

# **Dead Zero**

*Registered with WGA under original titles "Rainbow Triangle" and "Katz Cradle"*

*The first time I died, I was too young to fully appreciate it.*

*There was no tunnel of bright light. No chorus of angels. No movie of my life playing as I rose up, freed from corporeal form.*

*Now, eighteen years later, here I go again.*

*This death – my third – already feels different than the others. Instead of inky blackness, I can feel my vital fluids soaking the concrete floor, ribs screaming with every breath.*

*Lying on my side, I notice tingling in my bluish fingertips. Not good.*

*Gunshots overhead. Probably Samuel's .45.*

*I hear my name – echoes, as though coming down a long hallway. Ray? No, Katz, not Ray. You're not that far gone.*

*Endorphins finally kick in. Raw pain steps down a notch. Still no chorus of angels, still no tunnel of bright light. Will I finally get the movie of my life?*

*The projectionist cues up the reel, but it's only a sneak preview; at least it features an A-List Hollywood star, so it should play well in the overseas markets.*

*Cut to green screen. Then the 'R' Rating by the Motion Picture Association of America. Love to have 'PG-13' for the youth crowd, but we'd have to lose too much of the sex, violence, and adult themes. Can't please everyone.*

*Fade in.*

*I'm back in time a week. Back when I knew everything. Before realizing that everything I thought I knew was wrong.*

## One

Harsh July sunlight bounced off the hood of my '84 Camaro, reflecting the smog. Long-time Angelenos swear the air quality's gotten better.

I think their brains have been cooked from too much carbon monoxide.

Every couple months, a rainstorm sweeps through the LA basin, scrubbing the air and clearing the view all the way to the Santa Monica Mountains.

It never lasts.

After a day or two, the heat, emissions, and inversion layer bring back that same milky haze – isolating each neighborhood within the urban sprawl more effectively than fear or inadequate public transportation.

As I turned onto my street, Doble Avenue, I downshifted to neutral, idling toward a trio of LAPD black-and-whites that had established a perimeter around the Candy Lanai apartments.

I pulled up to the nearest Harbor division patrol car, while a cluster of onlookers took in the commotion from behind waist-high portable crowd barriers.

“Hey, man, I’m a P-II Dawg out of Southeast. That’s my building – can I reach into my pocket for my ID?”

It’s a common misconception that cops always carry badges. LAPD started issuing laminated IDs after two off-duty officers were involved in a hair-salon robbery. The

thieves left with their loot, opened the stolen wallets, saw the gold shields, came back and killed the cops to keep them from being witnesses.

“Officer Z.M. Katz,” the patrol officer read off my card, logging my name, department, and serial number. “Better see the assistant watch commander.”

“You gonna tell me what’s going on?”

“187. Off-duty officer took two in the chest.”

“Oh, man. Who?”

“One of your fellow Southeasters. PO named Wilson.”

Behind strands of yellow police tape, the rear of a Honda Accord jutted into the street, as though its owner hadn’t planned on staying long.

Of all the possibilities running through my mind during the furious drive home, this hadn’t made the list.

A curly-haired evidence tech bent down behind the car, snapping pictures. When he lifted a white sheet, I saw black shoes – toes to the sky.

Dazed, I struggled with the concept that this was *my* apartment complex – with the communal patio and planter of begonias where I kept a hide-a-key in case my girlfriend, Jennifer, locked herself out. My brain flat-out rejected that there on the sidewalk, lying still, arms splayed, was the body of my partner, Officer Raymond Wilson.

The blood splatter reached from the car’s front headlight to a coiled garden hose several feet away. I’m no coroner, but know a shotgun wound when I see one.

*Ray? What the hell? It’s our day off!*

With the crime tape, I couldn’t get too close – but the center of his chest resembled a pincushion, pockmarked flesh and gristle peeking through his torn gray T-shirt.

My partner’s face had escaped the blast. It looked as though a stray pellet caught his right cheek, but otherwise, his mouth was calm and expressionless. Eyes upturned. Unblinking and wholly lifeless.

Clicking away, the evidence tech set a portable screen around the body, blocking my view. On my left, two paramedics climbed into their ambulance, switched off their emergency lights, and slowly backed through an opening in the perimeter.

Don't know how long I stood against the crime tape before hearing the words: "You Katz?"

I nodded and the 3-stripe assistant watch commander took my upper arm in his meaty fist.

"Just talked to your girlfriend – she ID'd the body. The vic was your partner?"

I nodded again. Lips didn't want to work, but I got out: "Is Jennifer OK? Where is she?"

The sergeant had a good three inches on me, with broad shoulders that spoke to a youth in dockyard labor or competitive rugby. "She's shaken up, but fine. Robbery-Homicide has already taken over – they're in your apartment with her. I'm sorry, son. Nobody should see his partner this way."

"Can I talk to her?"

"Real soon. The detectives want a quick statement from you first. Mind waiting in my car?"

Head swirling, I sat in his back seat, watching a succession of official vehicles arrive at the scene. More plain-clothed detectives. The deputy chief of the South Bureau.

The opposite car door opened, revealing a man so thin he swam inside his slacks. He introduced himself as Detective Kevin Kipler and slid into the vacant seat without removing his rubber gloves.

"You're Wilson's partner?"

"That's right."

"Ugly business. Hate to see this happen to one of our own," he said in a nasal, reedy voice while opening a spiral notebook. "And your full name is...?"

"Z.M. Katz."

“Just the initials?”

“That’s what’s on my driver’s license.”

“How long you been at this address?”

I struggled to calculate the months. Usually, I perform well in a crisis, but my synapses didn’t want to fire. “Uh, little more than a year.”

“And you’ve been with LAPD how long?”

My face began to burn, rising anger cutting through the fog. “Is someone gonna tell me what happened? I come home to...” Maybe if I didn’t say the words, didn’t admit what I saw, there was a possibility it never happened. “To find Ray like that, and you’re asking—”

Kipler attempted to sound sympathetic. “Hey, we just got here twenty minutes ago and have been playing catch-up. Evidently your partner called while you were gone, talked to your girlfriend, and arranged to come over. He pulls up to your apartment, steps out of his car, and bammo.”

*Bammo? What the fuck is that?*

“So far, nobody’s stepping forward as a wit, but we’ve got a canvass going. Your girlfriend was one of the few people home. She called 911, identified the vic as an officer. Hate to be the one asking you these questions, but you know the drill – the faster we get on it, the faster we find our doer.”

That explains how Robbery-Homicide got the quick call. In Los Angeles, there’s so many dead bodies it takes several levels of detectives to keep up. Harbor Division has its own homicide squad for the run-of-the-mill shootings and stabbings. More complex cases get kicked up to a Bureau unit, covering multiple Divisions. But since Jennifer ID’d Ray as a cop, it skipped all the way to Robbery-Homicide, which handles the high-profile, media-friendly crimes.

I swallowed back the rage and bile. “I’ll help any way I can.”

“Knew you would. So, how many years you with the department?”

“Three. Did my probation in Hollywood, wheeled to Southeast last January.”

“How long did you and the deceased work together?”

“About a year and a half.”

“So where were you today?”

Brain lock. “Uh, I got up at 0500—”

“You’re on days?”

I’d tried to talk Ray into getting us transferred to PM watch, which saw more action and arrests, but he liked the slower pace. “Yeah. But today we had an RDO.”

“You got up at five a.m. on your day off?”

“What can I say? I’m a morning person. Drove to the Angeles National Forest, went for a long hike, started home—”

“What part of the Angeles Forest?”

“East Fork trail. I was in Azusa when I got a message from my girlfriend begging me to hurry home. Look, I need to see her.”

“My partner’s taking her statement right now. So you got her message...”

“I couldn’t really hear what she said – bad connection – but I knew something was wrong. Tried calling back, nobody answered, so I drove like hell.”

“How long that take?” When Kipler talked, his Adam’s apple danced more than a bantamweight in a pay-per-view fight – something you’d expect from a hormonal teenager, not a forty-something homicide detective.

“I got to my car at 1120 hours, got the message at 1140, came straight here.”

“You made good time.”

“Told you, I drove like hell. Jennifer sounded freaked – I may’ve taken a few liberties with speed laws.”

“Don’t blame you. Would’ve done the same myself. You got a hiking partner?”

“No.”

“Anybody see you out there?”

“Nobody I know.”

“Just a few more questions.”

“Shoot.” I immediately regretted my word choice.

“Get any gang activity on this block?”

“May not be much to look at, but it’s a quiet neighborhood. Young couples, teachers, good people. We always felt safe.”

“Know why anyone would want to kill your partner?”

“I don’t... can’t think of anything. I mean, we’ve had our share of punks threaten us... part of the job, right? But nothing that serious, you know.”

“Think more about that. We’ll want to follow up once you’ve had a chance to collect yourself. You on tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll call your watch commander. They’ll probably force you to take some time off. Got any vacation saved up?”

“Not really.”

“Play your cards right and you might be taking some VC on the department. But you didn’t hear that from me.”

“Please, can I see my girlfriend now?”

“You can follow me up – but I need to check your cell phone first.”

At this point, I would’ve given him anything to end the conversation and look in on Jennifer. Kipler made a note of my phone number, scrolled through my call log.

Satisfied, the detective led me around the perimeter. Ray’s body was still hidden behind the screen, but the Honda’s front door hung open. For such an orderly person on the job – Ray never left our “shop,” or patrol car, dirtier than we got it in the morning – his personal vehicle was always a disaster.

Old newspapers, shopping bags, shoe boxes, dirty laundry, fast food wrappers, crushed soda cans, unfolded street maps, plastic coffee mugs – they all enjoyed free rein inside Ray’s Accord. When asked about it, Ray said being clean and respectful on-duty sapped his willpower when it came to maintaining his own car.

As we headed up the laundry room stairs, a woman in a lab coat measured the dimensions of our courtyard. The front door to our apartment – #8 on the northeast corner – was ajar, and I heard voices inside.

Candy Lanai offered a one-bedroom, 950-square-foot box, with limp brown carpet and puke green linoleum. The foyer slash living room slash dining area had just enough space for an IKEA couch, computer desk, and dinette set. It felt cramped with two people inside, downright stifling with four.

Jennifer sat at the table, her face whiter than our placemats, straight blonde hair pulled into a practical ponytail. Seeing her, I felt a rush of relief. I wanted to hug her, but my path was blocked by a squat Asian man who stood over our answering machine.

“I’m on the 605 heading home,” said my recorded voice. “Call me when you get this so I know you’re OK!”

Introducing himself as Hiram Hong from Robbery-Homicide, the detective managed to look cool even in our unventilated apartment, his olive suit crisply pressed.

Underscoring the contrast in their appearances, Kipler tucked his uninspired maroon tie into the gap between the third and fourth buttons of his wrinkled dress shirt. “You ready to walk the grid again?”

“In a minute. We’re just finishing.” Hong’s gentle voice sounded more Hawaiian than Korean.

After offering me his condolences, Hong turned back to my girlfriend.

“Now, when Officer Wilson called this afternoon, did he say why he was coming over?”

Jennifer paused, gathering herself. When she spoke, the words came out uncharacteristically flat and expressionless. “To drop off the hunting stuff.”

“The deadline for a deer license was coming up and I had to submit his paperwork,” I interjected. “We were planning a trip to Colorado.”

Miraculously, I'd talked Ray into joining me for a hunting weekend in September. Since he wasn't a Colorado resident – personally, I kept a State ID with my mom's address for that very reason – I'd pulled strings with a buddy at the Division of Wildlife.

“He said he'd talked with Z about stopping by around three, but something came up and he needed to do it right away.”

“Officer Wilson never made it to your door, correct?”

“I was scrubbing the tub when I heard a loud noise. Thought it was the garbage people, but they only come on Tuesdays. So I went to the window–”

“That one?” Detective Hong motioned to the window above my CD rack.

Jennifer nodded.

“And what did you see?”

