t worry, kid. They’re not all like this. Why don’t you take your shirt off and we’ll get that wire off of you.”

I unbuttoned my shirt and watched Melissa being handcuffed as Jim stripped the pieces of wire and tape from my chest. I felt like I could cry.

“Jim, you think you could talk to Allison about looking the other way with Melissa? She did help us with the investigation.”

“What about your other girlfriend?”

“She’ll be fine. She was just letting people in. But Mel could be looking at jail time and she’s got a lot of problems she needs to work out.”

“I’ll see what I can do. See you at work tomorrow?”

“I’ll be there.”

He walked over to Allison and I could see him talking in his ear and pointing over to me. I didn’t feel good about asking Allison for a favor since we’d gotten to off to such a rocky start, but he respected me enough to let me go

in here with a wire in the first place, so I was relieved to see him talking to the patrolman who was holding Melissa hostage. The cop took off the handcuffs, said a few stern words to her, and she was off. I took the elevator down with her.

As the floor numbers decreased in order of importance, Melissa shifted weight to her right leg. She chewed her fingernail, and looked up into the ventilation grid.

“You need a ride?”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

We didn’t know how to be exes around each other. I didn’t know if we should talk about what she was gonna do now or talk about how weird it was that, in the end, maybe I did come to her rescue after all.

“Thanks for getting them to let me go.”

“No problem.”

The elevator set down and we walked into the brisk air. I looked up and down the street for some acceptable means of transportation for Melissa, but she didn’t look worried.

“I’ll see you around, El.”

“See you around, Mel.”

As she walked away, she looked even more small and frail and crackhead skinny in the garish yellow streetlights. She crossed the street and turned a corner, but I stood there, vigilant, watching over her as long as I could. I stood watch until I couldn’t see her tiny legs pumping away anymore. And then she was gone, off into the good black night, her arms warm and inviting.