“Ray's car against the curb. There's a tree down there, so I didn't see him right away. But then... all the blood on the sidewalk and I... Oh God–”

“That's fine, you're doing great. When you were at the window, are you sure you didn't see anybody driving away? Maybe someone walking?”

“No,” she sniffed, holding back a runny nose. “Nobody. The street was empty.”

“How long did it take you to get to the window?” I asked, taking her hand.

Kipler stabbed his pen at me with irritation. “This will go a lot faster if we ask the questions.”

“That's my partner lying out there, so don't tell me I don't have the right–”

“You're in no position–”

“She's my girlfriend, I think I have a better idea of how–”

Hong stepped in. “Officer Katz, don't make me pull rank and please don't interrupt again. Now, Jennifer, can you estimate how much time passed between hearing the noise and reaching the window?”

Jennifer looked up, shook her ponytail. “It wasn't right away. I thought it was the garbage truck dropping the dumpster. I don't know.”

“Fifteen seconds? Twenty?”

“I guess so.”

“Did you call 911 before or after you went outside?”

“After,” she sniffled again. “First I ran out to see what happened. I got there and Ray was just... there on the sidewalk, twitching. His eyes were open. So I bent over to see if he was breathing and he... he went still.”

“You’re doing great. I’m getting it straight in my head. What’d you do next?”

Part of me wanted to leap in, protect Jennifer, tell Hong to back off. Another part of me wanted to hear her answer. Curiosity won.

“I screamed for help, but nobody answered, so I ran back and called 911. I couldn’t reach Z, I didn’t know what to do. That’s when I heard the dog. I went back to the window and one of our neighbors – I don’t even know his name – was walking his Russell Terrier. He couldn’t get his dog to stop barking. I went back downstairs to see if he could help Ray, but before we could do anything, the ambulance showed up.”

“Thank you. You’ve been very helpful. Unfortunately, I need to ask two more favors. I’m going to need to borrow this answering machine tape and I’ll need to bring your shoes and clothes to the lab.”

“You need all of her clothes?” I asked.

“She was first on the scene. There could’ve been evidence transfer, but we won’t know for sure until we check it out.”

Jennifer remained silent, seeing whether or not I’d object.

“You going to stain them with all kind of chemical tests?”

“Hope not. But we can’t make any promises. Tell you what, if we ruin her outfit, I’ll make sure the department pays for a replacement.”

## Two

“What’cha got there?”

Jameson glanced over his shoulder at the twisted hunk of metal resting on the back seat. “Cracked muffler. ’82 Cavalier. Don’t want any money for it – the wife told me to get it out of the backyard.”

Jameson smiled. He had no wife. No backyard.

The scrap-yard attendant grunted, squeezing the brim of a stained Dodgers cap. “Mufflers inna back. Might find a new one. Feeling lucky?”

*Not today*, Jameson thought, fingering the ruby gem in his pocket. The power radiated from the jewel’s facets in a low hum. He wanted to affix it to the front of his neck, but knew he had to finish the disposal first.

The attendant returned his attention to the portable television inside his cramped booth. “I am so sick an’ tired of these guys cryin’ over every ball and strike call. Play the game, ya pussies!”

Jameson guided his Nissan Sentra down the dirt path, skirting a rusted tower of air conditioners. *Don’t worry about the tire tracks*, he told himself. *They’ll never tie the car to you.*

He reached the mufflers, stacked in the rear of the enclosure. He’d scouted this location earlier, knew the fence abutted a concrete drainage canal.

No other human scavengers in sight. He parked, wiped down the metal to obliterate any fingerprints, and threw the cracked muffler in with the others. Overkill, maybe, but one could never be too careful.

Glancing around, he stripped off his long-sleeve shirt and corduroy pants, replacing them with a bowling shirt, cargo shorts and flip-flops. Then, he carefully transferred the glowing gem to his right front pocket.

He stuffed the original set of clothing – taken off a rack from the Salvation Army thrift store – into an empty steel drum. Next, the wig and false mustache he'd purchased the previous Halloween. Everything paid for in cash, all the receipts shredded.

Finally, he crumpled up the butcher paper he'd used to line the driver's seat, tossing it in with the garage-sale sneakers and the shotgun. Squirting lighter fluid into the drum, he started the blaze.

After the flames died, he fished out the shotgun remains with a coat hanger. Once it cooled, he'd take a pipe cleaner to the barrel and drop it off a deep-sea boat.

Driving out the front gate, Jameson floored it, passing the attendant too fast for him to notice the costume change. In fifteen minutes, he reached the Artesia Blue Line metro stop, entering an open-air parking lot with notoriously poor security. Two weeks earlier, he'd boosted the Sentra – and spare set of plates from a Honda Civic – from the same lot.

Finding a spot between two vans, he wiped down all surfaces with Clorox, taking special care with foot pedals, gearshift, and dashboard, which could've picked up microscopic splatter. As a final touch, he ran a portable vacuum over the seats, upholstery, and mats, before stuffing the cleaning products into the duffel bag with the warm shotgun barrel. Using a gloved hand, he rolled down all the windows – in this neighborhood, the car wouldn't last 24 hours.

After taking the metro to the Green Line, he called a cab. During the ride, the ramifications of today's events began to sink in. His hands shook... not from wasting the cop, but his failure in achieving their objective.

*Keep it together, keep it together.*

His Alpha was going to be furious.

This was to be Jameson's great redemption; a way to prove his love, his gratitude. The great man had trusted him, hired him, showed him a way out.

And once again, he'd made a mess of things.

Maybe he should've waited longer. Yesterday's new moon left his strength at low ebb.

But the timing had seemed perfect. Kill two birds with one shotgun, so to speak.

All that care he'd taken with the disposal, giving the cops no reason to suspect anything beyond 'street justice' – none of that mattered until he could deliver the package.

*Where the hell was it?*

### Three

Jennifer asked if I wanted to talk.

That meant a barrage of those nagging four-word questions, like “What are you thinking?” or “What does this mean?” or my all-time favorite, “How do you feel?”

Take it from me, ‘hungry’ and ‘horny’ are never the right answers.

Frankly, the only person I wanted to talk to was Ray’s mother, Maureen. But the detectives wouldn’t let me accompany them to Seal Beach to break the news.

An hour and a half before sunset, the circus outside Candy Lanai finally packed up their stakes, taking vials of blood, rolls of photographs, statements of neighbors, diagrams of splatter, and the cooling body of my partner.

As Ray was loaded into the coroner’s van, every law enforcement officer and public service worker at the scene saluted, paying respects to a fallen brother.

At 1800, the detectives called for a shop tow and carted off the Honda Accord to Central Facilities.

That just left the television vans: KCAL, CBS, and, ugh, FOX. One KCAL reporter was brazen enough to knock on our door. Through the peephole, I kindly instructed him into which orifice he could stick his floodlight.

The phone rang, so I instinctively reached for the receiver.

“Hi there. Randy Domingo from the *Long Beach Press-Telegram*. May I please speak with Officer Katz?”

“Not home,” I said. “He’s camping in the Himalayas.”

“And your name is...?”

I hung up.

The phone rang again. I let it go to the answering machine.

Despite the ten-mile hike earlier, I felt the overwhelming urge to get out. I told Jennifer I was going for a run without asking if she wanted to come. Her pace is slower by two minutes per mile, and I was in no mood to throttle down.

By her glum silence, she obviously didn’t want me to leave. I knew what was on her mind – her mom, my job, all tangled up with what happened to Ray – but I wasn’t ready to be her Rock of Gibraltar. Not without first burning off some awfulness and aggression.

The detectives had bagged my hiking clothes – claiming it was a formality with an officer homicide – so I changed into running shorts and a Broncos cap.

Feeling strangely vulnerable without my Kevlar vest, I pictured my own chest torn up with buckshot. *What if it had been me instead of Ray? What if Jennifer had run out and found my twitching body on the sidewalk?*

I rummaged in my closet for a waist pack. Inside went my back-up service weapon, a .38 snub nose revolver, wrapped in a dish towel to prevent jostling.

Now I was ready.

“Goodbye!”

Instead of going out the front door, I popped the screen to our bedroom window, and climbed down the fire escape. Higgins, my Camaro, was parked a block from the news trucks. Cutting through a back alley, I dodged rows of garbage cans and zoomed to the ocean.

Before moving to California, I asked for suggestions about the most un-LA part of LA, and kept hearing the name Belmont Shore. Located near the Long Beach Marina, Belmont Shore is a bedroom community of mish-mashed housing styles – Spanish,

Mediterranean, Japanese, Cape Cod, Santa Fe, stucco, post-modern – wedged against an uninspiring beach.

The breakwater kills the waves. The wind never quits. Dramatic sunset after dramatic sunset manages to be spoiled by silhouettes of cargo ships, loading cranes, and oil-drilling platforms. Tourists largely stay away, preferring the more idyllic beach towns of Hermosa, Newport, Huntington, or Laguna – which means in Belmont Shore, you can actually find parking.

I've seen enough grief in my short career to recognize the stages. If I was in denial, let me be distracted by this vision of my future, where I could afford half-a-mil for a 900-square-foot fixer-upper with two bedrooms, one bath, ancient plumbing and no yard.

Nothing like facing the Southern California housing market to make all other horrors pale by comparison.

Jennifer and I considered other areas... Seal Beach is cool, but prohibitively expensive. Prices are more sane in Belmont Heights, but there's an uncomfortable element. Rainbow flags pepper Broadway Street – the main thoroughfare – with guys hanging outside bars with names like "The Mine Shaft." Whenever we got called out for same-sex domestic disputes, I'd let Ray do all the talking – that whole scene creeps me out.

So Jennifer and I settled on Harbor City. Half as nice, not much ocean breeze, but cheap rent and a bearable commute.

A snapshot of Ray's upturned shoes flashed in my mind. I willed it away, not ready to process.

Best to focus on what's in front of my face.

Best to move.

I jogged past my namesake, Z Pizza, and saw the sign for McCarthy's Jewelers. Word is it got knocked off a few years back. Ever since, they've posted a security guard at the front door. Given his penchant for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> jobs, it's surprising Ray

never pulled a shift there. Because if Ray is one thing, he – shit, there I go with the “is.” I mean if Ray “was” one thing, he “was” on the prowl for extra cash.

I couldn’t reconcile thinking about Ray in the past tense. It seemed like just yesterday we were on our first bust.

Without Ray watching my back, I wouldn’t have survived a month in Southeast. So where was I today when Ray needed me to cover his six? If I’d been there, would he still be alive?

My eyes misted over, causing me to nearly trample a couple pushing a baby stroller outside the Shorehouse Café.

*Suck it up. Pay attention to where you’re going!*

I crossed the street in front of Engine Company #8, reaching the bridge to the neighboring community of Naples. The pounding of my soles against the sidewalk helped clear my eyes, and I retreated further inward, finally hitting my stride mid-way through the looping canals that linked the waterfront mansions.

Images flowed faster. Twirling windsocks dancing from a second-story balcony. A bed of pink roses. Gold USC flag. Chicken skewers on the grill.

Unbidden, a sickening thought intruded: *If Ray’s death wasn’t an accident and was related to something he did or saw at work, I could also be a target.*

I sidetracked myself with thoughts of Limerick’s, a nearby Irish pub. Maybe I needed a draft Guinness to shut off my brain.

*Maybe you need to stop dicking around and find the motherfucker who shot your partner on your goddamn doorstep!*

My left calf muscle barked in protest as I blew past the larger boat slips along Alamitos Bay, housing split-level ocean cruisers with names like “Lucky Seven” and “Wicked Nights.”

A crew team took advantage of the glassy water. Their paddle strokes fell in time with my exhalations. In, in, out. In, out.

Entering the final stretch, I spied an elderly couple on a park bench, their faces serene, taking in the last of the sunset.

I wanted to stop and linger on the view – but instead pushed myself faster, away from the expiring light.

Sometimes one’s path is revealed slowly – like hacking your way through an overgrown forest. Other times it comes in a flash. One step off a ledge. That moment when gravity gets its hooks in you.

*Ray, whoever did this is going to pay. Bank on it.*

And once you promise something like that, there’s no turning back.

\* \* \*

Slamming a pint at Limericks cost me \$5 and 210 calories, but didn’t do much more, so I detoured though Torrance.

“We’re closing in fifteen minutes.”

“I know. I’ll be fast.”

My range card was marked for law enforcement, so the manager cut me slack and sold me a bag of .38 shells.

It’s always a good idea to practice with your back-up weapon. Every couple months, I’d head out to the desert to work on my quick draw, lefty, and shooting on the roll. Tonight would be nothing fancy; fifty rounds into a stationary target before heading home.

The indoor range was nearly empty, save one night owl toting a Sig Sauer P-220. Even with ear protection, his .45 sounded like a jackhammer.

There’s something primal about firing a gun. Gun-control hippies can try to deny it, but our founding fathers knew the truth. It’s an adrenaline cocktail – the muzzle flash, harsh recoil, and gunpowder stench.

I swept the stall's empty casings and loaded my Smith & Wesson. Some cops prefer the traditional bullseye, but my favorite target is 'the hostage,' with an armed criminal partially hidden behind a frightened lady.

It always struck me as more authentic. Should I ever be in that situation – with an innocent bystander caught in the line of fire – I'd want to know that I could still pull the trigger.

After sending out the target, I steadied my grip, settled into a Chapman modified Weaver stance, inhaled, and took aim.

*This is you, motherfucker. When we come face to face – and I'll swear this on Ray's grave – you better pray I don't have a clear shot.*

My revolver features a 3-dot tritium sight, made with a glowing radioactive isotope. Probably unnecessary, but it gave me peace of mind.

*Level sight, level white, steady pull.*

My first three shots ripped through the hostage-taker's forehead, but then my vision blurred, causing the next two rounds to sail wide.

Lowering my .38, I whipped off the safety goggles, tears streaming. Wiping my face on my shirt didn't help as it was still damp from the jog.

The guy with the Sig Sauer continued to bang away at his silhouetted target, tearing holes from the ten-point center.

The tears wouldn't stop, so I covered my face and made a beeline for the unisex bathroom. I locked the door and sat on the toilet, hunched over.

"Jesus. Fuck."

My chest heaved beyond control, snot leaking from my nose. I gagged it back.

"Godammit, Ray. Godammit."

At a certain point, that was all I could say. I kept repeating the phrase over and over, rocking on that porcelain throne, until the wave of grief released me.

## Four

Jameson made one last adjustment to the release mechanism.

*There. That should do it.*

Pressing a hidden button in his wristband, ten claws slid from their protective sheaths with a whisper.

Each claw measured an inch, protruding from his hairy fingers like demonic Press-On nails. With enough pressure, the sharpened composite blades were capable of cutting glass.

Though they'd cost a pretty penny, the claws would be paid off once he completed his assignment, with plenty left over to upgrade his masterpiece.

The job weighed heavily on his mind – he was seriously overdue for a progress report, and he'd been dreading the call for hours.

He fingered the spot above his sternum, where the oval gem bathed his neck in a red glow. The moonstone would give him strength. Strength enough to handle his Alpha's disappointment.

The doorbell rang.

Had to be the pizza guy. His current whereabouts were a secret to all but a select few. The apartment was on a month-by-month lease – its main attraction being the attached, downstairs garage – coming furnished with limp furniture and sputtering appliances.

To safely answer the door, he should take off his new skin. Or at least remove the headpiece and throw on a bathrobe. But this was his first time inside the fursuit since the accident and he wanted to enjoy it a while longer. Let the ugly pink workabee feast his eyes on the magnificent Stargod.

He checked the peephole and unhooked the security chain.

“Alright. We’ve got a large deep dish with extra pepperoni, extra sausage and a side of– LORDY!”

The deliveryman recoiled; framed within the doorway stood a muscular werewolf covered in polar-white fur. Triangle ears topped the lupine head, which terminated in a long snout and snarling teeth.

Dressed like a futuristic space pirate, the beast modeled a green vest of scaled armor and matching, open-toed cavalier boots. Thick gold bands encased the figure’s massive forearms. A two-handed sword hung from a vermillion scabbard, complimented by a thigh-mounted dagger and crossbow slung across broad shoulders.

“You take cash I assume.” The creature’s harsh voice came from somewhere deep within the fanged mouth.

“Uh... yeah. Cash is fine,” the pizza guy squeaked. “Your total comes to \$16.27.”

The ivory werewolf produced a twenty. “Keep the change.”

## Five

Our bedroom window was closed and locked – curtains down, room dark. From my perch on the fire escape, I knocked on the glass.

No response.

The news vans maintained their vigil in front, preventing me from yelling Jennifer's name. I knocked harder and pressed my face against the window, hearing the faint strains of music.

Fire escapes are a rarity in LA – particularly for two-story apartments in questionable neighborhoods. Candy Lanai's owner must've been a New York transplant or paranoid about earthquakes. Whatever the case, we had no security bars on the bedroom window, which made Jennifer nervous until I'd rigged the frame with a pin and broomstick.

Cursing under my breath, I made my way back down the ladder, my coordination shaky after the beer and the firing range. Moving slowly to the edge of the building, I peered around the corner. The Channel 11 guy finished his live update and two cameramen switched positions. Someone in a windbreaker called for a longer extension cord.

Instead of making a break for the courtyard, I went back up the rear alley, emerging a couple blocks up Doble Avenue. Pulling down my Broncos cap, I lowered my eyes

and began jogging towards Candy Lanai, my strides casual and unhurried. Just another California health nut putting in the miles after a long day of work.

“Hey, isn’t that the guy?”

Cutting hard to the left, I jumped a flower pot and made it up the courtyard steps, keys in hand, before anyone could stop me.

The waterworks started the instant I barreled through the front door.

Jennifer popped up from the couch and turned off the stereo. “Where have you been?”

“Jogging. I told you I was going.” I made a beeline for the shower, tugging at my damp T-shirt. All I wanted to do was clean up, brush my teeth, and gargle Listerine.

“It’s been three hours!” When really upset, Jennifer’s face turned blotchy and the corners of her eyes went crimson. Wisps of hair sprung from the confines of her ponytail, giving her the profile of a horse at a full gallop.

“I drove into Belmont Shore, that’s all. It’s a zoo out front – why’d you lock the window on me?”

“Are you serious? After everything that’s happened, I’m supposed to leave our window open?!”

“Good point. Look, can I just take a quick shower? I absolutely reek.”

“You didn’t even bring your cell!”

“Uh. I guess I forgot. Look, babe, I’m really...” The wall phone rang, interrupting my apology. “Let the machine get it.”

She stomped across the room. “This has been going on non-stop! The *LA Times* alone has called five times.”

“That’s why we have caller ID. Just because they want quotes for tomorrow’s fishwrap, doesn’t mean you have to give it to them.”

My recorded voice on the answering machine’s outgoing message chimed in, “You’ve reached Z and Jen...”

Jennifer responded by shouting louder, “I kept getting it because I thought it might be news about Ray! I told the reporters to stop, but they wouldn’t listen. The one from the *Register* had the nerve to ask what it felt like to find the body!”

The machine beeped and a woman’s voice said, “Officer Katz, this is Hallie McCormack from FOX News. I know you’re there and don’t wish to speak with the press – and I can appreciate what you’re going through. I really can. But we’re trying to paint an accurate portrait of your partner. Don’t you think he deserves to have the people who knew him best speak out about his career? I’m outside your apartment right now. All I’m asking for is a brief interview. Less than five minutes.”

Picking up the receiver, I barked “Not interested,” and slammed it down.

The wall phone immediately rang again. “For fuck’s sake, I just told you no! And I swear that if you call here again–”

“Officer Katz?”

Whoops. Hong.

“Sorry, detective. Damn reporters have been hounding us. Didn’t mean to shout.”

“I understand. We still need to take your follow-up statements – can you be at Harbor Division in an hour?”

“Can’t we do this tomorrow? I don’t think Jennifer’s up for anything more today.”

Hong asked to speak with her and I handed over the phone. Jennifer nodded a few times, said “I understand,” and told the detective we’d be there.

She hung up the receiver. “So *now* you’re feeling protective.”

“I always feel protective. I’m sorry you thought I disappeared. I just needed to... get it out, you know.”

She touched my face. With one brush of her fingertips, the day’s weight drained from my body. I opened my arms and she stepped in so close I felt the wild strands of blonde hair against my chin.

She couldn't have missed the beer, gunpowder, and multiple layers of dried sweat, but mercifully didn't mention it. We just swayed there, hugging each other so tightly that time halted.

\* \* \*

Detective Kipler leaned over the interview room's tape recorder. "Today is Monday, July 31st, and the time is 2200 hours. This interview is being conducted by Detectives Kevin Kipler and Hiram Hong with subject LAPD Officer Z.M. Katz – spelling K-A-T-Z – regarding the homicide of Officer Raymond Wilson."

Kipler's dress shirt appeared even more wrinkled than before. Tie-less, the open collar revealed that his pepper-to-salt transformation had migrated to his chest hair.

Hong, though, still looked freshly pressed. A slight sheen between his eyebrows was the only sign he'd been working non-stop the past ten hours.

The interview room's harsh lighting reminded me of squinting for the cameras while making a brief media statement outside Candy Lanai: "Ray was a stand-up cop, a good friend, and I owe him my life. As soon as I find out who did this, I'm planning to personally rip out their entrails. Now beat it, you scumsuckers."

Edit that.

Hong shuffled through his notebook. "Hopefully, you can shed some light here – we talked to your neighbors and nobody saw a thing. We talked to Wilson's mother, and other than repeating what a sweet boy he was, she couldn't name a single friend other than you. I'm hoping," he looked over at Kipler, "*we're* hoping, you can fill in some gaps."

"For starters," Kipler said, "Can you think of any motive?"

"I've been wracking my brain and nothing adds up."

"Any recent threats?"

"Just the usual b.s. from assholes bitter about going back to the joint."

“Got any names?”

“Ezekiel Castaño. He threatened to feed our balls to his Rottweiler after we pulled him over for driving without his headlights.”

Kipler noted it. Hong asked, “Anyone else?”

“There was a banger for the Bloods named Sonny Mix. We busted him last year for narco possession and unlicensed weapons. Third strike – serious time. Sonny actually called us from the pen, saying he was looking forward to getting out so he could pay us a visit. Somehow he’d come up with our home numbers.”

“What led you to him in the first place?”

“Tipster of Ray’s. He fingered Sonny for a pair of turf hits. Ray and I were on the team that tossed his place, and came up with a pound of cocaine base, two Uzis, a Glock, shotgun, and grenade launcher. Pretty clear Sonny wasn’t planning on going down without a fight. Murder charge didn’t stick – none of the guns matched up.”

“We’ll check it out. I understand you and Wilson were involved in a shooting last year.”

“Darrell Browne. That was my first thought... but Darrell didn’t make it and didn’t have any family. We didn’t get any threats afterwards. So if what happened to Ray was retaliation for that, why wait eighteen months?”

“Reads like a clean shoot in the report, but we’ll check into it.”

“Maybe if I went through Ray’s old arrest reports, I’d remember more names. And I could look for old beefs from before we were partners.”

“Would an ‘old beef’ surprise you?”

“Ray wasn’t much of a talker. And as he was fond of reminding me, he worked the streets when I was blowing my allowance on Green Lantern comics.”

Hong offered me coffee. I declined, hoping we were almost finished, but the sharp-dressed detective was just warming up. “Tell us about your last arrest.”

“A no brainer. Some pooh-butt named James Prescott tried to knock off a liquor store with his mama’s ice pick. Unfortunately for James, he wore a football jersey

with his last name on the back. He was already cuffed when Ray and I got there – so we just took statements, transported the body, shuffled the paper.”

“Did the kid threaten you or Ray?”

“Naw. Too busy talking about the Playstation he wanted for Christmas.”

Hong switched topics. “Do you know if Officer Wilson was having any financial difficulties? He owe anyone money?”

“Hard to imagine. Ray was too cheap to even pay for his own cell phone. To save for retirement, he was always pulling extra shifts, doing security at concerts and movie shoots.”

Hong jiggled his pen between his thumb and forefinger. “What about women?”

“He wasn’t that social. There was one gal he saw for a while last year, Paula. She seemed all right. Ray brought her to a couple department functions – so you know he must’ve liked her, ‘cause he hated those things.”

“Paula have a last name?”

“Ahh... crap. No. I think she worked in a law office downtown.”

“Which firm?”

“They all sound the same. Slezzy, Slimy & Associates.”

To my surprise, Detective Kipler smacked his palm on the desk. The tape recorder jumped. “You think this is a joke, Katz?” he snarled.

I returned his glare with my own death ray. “My partner died today – does it look like I’m laughing? I don’t know where she worked.” My headache kicked into second gear and I could already taste the cold beer back home.

Hong stepped in, breaking the schoolyard stare-down. “What else do you remember about her?”

“Early thirties. Brown hair. Little bit doughy. Great smile, right off a Wheaties box.”

“What happened?”

“Ray just stopped talking about her. I assumed they broke up, but he never mentioned it.”

“So if Officer Wilson didn’t talk about his girlfriend, didn’t discuss his finances, and didn’t bore you with war stories, what did he talk about?”

My eyes drifted upwards and to the right. It didn’t help me think of a better answer, but I did spy a water stain in the corner of the interrogation room’s plaster ceiling. Nothing like government-issued pipes.

“Come to think of it, I did most of the talking.”

Neither detective appeared to find that surprising. Kipler flipped to the front of his notebook and wagged his Adam’s apple. “When we spoke earlier, you stated you got up at 0500, drove to the Angeles National Forest, went for a hike by yourself, got the message from your girlfriend at 1140, and drove immediately home. Correct?”

“That pretty much sums it up.”

“And you maintain you saw nobody the entire time? What, five hours?”

“I saw several people – just nobody I knew. Passed a gaggle of Boy Scouts. After them, ran into an old prospector, but he wasn’t the one I usually see.”

“Prospector?” Kipler looked puzzled. “You mean with a pick and mule?”

“Look, I’d love to chit-chat about old coots who still pan for Eldoradoville gold – but every minute you sit with me here, the motherfucker who shot Ray is out there!”

“Enough,” Hong said levelly. “The quicker we finish taking your statement, the quicker we get back to working the case.”

I bit my lip. “Sorry about that. I owe Ray big-time. Mix should still be in lock-up, but how about I track down Castaño?”

“No can do,” Kipler said. “You know how it is.”

Asshole.

\* \* \*

“I forgot my purse.”

We’d already made it back to Higgins when Jennifer remembered. Normally I would’ve teased her, made a blonde joke, but I took the cue from her weary eyes and offered to go back for her bag. Mr. Chivalry.

The door to Harbor Division’s rear conference room stood half-open, and as I approached, I heard Detective Kipler ask, “How about Kiddie Cop? Alibi’s soft.”

Hong’s reply was slightly muffled. “Wouldn’t hurt to pull his phone... see which cell tower handled that call to...”

Glad I was wearing running shoes, I held my breath and crept closer.

“His last arrest, you could tell he was all bummed about not going Code 3, blowing through red lights,” Kipler said. “Probably grew up teething on ‘Lethal Weapon’ sequels.”

“Now, now... Katz did finish Top 5% in his class. Elite scores in marksmanship, self defense. Four-year university.”

“Yeah, but did you see his major? Philosophy.”

From Kipler’s tone, he was obviously rolling his eyes. Philistine.

Their conversation came to a stop as Hong answered his cell phone and moved farther away from the door, talking under his breath.

I was alone in the hall. Shouldn’t be eavesdropping, but I was getting the distinct impression the detectives didn’t plan on keeping me in the loop.

Even though I couldn’t see Hong or Kipler inside the conference room, I could hear the evidence tech scribbling on a dry erase board.

I hugged the wall, angling myself enough to read:

*Ballistics*

*Tactical load, 2-3/4” OO Buckshot, copper-plate*

*Garments*

*Koplein. Positive for AB – same blood type as vic. Trace on shoes/pants.*

*Katz. Negative for blood/GSR. High pollen concentration.*

“Pollen?” Kipler asked.

“Lots of it,” the evidence tech replied. “Tops of his socks were saturated with spores.”

“Katz claims he spent the morning hiking in the Angeles National Forest.”

“We’d have to run a comparison with the native flora, but you wouldn’t see those concentrations if he were walking his dog.”

“So when’s the cut?”

“They’ve put a rush on it – tomorrow at 0900.”

Two Harbor Division patrol officers exited the nearby bathroom, arguing about who had the better buffalo wings, Hooters or TGI Fridays. Pretending to tie my shoes, I knelt down until they passed. I was past pushing my luck, but curiosity got the better of my judgment.

“That was Silvia,” said Hong. “Footprints matched to the girlfriend, paramedic, and neighbor with the Russell Terrier. Nothing for Katz’s hiking shoes, but there was an unidentified print in the blood pool near the vic’s right hip. Partial of the same heading two paces back into the street.”

“The shooter?” Kipler asked.

“Whoever left the print did so after the body was down. They’re still working to get us the size and model.”

“Anything new from ballistics?”

“She said it would’ve been easier if we’d found the casings, but one of the wads had a few gouges and striations in the plastic. Her firearms guy is cautiously optimistic that *if* we recover the gun, we *might* be able to get a match with a test fire.”

From my hunting experience, I knew that wads are the thin cardboard discs and expandable cushions that separate the buckshot from the gunpowder. If the detectives

couldn't find the shell casings, the shooter must've picked them up, or fired the shotgun from inside a car.

"Sawed-off?" Kipler asked.

"Looks that way," Hong replied. "No powder burns – pellet spread indicates a shot from about fifteen to twenty-five feet."

"What about the trajectory?"

"Silvia caught a through-and-through in Wilson's right armpit. Based on that and the splatter, she's almost positive the shot came from the street side."

"Assume this played out as a straight gang tit-for-tat."

"Go ahead."

"Wilson parks in front of the apartment building, gets out, and is about to run inside when a second car drives up. He turns and takes two in the chest. Now we get to the hazy part... instead of driving off, someone gets out of the car and stands over the body. Why?"

"His wallet or keys weren't missing. Maybe Wilson identified himself as a cop."

"That might've spooked him"

"Maybe the shooter thought he got the wrong guy," Hong suggested. "Or stopped to check Wilson's pulse."

"Doesn't jive with your typical banger. And you don't often see middle-aged white males involved in drive-bys."

"A pro would pick up the casings – but probably wouldn't use a tube. Why wake the neighborhood?"

I was about to step back 10 paces, cough, and loudly approach the door when Hong asked, "How about Katz's offer to look over his old files? We could have him check for any arrests involving a shotgun."

"Is the kid a suspect?"

"No clear motive, nothing tying him to the scene."

“Unless Wilson had something going with the girlfriend. She denied it, but it happens.”

*Ray and Jennifer? How could they think that?* It took all my self control hold back from barging in and slugging Kipler.

The detective followed with an even worse idea: “We could always insist on an immediate trip to BSS. You know, for his own good.”

Hong laughed. “You are a cruel, cruel man.”

“So my ex tells me.”

## Six

Jameson needed to make the call.

First, perhaps he could check in on Rahne. Then again, that might just leave him frustrated – she still wasn't fully functional. Desire and longing gripped his chest with invisible fingers; the moonstone, while undeniably potent, was powerless in matters of the heart.

Swallowing his needs for the time being, he booted his computer and removed his claws.

His favorite chat-room required a 7-digit password. He logged in under the screen name "Bode\_Stargod," but didn't see any activity. The cursor blinked in time with his blood-shot eyes.

**Bode\_Stargod:** Anyone here?

**Foxwolfiedan:** The furrocious Bode! Glad someone decided to sign on. Was about to give up and watch SG-1 instead. What new in your henhouse?

He smiled, glad to have caught Foxwolfiedan, and not one of the self-righteous furs worried about someone crashing their fun.

**Bode\_Stargod:** You think we get to choose our obsessions? Or they chosen for us?

**Foxwolfiedan:** Someone thinking too deep tonite! LOL.

**Bode\_Stargod:** Sorry. Rare mood.

It took a long minute for his friend to reply.

**Foxwolfiedan:** I think chosen for us. Maybe predisposition there, lurk in subconscious, needing trigger. At least U R obsessed about something! Otherwise, U'd be just another Avg Joe, instead of Furrydom's Most Wanted! Cause of rare mood?

**Bode\_Stargod:** Ever do something you knew wrong, but did anyway to make someone happy?

**Foxwolfiedan:** Who hasn't?

**Bode\_Stargod:** Worry I do bad things b/c can't stop myself.

**Foxwolfiedan:** U could always blame FM.

**Bode\_Stargod:** Full moon not for another week.

**Foxwolfiedan:** True. What bad things?

**Bode\_Stargod:** Best you not know details.

**Foxwolfiedan:** Fair 'nuff. U see new FC&S zine? Sweet pic by T.Wessner on pg. 14. Better eyes than Meeko.

He glanced over at the stack of mail from his last visit to the PO Box. Clearly he'd been working too hard – he still hadn't flipped through his latest copy of *Fang, Claw & Steel*.

**Bode\_Stargod:** Will check out. Gotta go. Have been putting off something.

**Foxwolfiedan:** Bath?

**Bode\_Stargod:** Worse.

**Foxwolfiedan:** Must be bad, then! U going to FurtherCon?

**Bode\_Stargod:** Don't think so. Too much heat. Not given welcome wagon last time.

**Foxwolfiedan:** U R victim of politics. Up to me I'd make U Chair-fur. Shake things up! Howls!

Logging off, he turned to find a pair of eyes watching from a crack in the balcony blinds. Marley, the neighbor's cat.

How much had she seen? His 7-digit password? Rahne?

He slipped on a glove, testing the claw release mechanism. The calico liked to climb between balconies, no doubt reporting back to her nosy owner.

Did she know he killed a man today? Only one way to find out.

He opened the glass door and got on all fours, making direct eye contact. "What'd you see?"

Marley arched, letting out a wary "Rrrrr-eeeeooooowwww." Her eyes flashed.

That was it. The moonstone throbbed, releasing the wolf within. With a flick of his wrist, he sliced off the top of her ears – the composite blades effortlessly moving through flesh and fur.

Jumping back, Marley howled and bolted to the railing between apartments.

"No more spying," he said. "Next time it's the tail."

Fortunately, the cat's reaction kept the blood from spilling on his new glove or Stargod skin. He dropped the triangular ear tips down his garbage disposal.

Feeling a rush, he reached for the Bat Phone: a clear plastic cellular that had been cloned for one task, to dial a certain private number without leaving a trace. His new Alpha picked up after the first ring.

"What the hell? It's all over the news – you were supposed to watch the guy, not shoot him!" The voice on the other line was abrupt, agitated.

"You said he was becoming a nuisance, that we'd eventually need to deal with the situation. I thought you'd be appreciative."

"Is that so?"

“Don’t worry, I made it look like a drive-by, spent all afternoon cleaning up.”

“Then everything’s taken care of?”

“Yes. And no.”

An uncomfortable beat. “Meaning...?”

“I did him no muss, no fuss. But he... he wasn’t carrying the package.”

“What? Now the detectives will be crawling over everything – and we’re already running out of time!”

“I can fix it. There’s only so many places he could’ve hid—”

“You’ve turned this into a total cluster fuck! Why do I continue to put my faith where it doesn’t belong?”

Jameson massaged the ruby under his neck, knowing from experience that raising his voice only made it worse. He wanted to blame his failure on the new moon, but made a habit of toning down the wolf references when speaking to his Alpha. “I was about to head over to his apartment. I won’t let you down again.”

“No, you idiot, the cops will be scouring the place – you’ll need to go when they aren’t watching. If they start getting close, we’ll go with Plan B, which means Bode’s going to need to make an appearance.”

“Really?”

“Just make it memorable. Now, walk me through everything, step-by-step.”

Jameson felt his tension melt into anticipation. He didn’t want to rehash today’s failure, but his heart skipped with the fact others would witness his transformation, witness the glory of Stargod.

## Seven

I blinked against the bright morning sun as it filtered through the blinds, reminding me that moments ago I'd been dreaming about the Bridge To Nowhere. Standing on the railing, looking down, judging wind speed.

"It's for you." Jennifer thrust our phone into my limited field of vision, her complexion washed-out, haggard.

"Wha... what time?"

"Almost eight. I gotta get ready for work."

I'd slept well past my usual 0500 wake-up time and hadn't even heard the ring.

No mistaking Lieutenant Lockett – otherwise known as 'Luckless.' "Yesterday was obviously a rough day for everyone in Southeast – and you can be sure we're doing everything possible to find the persons responsible."

"Great. What time you want me to come in?"

"I've spoken with Captain Baker and Chief Phillips... we think it'd be in your best interest – and the department's – to move you off active duty." You could tell Lockett strove for a baritone to project command, but it came across like an announcer for a late-night infomercial.

"No need for that, as long as I get the time off for Ray's service."

"This is not negotiable."

“When I spoke with homicide, they said I might help by going through old arrest reports. If I’m grounded, at least let me do that much.”

“Before you’re cleared for any form of duty, you’ll need to get signed off by BSS.”

Aw, hell... I’d hoped Kipler was just kidding about that. “Driving a desk isn’t bad enough? You want me to see a shrink?”

“Again, not negotiable. You have an appointment today at 1200.”

“I’m fine. Seriously. You don’t need to send me to Chinatown – that’ll just be a waste of everybody’s time.”

Luckett ignored my protestations and wouldn’t let me go until I repeated the office address back to him.

Jennifer called out from the bathroom. “What was that about?”

“Stupid department shit. They’re putting me through hoops.”

By scooting to the foot of the bed, I could watch as she applied blush to her cheeks. The sight of her standing in front of the medicine cabinet mirror wearing nothing but jeans and a black lace bra derailed thoughts of yesterday’s trauma and my rising frustration towards Kipler and Luckett.

Is love having someone’s topography hard-wired to your hormones? If so, I was in trouble, because seeing the gentle curve between Jennifer’s hip and rib cage got my juices flowing.

“Damn, honey, MMLFW.” Our shorthand for Make Me Late For Work.

“I can’t. There’s SigAlerts on the 405 and 91.”

“I’ll make you a travel mug of coffee. That’ll save some time.”

“Not enough. I’m already running behind.”

“Call in, take the day off.”

“I don’t want to go in – but I also don’t want to stay here.”

Last night, Jennifer sweated through the sheets, nightmares jolting her awake. At a young age, she’d lost her mom in a car crash – about the same year I realized my

father wasn't coming home. I used to joke that we should fix up our parents, saying "Wouldn't that make holidays fun?"

Knowing she wasn't looking forward to strapping on her Disney costume for a shift at the Happiest Place On Earth, I did my best to cheer her up. Still naked, I sprung out of bed, dropped to one knee, chanting: "Mirror mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest Snow White of all?"

She waved her mascara brush at my erection. "I'm so not in the mood."

\* \* \*

"I'll tell you upfront our session isn't totally confidential." Dr. JoAnn Williams' luminous chocolate skin was complimented by her linen suit – in some muted color that probably had a fancy name like taupe or sea foam. "Anyone explain the process?"

"Not really."

"Losing a partner is emotional – so consider this a debriefing. It's not that anybody thinks you have a problem."

Cops never referred to Behavioral Science Services by its full name, as though failing to abbreviate BSS would bring bad luck or remind us of our affinity for depression, divorce, alcoholism, and suicide.

"Maybe you're dealing with anger, maybe not," Dr. Williams continued. "But you should know those feelings are normal. You might be experiencing survivor's guilt, thinking if you'd been there, maybe you could've prevented it."

No pens or open files on her desk. *Did she have access to my personnel records?* Parker Center was only a couple miles away from BSS' Chinatown offices – close enough to be connected by a secret network of pneumatic tubes.

"Are you going to write anything down?"

"I'm going to write down that you came in and cooperated. I'll note what happened, because twenty-five years from now, I won't remember the details. At

some point, I'm going to call your commanding officer. If you like, I'll call him with you in the room, because I'm not going to tell him anything I don't tell you first. No bullshit – that's my motto. Why don't you fill me in on what happened."

My eyes wandered to her solitary bookshelf, which contained a section of detective novels by Michael Connelly and James Patterson mixed in with clinical texts. I snorted with grudging approval at Wambaugh's *The Onion Field*.

"My partner got offed."

"Were you there?"

"No, we were off-duty." *Deep breaths. Relax. You can do this.* "While I was out, Ray stopped by my apartment, got out and someone rolled up and opened fire. Must've caught him by surprise, because he never got off a shot."

"Outside your apartment? Horrible."

I could smell what she was doing. Being empathetic to get me to open up. "I'm fine. I just want to get back to work."

"From the look on your face, you think this is a waste of time and you don't want to be here."

Before I could stop myself, I was on my feet, barking, "It's this whole CYA mentality, the department making sure I don't go all freaky-deaky. The lawyers have upper management running scared – no choke holds in self defense, no jamming suspects. And now I've got to be here when I could be pounding the pavement!"

"Anger's a natural part of the grieving process." Dr. Williams tapped her red fingernails on the desktop. I kept waiting for her to ask how I felt. Instead, she pulled a switcheroo and asked why I decided to become a police officer.

Pacing back and forth, I noted the fire sprinkler above her desk. Probably bugged.

"I used to watch a lot of TV re-runs of *Hill Street Blues*, *Magnum*, and my favorite, *Simon & Simon*. You ever see it? Two brothers in San Diego, sunshine, crimes to solve week after week. The older brother, Rick, lived on a boat and wore a sweet cowboy hat."

“Weren’t they private detectives?”

“You’ve got to start somewhere. So I thought, LAPD... it’s close to San Diego, I can learn a thing or two about detectin’, and start saving for my boat. Now if I could just crack the policy against wearing cowboy hats on patrol.”

“Any other reasons you joined the force?”

“Now that you mention it, there was one.”

“Yes?”

“I heard cops get more pussy than a bag ‘o’ catnip.”

That made her pause. Her nostrils quivered ever so slightly. “How’s that working for you?”

“Not bad, but sometimes I feel starved for attention. You could just diagnose me with middle-child syndrome and send me on my way.”

“Are you a middle child?”

“No.”

Her nostrils flared at that one. Dr. Williams looked over at the clock.

“All right. We’re done.”

“Great. So now what? Do you have a tip jar?”

“Now nothing. You go home.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“When can I get to go back to work?”

She shrugged. “That depends on you. And your willingness to work with me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re not treating this seriously. And you’re certainly not ready to exercise good judgment in the line of duty. So until you are, enjoy your holiday.”

“Just because I made a stupid joke?”

“Take my card.” She got up, opened her office door. “Call me when you’re ready.”

“Look, I have to go into the station. My arrest reports are there. The detectives said I could check them for leads.”

“Not without my OK you aren’t.”

My vision darkened. “You’d impede a murder investigation because you can’t take a joke?”

“You’re not a detective and you’re not a part of the investigation.”

“I can help. I owe Ray, and sitting at home *will* have me climbing the walls. What’s it going to take to get a clean bill of health?”

“Like I said from the start, no bullshit – and if I thought you had a problem, I’d tell you. You may not want to acknowledge it, but you’re working through some deep emotions. I can’t recommend you for active duty, but I am willing to approve a limited role – deskwork only – *if* you agree to come back tomorrow and continue seeing me until we make real progress.”

I took a deep breath. Then another. “How long will that take?”

“Can’t promise a timetable. It could take a couple weeks, could take months.”

“*Months?!?*”

“I can’t let you back in a patrol car until I’m convinced you’re fit to drive it.”

“What are you going to tell my Lieutenant?”

“That you’re cleared to look over your reports, but should remain on limited duty until we have at least two more sessions.”

“If I agree, can I go into work today?”

“Tomorrow morning. And I’ll expect to see you immediately afterward.”

“You’re killing me here.”

“Take it or leave it.”

She had me in a box. See why I hate shrinks?

“Fine. You win.”

## **Eight**

LAPD's Southeast division covers ten square miles south of Manchester Avenue with a homicide rate four times higher than the rest of the city. The neighborhoods used to be primarily black, before an influx of Mexicans and El Salvadorians. Cruising past the Jordan Downs housing project, it's hard to believe you're barely a half hour from Manhattan Beach's smorgasbord of bikinis.

Driving straight from Dr. Williams' office, I reached my station house during roll call for Watch 2, planning to get in and get out before causing a stir.

I didn't have a whole day to waste. There had to be an answer in our files. A name. A bust gone wrong. An empty threat that wasn't so empty.

Passing the reception area, I ran into a Latina first-year boot, whose name escaped me. She grabbed my hand, choking out, "I'm so sorry."

Her P-III training officer, Terrell Overton, a black guy built like a Greek decathlete, echoed the sentiment. "If you need anything, I'm there. Anyplace, anytime."

"Thanks," I mumbled. Not trusting my ability to maintain composure, I made straight for the report writing room.

Ray and I didn't have desks, but we shared a bookshelf in the report room. Both the room and shelf were empty, dust streaks marking the imprint of the missing binders.

Sometimes Ray worked on paperwork at home and stashed folders in his department locker. I hot-footed it to the changing room, glad I'd recently memorized his locker combo.

He'd been giving me grief about a bachelor party I'd attended, where one of my buddies pissed off the stripper by sticking his little finger into her hoo-ha – then charging the other guys \$5 a sniff.

*That's disgusting, Ray said. I hope you didn't stoop low enough to pay for that.*

*Aw, come on, it was all in fun. He eventually cut her in on the deal. Besides, he already owed me money, so I got to check it out for free. Smelled like raw veal.*

*Please, I'm trying to eat my sandwich. That's got to be an all-time low for you.*

*Give me five minutes. I'll do worse.*

*Remember when I said you were pretty mature for your age? I take it all back.*

So, to prove my maturity, I peeked over his shoulder as he opened his locker, stayed after our shift and plastered the inside walls with pages from *Hustler*.

My favorite had a raven-haired lass reclining on a Harley Davidson with the caption, "I'm spreading my lips for you." The lips weren't the ones on her face.

Ray laughed when he saw my practical joke. *You win. I'll never underestimate your bad taste again.*

Come to think of it, I wasn't sure if he'd taken down the nudie photos yet.

The L-shaped changing room was vacant when I idled up to Ray's locker.

Let's see, it was right to 15, left to 11, then right to 29.

Nothing.

I tried again. The Masterlock smirked at me, not giving up the goods. I switched the numbers. Right to 11, left to 15, then right to 29.

Snake-eyes.

Right to 29, left to 11, right to 15.

Right to 15, left to 29, right to 11.

*Shit!*

A pair of voices echoed from the shower area, so I slid over to my locker.

“Hey, Katz.”

Patrol Officers Landry and DiCinces padded across the tile floor, wearing nothing but towels and flip-flops.

“Damn shame about Wilson,” Landry said.

“Damn shame,” DiCinces parroted.

I didn’t think much of them, even though the two combined for thirty-plus years on the street. Constantly behind on his alimony, Landry was known as ‘Overtime Oscar’ because he frequently initiated arrests at 1400, close to the end of Watch 1, knowing that booking would take an extra two hours of paperwork. Landry’s partner, Nate DiCinces, ran the 100-meter dash slower than continental drift. It’s a mystery how he passed the initial physical exam.

“They making you pull desk duty?” Landry asked, throwing a towel over his shoulder.

“Something like that.”

DiCinces kicked off his plastic sandals. “Must be nice. Getting paid to kick-up your feet and drink lousy coffee.”

I made a quick exit towards the kit room. The desk sergeant behind the mesh screen, Doug Hardee, had been working the same detail since Roosevelt was in office.

I poked my nose through the small opening. “How’s it hangin’?”

He looked up from his romance novel. “The infamous Katz. That’s fucked about Wilson, man. Tragic.” Only a relic like Hardee could read something called ‘Passions of the Pacific’ on the job without taking an avalanche of abuse from the rank and file.

“Speaking of Ray, I was wondering if you could help a brotha out.”

“A brotha?”

“You keep a record of locker combos, right?”

Hardee’s eyes narrowed beneath folds of pale flesh. He reclined even further in his creaky office chair. “Yeah. So?”

I put on my best shit-eating grin. “Think I left something in my partner’s locker that shouldn’t be there. I’m wondering if – you know, for a brotha – you could double-check his combo. Should be 15-11-29, but that’s not working.”

“Can’t help you. Brother.”

“C’mon, there were no secrets between me and Ray.”

“Sorry.” Hardee reopened his novel. “Homicide’s on their way, and I got orders not to open that locker for nobody until then.”

“That’s a double negative. Slide me the combination and I’ll give you a free grammar lesson.”

“Don’t need no help with no fancy-pants grammar. Beat it, Katz.”

“All right, look, it’s porn.” I wedged my face as far as possible into the gap. “As a joke, I postered his locker with naked chicks. It’s got nothing to do with the investigation, but if his mother hears, she’d die of embarrassment.”

Hardee didn’t even look up. “You could’ve hung a picture of Santa Claus getting a hummer for all I care – got me another 14 months until retirement, and I ain’t risking my pension on some rook who don’t know his poop chute from a canned ham. Besides, I bet the Lieutenant will appreciate the peep show. Probably been years since he’s seen fresh puntang.”

I slammed my fist into the metal cage, noting with satisfaction that Hardee lost his balance, almost back-flipped off his chair. “Lazy sack of shit.”

“Know what? I’m going to enjoy opening that locker for Homicide. When the hammer comes down, I’ll be sure everybody knows who’s the decorator.”

“Cocksucker.”

“Takes one to know one.”

Before stomping off, I gave the cage one more rattle for good measure.

Getting nailed for the beaver shots didn’t bum me out as much as not being able to locate our arrest reports. They must’ve already been sent to Robbery-Homicide.

On my way out, I skirted the meeting room occupied by roll call. Through the open door, I heard the Lieutenant addressing the troops: “The chaplain’s part of CIRT, our critical incident response team, available to anybody who’d like to talk.”

No thanks. But Lockett’s voice gave me an idea and I doubled-back towards his office. Sure enough, through his window, I spied a pile of three-ring binders sitting on the Lieutenant’s typically-immaculate desk.

I tried the door. Locked.

Chucking a trash can through the plate glass was Plan A. Before I could come up with Plan B, Oliver appeared. He worked for the Information Technology Division troubleshooting our computer systems, and as civilian worker, could get away with spiky, gelled hair.

“Z? Didn’t expect to see you back so soon.”

“I’m like a bad case of genital warts.”

“I heard the news. If you need anything, let me know.”

“Got a spare key to Luckless’ office?”

Instead of responding, his face froze.

“He’s right behind me, isn’t he?” I asked.

Oliver turned away without answering.

“Katz? What are you doing here?” Lockett asked.

I did my best nonchalant. “Are those our binders? I’ve been looking everywhere for them.”

“I moved them for safekeeping.” The Lieutenant’s neck reminded me of those inflatable airplane pillows, flexing with each syllable. “You get cleared by BSS?”

“Sure thing, boss.”

He unlocked his office, walking past a divisional wall map with red pins for robberies, blue pins for auto thefts, and green pins for burglaries. Seven months into the year, and not one square inch of white paper remained.

A family portrait hung from the back of his computer monitor. Lockett's wife had the look of a sliced-oranges-and-Gatorade soccer mom, with crinkly eyes and slender hands. A pair of tow-headed boys, who shared their mother's sandy brown coloring, sat in the forefront, hugging a well-groomed yellow Labrador.

"If you ask me, I think you should be kept out of the investigation. Robbery-Homicide can sift through your reports themselves – no matter how busy they are."

I wondered if he'd already gone through our paperwork, looking for misspellings. The Lieutenant had been noticeably on edge the past few weeks, so I tried not to provoke him. At least not more than usual.

"I volunteered in case there was something I missed during my interview."

"Your job is on the street. And it's my job to have you doing your job as soon as possible. I'm absolutely sick over what happened to Ray – we were in the same class in the Academy – but Parker Center has more than enough detectives on the case. So now I'm two men down and have to stack shifts for Thursday's memorial, which, by the way, is something you will be attending. In fact, I think you should say a few words. You don't have a problem with that, do you?"

"No, sir. I got a gold star at Toastmasters."

The Lieutenant glared, but let the subject drop. "I need to step into a five-minute meeting; you can park it in that chair. No matter how long it takes, those binders don't leave my office. You're only going to find a shitload of bad leads, but on the slim chance you hit on something, I don't want to be accused of evidence contamination."

"Sir?"

"What?"

"If I need to use the bathroom, will you be issuing hall passes?"

So much for not provoking him.

"Do yourself a favor – stop talking before I loan you out to Santa Barbara PD, where you can spend all day writing jaywalking tickets to spoiled potheads."

"Gotcha."

“You just say something?”

“...”

“That’s what I thought. Put your feet on my desk and I’ll have you tazered.”

Hearing the door shut, I muttered, “A whole afternoon in the Principal’s office? Oh boy, can I?”

Sometimes the best comebacks are uttered at empty chairs.

I picked up the first binder with a grunt. “So Mohammed goes to the mountain.”

Borrowing a pen and yellow legal pad from Luckett’s desk, I wrote three columns: “Threats,” “Gangs,” and “Bad Busts.”

Flipping through our arrest records, I acutely sensed Ray’s absence. Ray was the one with the filofax memory of scumbags. Ray decided where we were going to cruise, as well as when we broke for a Code 7. Ray could walk into any scene, let angry people vent, and then take control with his voice. He didn’t coddle, he didn’t offer family counseling, he just held their eyes and made it clear that any continuation of conflict would no longer be tolerated. People trusted him, and street information seemed to effortlessly flow his way.

His advice to me was always: “Keep your head up, eyes open, and mouth closed.” The latter was never my strong suit, but under his tutelage, I’d gained a greater appreciation for good and evil.

And yes, it can be that simple.

Even in the housing projects, you’ve got solid citizens trying to make a better life for their families. You’ve also got your share of irredeemably bad people – some too young to vote – who’d walk up and shoot you in the head without hesitating.

Detective Hong knocked on the door, looking dapper even though he probably hadn’t slept. “Officer Katz. Where’s your Lieutenant?”

“He stepped out. So what’s the latest?”

“Perhaps you should tell me.”

“I got started, but I’m noting any arrest that went south. Nothing specific to a shotgun yet, but I found a note Ray made about booking this four-time loser, Patrick Monehan, who whispered: ‘Watch your back, pig. You better hope they put me away for a long time.’”

“I’ll assign somebody to check it out.”

“Have you looked into Castaño and Mix?”

“Soon.”

“What have you done then?” I tried not to let my frustration boil over.

“Trust me, we’re working the case the right way.”

I wanted to press further, but Lockett picked that moment to return to his office.

He ignored Detective Hong, his radar locked on yours truly. “I just got a message from BSS – you’re not cleared for desk duty until tomorrow!”

“Today, tomorrow, what’s the difference?”

“This isn’t a democracy – you don’t get to pick which orders to follow!” His bulging neck threatened to send his shirt buttons into low orbit.

“Hey, honest mistake.”

“Go home before I write you up.”

“What about my reports? I barely started–”

“I said go home!”

I looked pleadingly to Hong, but the detective shrugged. “I’m off to inventory Officer Wilson’s locker.”

Kicking me out of his office, Lockett set off with Hong. After a minute, I followed behind. When he saw me enter the locker room, the Lieutenant exploded, “Katz, you’re already working my last nerve!”

“I’m going, I’m going. I just need to grab my workout gloves.”

Hardee entered, grinning. The desk sergeant made a big show of twirling the lock, giving it a ceremonial yank. Nothing happened. He tried again to no avail, double-checked his list before making two more failed attempts.

“Problem?” Lockett asked.

“Wilson must’ve changed his lock.”

Lockett’s tone was withering. “Aren’t you in charge of keeping updated combinations?”

“Yes, but I can’t always keep track. I mean, if an officer were to bring one from home, there’s no way for me to—”

“Get the bolt cutters.”

I stalled, moving things around my locker until Hardee returned with a red-handled tool. He fitted the hooked blade around the metal clasp and snipped.

Using surgical gloves, Hong dropped the lock into an evidence baggie. “Very interesting.”

I chanced a look; the inside of Ray’s locker was mercifully free of pubic hair and erect nipples. Just deodorant, hair products and sun block. A spare uniform hung from the side hook and two rolled towels sat alongside a stack of magazines.

“Looks like Wilson was a neat freak everywhere but his car.” Hong sorted through Ray’s toiletries, shook out the towels, turned my way. “Your partner certainly wasn’t the sentimental type. I went back through his apartment today, and the only photos we found were from company functions or shot of his mother. Nothing, unfortunately, showing his ex-girlfriend.”

“You hang pictures of your exes?”

“Fair enough. Any luck remembering Paula’s last name?”

I shook my head. “Sorry.”

Hong snapped off his rubber glove. “Back to square one.”

After Hong told Hardee to box up the personal effects and send them to Maureen Wilson, I volunteered to take them over personally. Lockett grumbled, but agreed it would be a nice touch. Hong was about to leave when I saw my opening.

“I can help you find Paula.”

To my right, Lockett’s neck grew two sizes. “What?”

“Maybe I’m not good with names, but we went on a couple double-dates. I could work with a sketch artist, start checking downtown law offices – someone’s gotta recognize her.”

“How many times do I have to order you to go home?” the Lieutenant rumbled.

“He does have a point,” Hong said.

“You can’t seriously be thinking of commandeering one of my officers when we’re short-staffed. Especially one that flagrantly shows up without the proper clearance.”

Hong faced down Lockett’s bluster. “Right now, I know next to nothing about Wilson’s private life. Next Saturday is the start of Police Memorial Week and I’ve got Chief Phillips breathing down my neck, wanting a suspect before his speech at the candlelight vigil. So if Officer Katz is willing to assist in any way—”

“Which I totally am.”

“Then I can have my Captain call over and work out the details. We can work something out with BSS. Agreed, Lieutenant?”

“I don’t like it.” Lockett shot me a glare that would’ve stripped paint.

“I don’t either. But unless you have a better idea...” Hong offered.

Lockett weighed the political ramifications. “He just does the sketch – nothing in the field, right?”

“We just need to find this ex-girlfriend.”

“If he blows a gasket, it’s on you. And I want a signed letter from BSS before he steps back through these doors.”

“I can handle it, Lieutenant.”

Lockett looked unconvinced. “Whatever. You’re Detective Hong’s headache now. Just get that box from Hardee before you go.”

Needing to use the restroom, I rounded the corner and nearly collided with an officer coming from the urinals. It took a moment to place his face: Ray’s old partner, Jason Rupkalvis. I wondered how long he’d been in the locker room, and what he’d overheard.

“Watch it,” he said.

If I tried to wear facial hair, I’d have been labeled ‘too salty’ for my britches, but Rupkalvis had been around long enough to get away with the stereotypical cop mustache. Standing well over six feet, he was clearly a weight room fiend – I would’ve been intimidated if not for the fact that he wore his sunglasses indoors.

“Long time no see, Rupkalvis.”

“Finally got transferred back two weeks ago. No thanks to your partner. Or should I say, ex-partner.”

“Nice. Way to honor Ray’s memory.”

“My daughter’s in high school, so it’s not like I could pick up and move. Have you ever tried commuting to Rampart?”

“Ray may not have liked you, but that doesn’t mean he got you shipped out.”

“The fuck you say. Three hours a day stuck in traffic – just to get to work and back. Do you know how much I had to lobby to come back to Southeast? And they only agreed when I offered to pull mornings.”

“So you won’t be attending the service?”

Rupkalvis spit into the nearest urinal. “You think I’d wear my dress blues for some butt-pirate?”

Now he’d gone too far. The hair on my forearms stiffened. “What’d you say?”

“Word on the street is your pal Ray took it chewing the pillow.”

“Fuck you! Ray was straight as they come.”

“No wonder you two got along. Did you ladies blow each other’s pink flute?”

Everything I’ve been taught – “Clear Mind” and “Stillness Defeats Motion” – got swallowed in hate. Suddenly my hands were around Rupkalvis’ collar and I was using my momentum to run him across the bathroom tiles.

Rupkalvis hit flush against a stall partition and came up swinging. I ducked the right cross and used an open palm to push his left hook outside.

In a flash, I saw the opening. I was about to rake my fingers under his chin – which would've left him sucking Jell-O through a straw for a week – but a pair of hands hooked me under the armpits, tugging me back.

“Chill,” said a deep voice in my ear. I might've been able to flip him, but I couldn't get enough leverage against the steel-drum grip. Turning, I saw the hard visage of Officer Terrell Overton.

Rupkalvis moved towards me with balled fists. The impact against the toilet stall had been enough to knock off his sunglasses. A sneer developed under his thick moustache.

“Back off, Jason,” Terrell ordered. “Z, just walk away. Don't make me help Lockett put you on the shelf.”

My shoulders relaxed and I allowed the training officer to guide me out of the bathroom. Overton followed me all the way to the parking lot, making sure I didn't stop until I was behind the wheel of Higgins.

“Go home. Get drunk. Get laid. Just get it out of your system.”

Overton's wife worked as a jazz singer at the Blue Café in Long Beach. I wondered how many belligerent patrons he'd hauled outside and given the same advice over the years.

I didn't know whether to thank him or run over his foot with my 14 x 7 finned aluminum wheels. I couldn't speak, so I fired up Higgins and gunned the V-6.

Instead of the dashboard, all I saw was Rupkalvis' face. Butt-pirate, my ass. No way Ray was a fag.

## Nine

“Zero, you shouldn’t have.”

She accepted my gift of a dozen Gerber daisies and gave me a hug. Aside from my mother, Maureen Wilson is the only person allowed to use my given name.

“I’m... I don’t know what to say.”

“Well, I’ve been expecting this ever since Raymond took that job.” Maureen’s words were as hollow as the steel globe marking the entrance to her retirement community, Leisure World.

‘Seizure World,’ as it’s commonly referred to by locals, sits across from the US Navy’s weapons facility in Seal Beach, and has front gate more secure than the border checkpoint to Mexico. Signing in, I wondered if the eight-foot walls encircling the compound were to keep potential burglars out, or prevent the aged residents from fleeing.

“That first year on patrol, I almost cancelled my phone,” Maureen continued. “Every time it rang, I jumped through the ceiling. At least the detectives said he didn’t suffer.”

I thought of Jennifer’s description – Ray twitching, heaving. “At least there’s that.”

“I don’t exactly know what to do now. Someone from the department called, saying they’re handling the funeral.”

Maureen ushered me into her living room, air thick with menthol vapor rub. In the background, a weeping ‘Price Is Right’ contestant won a new dishwasher. Funny how seniors are quick to blame the boob tube for destroying our culture, yet every blue hair I know has it blaring it all day.

“Are you hanging in there?”

“Me? Oh... it doesn’t seem real, but you go on. You wake up the next day, and somehow go on.”

“Have the reporters been bothering you?”

“A few called, and I told them Raymond was a sweet boy who spent his life helping people. Anything else they print can’t hurt me because I know the truth.”

“Can I do anything for you?”

“No, sweetie, I’ll manage. You know, Raymond was the end of the line. I thought I’d come to grips with it years ago, but I never believed I’d live to see the end of my own family tree. The detectives didn’t say much, but who would do such a horrible thing?”

“We’re doing everything in our power to find out.”

I laid a hand on hers, feeling every bone under her clammy skin. Seeming embarrassed by her grief, she excused herself.

In her absence, my attention settled on an end table holding a cluster of framed pictures. Nearly all were headshots of Ray in various uniforms: little league baseball, high school band, Navy ensign, LAPD dress blues.

The odd one out was a photo of Wally Wilson, who’d died of lung cancer a decade ago. Ray’s father stood next to a forklift, sporting a hard-hat and overalls. You could see the family resemblance in their thick build and high foreheads – although Ray clearly inherited his eye color and crooked nose from Maureen.

I could only imagine how it feels having another person out there – someone you created and raised – who inherited your features, both physical and otherwise. See the

blending of genes, the tangible result of life's most intimate act, then have it snatched away without warning or replacement.

I've contemplated my own death enough times, but never seriously thought about how it affects a parent. It was hard enough accepting Ray wouldn't be at roll call – how must that compare with Maureen knowing she'll never see her only child again?

It doesn't. It can't.

"Raymond knew you'd turn into a great cop," she said from the doorway. She'd brushed her silver hair, changed into a powder blue sweater. "He said you had great instincts and were fair. So much better than his last partner."

"Jason Rupkalvis?"

"Raymond didn't get along with him at all – too mean spirited." Her voice had recovered a little of its strength and I could see she'd willed herself into hostess mode. Without looking down, she straightened a pile of magazines on her table.

"I know what you mean – we just had our own little run-in."

"Watch out. Raymond said Rupkalvis was a graduate of the Rodney King school of policing."

"Ray saw him beat a suspect?"

"He never said in so many words. But I knew it got bad enough that Raymond went to his boss. Next thing you know, that awful man was gone and you two started working together."

I picked up a gold-leaf picture frame. Inside, Ray wore his Navy dress uniform, jaw set, chest thrust at the camera. "He saved my life, you know. Did he ever tell you?"

Maureen shook her head. I told her about that fateful afternoon, the one I tried to simultaneously remember and forget before every patrol shift. I described how Ray shielded me from department recriminations – and worse, an early bad rap – by giving vague testimony about one important detail.

Afterwards, she said, “I always knew God put Raymond here to help people. Now I see His work in you standing here today.”

I have my own issues with the validity of a higher power, but didn’t air them in front of Mrs. Wilson. By the way she’d listened with rapt attention, it was clear Ray hadn’t shared all his work exploits with his mother. I didn’t blame him for omitting the adrenaline-charged moments that punctuated our daily routine, especially ones that ended in hospital visits. I also shielded Jennifer from those whenever possible.

But Maureen was past worrying about near-misses. So if hearing about Ray’s actions in the line of duty – how he handled himself with such confidence – brought her any measure of comfort, I’d happily oblige.

Over a bowl of M & M’s and miniature chocolate bars, I told Maureen what little information I’d gleaned from my contact with the two homicide detectives.

“Detective Kipler called me this morning asking more questions. You know how private Raymond is. He certainly wouldn’t want me mucking in his affairs – especially to those men.”

I noticed Maureen’s occasional use of the present tense when referring to her son, but let it go. “Speaking of, do you remember the woman he was seeing last year. Paula something-or-other?”

“Oh, sure.”

“Whatever happened? At some point, Ray stopped talking about her.”

“She went back to school, and after that, they never had the time. He said it was best to end it.”

“Too bad – nice girl. Do you remember where they met?”

“Ray was working the Rose Bowl game. Some drunk Washington State fan hit her car, so first he took her statement, then he asked her out – always the charmer.”

I scratched my chin. “For the life of me, I can’t remember her last name.”

Maureen wrung her hands and said she couldn't remember either. "Too bad they never considered starting a family, she came from hearty Midwest stock. Now, Zero, tell me another story about my Raymond."

\* \* \*

There was a good reason my recollections of Paula were hazy – in order to get my foot inside the investigation, it's possible I slightly overstated the number of times I'd seen her with Ray.

There'd only been one double-date, not several; but that one night had been no figment of my imagination. The four of us taking a limo to see Billy Joel, all dressed in our Sunday finest. Me, singing impromptu odes to alcohol:

*Sing us a song, you're the piano man... sing us a song tonight... 'cause we're all in the mood for a melon ball... and I've got a wet bar alright. Who wants more Midori?*

After leaving Maureen's, I drove Higgins up Seal Beach Boulevard, juggling between my gearshift and phone. "I know how to track down Ray's ex-girlfriend."

"Katz?" Detective Hong asked.

"I know you told me to meet up with you after the memorial, but if you cross-reference Paula's name with 480's that were filed when Washington State played in the Rose Bowl—"

"We already found her," he interrupted.

"Say what?"

"Paula Johannsen. The LA Bar did a search of their member rolls – we matched it against an RSVP list from last year's Peace Officer's Ball. Detective Kipler just got interviewed her – total bust. She said they only went out a couple times, nothing serious."

"Are you kidding? They dated for months."

“It may have taken months, but it was only a few dates. Wilson always picked her up, she never went back to his place, and you were the only friend she ever met. We got nothing.”

“Let me talk to her. Maybe if a familiar face were asking the questions—”

“I know you want to help, but your continued involvement might compromise our investigation. And once we catch the perp, you don’t want him walking on some bullshit technicality, do you?”

“I can still look over my arrest records, right? I only had a chance to go back a few months.”

“I already sent them to Parker Center for review. I’ll call your Lieutenant and tell him you’re returning to his capable hands.”

“But... but...”

The detective hung up before I’d finished sputtering. Vibrating with frustration, I placed a new call.

“ITD, this is Oliver.”

“Hey, it’s Z. Remember when you asked if I needed anything? You still at Southeast?”

“All week. They’ve got me swapping out the router.”

“Hardee’s holding a box of Ray’s stuff for me in the kit room. I had to leave the station in a hurry and can’t show my face yet. Can you pick it up and meet me in the parking lot in half an hour?”

“No problem.”

Fortunately, Oliver was at his computer and able to type in a quick Google search for the Cougars’ last appearance in the Rose Bowl. A buddy of mine in the Pasadena police department could do the rest.

Then I asked Oliver if he could search NECS for some addresses without leaving an electronic trail. He hesitated.

“I suppose.”

“Let’s start with Ezekiel Castaño. C-A-S-T-A- one of those funny n’s, then O.”

“Is this going to get me in deep shit?”

“Trust me – I just got to check out a few guys who might’ve had it in for Ray.”

“It’ll take me a minute to set up a phantom login.” Oliver banged away at his keyboard, then pulled up Ezekiel’s CII#, which is essentially a Social Security number for criminals. “Castaño checked out.”

“He’s got an alibi? How’d the computer tell you that?”

“No, I mean he really checked out – died six months ago.”

“One down. Next...”

## Ten

“Hello, Paula.”

I could tell she didn't immediately make the connection. Standing in her doorway, I could've been a magazine salesman, a get-out-the-vote signature jockey, or worse, a Jehovah's Witness. Then it clicked and her face softened. “Z, oh my God... I don't know what to say.”

“‘Come in’ always works.”

“Of course. Come in, come in.”

Following her into the apartment, I noticed Paula had lost weight. The ridges of her shoulders – uncovered by a sleeveless tank top – stuck out like flexed knuckles. Her thin brown hair was streaked with blonde highlights; it might've looked good in the sun, but in low light, with her wan expression, it came across as prematurely gray.

Paula offered me a drink and I took in her living space while she poured me a glass of water. Structurally speaking, her apartment contained plenty of square footage. But with curtains pulled, and a layer of open books, coffee mugs, crusty dishes, and strewn blankets covering the furniture, her front room appeared to contract – just like the black hole inside Ray's Honda. No wonder they'd been attracted to each other. Clutterers of the World Unite.

As if reading my mind, Paula called out from the attached kitchen: “Forgive the mess. I've been taking night classes.”

“That’s what maids are for.”

“What?”

“I said ‘way to insulate the floor.’ I bet you save a fortune on your heating bill.”

“Ha ha. Still the kidder, I see. Here’s your water.”

“So, how’ve you been?”

“Busy. If I knew getting an MBA was this much work, I never would’ve started.”

Her hunched shoulders carried the weight of full-body tiredness.

“I heard you spoke with Detective Kipler today and weren’t particularly helpful.”

Paula crossed her arms and straightened. “I’m not sure what you mean. He asked a bunch of questions about Ray that I couldn’t answer.”

I decided to make a left turn before she got too defensive. “We never really got past the basic ‘hi, how are ya’s,’ did we? Helluva Billy Joel concert, though.”

Her posture didn’t change, but her gaze downshifted a gear. “I couldn’t believe when you stood on your seat and started dancing.”

“Might’ve had something to do with the wet bar in the limo.”

“I wouldn’t have guessed anybody your age knew the lyrics to ‘Uptown Girl.’”

“You gotta respect any song powerful enough to snare Christy Brinkley – especially when you got a mug like Billy’s. Too bad they didn’t last... which reminds me, Ray never said why you guys broke up.”

“Let’s just say we had some issues. Long story.”

“I’ve got time – they put me on desk duty. Honestly, how often did you see each other?”

Her posture stiffened again. “The detective already asked those questions.”

“I’m just trying to get a feel for your relationship. We may have shared a car, but Ray wasn’t much of a communicator.”

“He didn’t talk about us?” Her arms stayed crossed.

“Only when I dragged it out of him. Still, he always said how much he liked spending time with you. That nobody else made him laugh as hard.”

The fog lifted for a second, all the muscles in her face stretching upwards. Not a full smile, but close. She still had the whitest teeth of anyone I'd ever met.

"What are you doing here?" Her tone regained some of its weariness and wariness.

"I was looking through old files, making a list of scumbags we locked up, and I don't feel any closer to understanding what happened. Maybe I'll never know, but I can't sit around while Ray's killer walks the streets."

I silently patted myself on the back for getting Paula to uncross her arms.

"You haven't found any witnesses?"

"Not yet. But Jennifer's the one who found his body."

"That's awful."

"On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being peachy-keen and 10 being awful, it's about a 4.2. She wakes up screaming."

Paula shook her head. "I'm sorry. And the detectives, they don't know..."

"Anything," I finished for her. "From what I can tell, the investigation's stalled. Maureen couldn't name a single one of his friends – not even an old drinking buddy. You're the only person I know who spent time with Ray outside of work. So if you remember anything, here's my card – I wrote my cell number on the back."

Through her mask of fatigue, there were signs of an internal struggle.

I went for broke. "Please. Was Ray involved in anything shady? Do you know anybody who'd want to hurt him?"

"I'm not sure how much to say. I'd feel like I was betraying a confidence."

"Whose confidence? Who are you protecting?"

The struggle continued, but she finally said, "Ray."

"You can't protect Ray. His body's lying on an autopsy slab and nobody knows why. Give me something – a name, a phone number, anything to go on."

I didn't think I'd gotten through, but instead of showing me the door, Paula walked to her messy dining room table and rummaged through her handbag. She withdrew a black and white picture, about an inch square, probably taken at an arcade or county

fair. In the photo, the woman was smiling awkwardly, like the flash had caught her off guard. Thick glasses, arched eyebrows, hair parted in the middle – to me, she looked like a nurse – someone who wore sensible shoes to work, had two cats at home.

“This is Monica. My partner.”

“Your study partner?”

“For God’s sake, do I have to spell it out for you? We’re lovers.”

The meaning of her words registered. “Oh... so you dig chicks. No wonder you and Ray broke up.”

“Apparently, I do need to spell it out for you. Ray and were never a couple. We were each other’s beard.”

Now I was wholly befuddled – so Paula was a dyke, but what did that have to do with anybody’s facial hair? Wait, was this some kind of sex-change deal?

I must’ve looked as stupid as I felt, because Paula volunteered, “I’d take him to events, like company parties, where I couldn’t bring Monica. I was only ‘out’ to a couple of people at the law office, and having Ray show up as my date made things easier. He was my beard – a cover, so I wouldn’t have to answer questions about my personal life. And I’d do the same for his police BBQ’s and Friday lasagna nights – although I’m pretty sure Maureen saw through the act.”

“You’re not suggesting–”

“That Ray was gay? What do you think I’ve been trying to tell you? *Now* do you understand why I didn’t want to answer a bunch of questions about our relationship? Not that I’m suggesting Ray’s sexuality had anything to do with his death, but he used to stress, you know, about people at work finding out. Once, he overheard some officers talking about a fellow cop they suspected of being a ‘fucking homo,’ and how they’d ignore the call if he ever needed back-up.”

“Hold on. You’re talking to the guy who rode in the same car with Ray – day-in and day-out – for eighteen months. If he swung that way, I sure as hell would’ve known.”

“News flash: being gay is like being Jewish. You don’t have to tell people if you don’t want.”

“He called you his girlfriend.”

“If you don’t believe me, see for yourself.” Paula’s cheeks flushed, her lips pulling back to reveal pearly-white fangs. “You want to meet his friends? Drive down to San Diego, go to the clubs in Hillcrest. Ray almost never bar-hopped in town – too afraid of running into somebody from work.”

I tried to speak but couldn’t muster the words.

She continued, “The closest he came to coming out was volunteering at DOOR, a gay-rights outfit across from AIDS Project LA. I never understood why he gave them the time of day – a bunch of deluded, misguided throwbacks – but ask them if you don’t believe me.”

*It couldn’t be. Not Ray. Must be something else.*

“I think I get it – he cheated on you, didn’t he?”

The sweet smile returned. “I’m just being honest, Z.”

“If this is your honest, I’d hate to see vindictive.”

“Sorry for thinking you’d understand.” Her voice dripped with false pity. “Ray would be so proud.”

“You know, Percival once said, ‘Lunacy is a confusion of the understanding.’”

Paula took my empty glass and added it to the pyramid of unwashed dishes in the sink. Without looking up, she replied, “There’s another old saying: ‘To the blind, everything is sudden.’”

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Jennifer and I spooned under the covers, heads sharing the same pillow. By her breathing, I could tell she wasn’t yet asleep.

She'd been especially quiet after returning from work. When I asked how her day had gone, a question normally good for a half-hour debrief on which Disneyland characters were secretly dating or looking for new jobs, her only response was, "Fine."

Then she told me she wanted to chill out and proceeded to watch back-to-back episodes of "The Simpsons." For dinner, Jennifer opened two cans of Campbell's soup and broke out a bag of Funyuns.

The broadcast vans outside Candy Lanai departed – our saving grace coming in the form of a live carjacking and police pursuit.

Another night in Los Angeles. Another top story for the evening news.

More bread and circuses for the masses.

Jennifer was in pajamas by eight, curled in bed by ten.

I couldn't shake my conversation with Paula. Obviously, her break-up with Ray hadn't been pretty. Paula's final words played on a mental loop: *To the blind, everything is sudden.*

I wouldn't have given her accusations a second thought if not for Rupkalvis' locker room slur. *From what I heard, your buddy Ray took it chewing the pillow.*

Before falling asleep, Jennifer waved the yellow flag at my racing thoughts by asking if I was going on patrol tomorrow.

"They're forcing me to pull desk duty. For a day or two at least."

"Good. I don't think I could handle you being out there right now."

"We've been over this. It's what I do." After I recovered from last year's Darrell Browne incident, for weeks Jennifer freaked out every time I went on patrol, wanting me to check in multiple times a shift.

"You knew my job before we started dating," I pointed out. My simple logic ran aground on her rocky shore of silence.

I attempted a different harbor. "I'm sure what happened had nothing to do with the job. Ray was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Pedestrians die all the time. That doesn't mean you stop crossing the street."

“You weren’t the one who found him.” It came out barely above a whisper.

“And you showed a clear head by calling for help right away. What else could you have done, Jellybean?”

More silence. “I keep seeing his face. How he looked when he took his last breath. He stared right through me.”

“Maybe you should take the detectives’ offer to see a counselor. They even made me go today for a routine check-up.” I hugged her tighter and didn’t mention the fact I was in line for another session tomorrow with the evil Dr. Williams.

“What if you didn’t go back? Could you please think about that?”

“Back where? On patrol?”

“LAPD. All of it.”

“Now you’re just being silly.”

She sat up, gathered the comforter, snatched the pillow from under my head.

“Where are you going?”

“Couch.”

She marched to the living room.

“But you’re my heater,” I called. “The bed gets all chilly without you, Jellybean. Jellybean?”

Perfect.

## Eleven

Jameson stood on the pebbled rooftop, allowing his eyes to fully adjust to the dark. A marine layer blanketed Long Beach, limiting the ambient light to the streetlights below. No matter. He lived for the night.

Now that the new moon had passed, his muscles tingled with resurgent power.

The ruby gem felt cool against the skin of his neck. For this mission, he'd removed its small circular battery, so the red glow wouldn't draw attention.

He backed to the edge, leaning into space, testing the hoist. The ropes creaked as fibers stretched against his weight, but the harness and pulleys held fast.

Wilson's apartment was on the fourth floor of a six-story complex. With the lousy placement of a rooftop air conditioning unit, Jameson wasn't able to lower himself directly to the balcony. Instead, he'd have to descend two floors, swing across a ten-foot gap.

A more experienced cat burglar might've been able to pick Wilson's front door, but Jameson knew his limits. The door was secured with a Grade-1 Schlage deadbolt, its beveled casing preventing him from using channel-lock pliers. He probably could've kicked it in – even with a four-screw strike plate – but Jameson didn't want to tip off the police that something of value might still be in Wilson's apartment.

The balcony door would surely be easier to negotiate.

No traffic at 2:00 am. The streets below were quiet. Jameson checked the straps of his harness, lowering himself down the building's stucco face.

Moments later, he reached the fourth story balcony and halted his momentum. While tiptoeing across the balcony's railing, he accidentally bumped a hanging fern. The plant didn't fall, but knocked against another clay pot.

With a gloved hand, he let out slack, preparing to swing to Wilson's apartment. Before leaping, a wide-eyed poodle appeared behind the screen door, yapping convulsively. Jameson lurched backwards, almost losing his grip on the guide rope as his feet reconnected with the railing.

Inside the apartment, a light came on, and he had just enough time to pull himself out of sight before the screen door slid open, an elderly woman's voice saying, "Hush, Noodles. What's gotten into you?"

*Better muzzle that fucking poodle before I do it my way,* Jameson thought.

Fortunately, the upstairs neighbors didn't stir. He thought about raising himself back to the roof, but couldn't face disappointing his Alpha again.

Calming his breathing, he lowered himself to the railing and swung over to Wilson's balcony.

The glass door was locked, but no charley bar or anti-lift device. Easy pickings.

He clicked on a penlight and stepped into the living room.

Jackpot.

Three storage containers, overflowing with paperwork, sat on Wilson's dining room table. Apparently, the detectives hadn't finished gathering everything from the officer's home office. In less than twenty minutes, he'd found what he was looking for, tucked inside a plain brown envelope.

No need to search the apartment. His Alpha was going to be so impressed!

## Twelve

Paula was at least right about DOOR's location. I parked Higgins down the street from AIDS Project LA and crossed to an older, three story building.

Finding the correct office, I approached the receptionist's desk, which was manned by a fellow with a shock of gravity-defying blond hair.

Jennifer's trendy LA friends say I have no fashion sense, but this guy had far too much fashion for my liking. Open at the collar, his shirt appeared to be iridescent silk. Two gold hoops hung from his right ear, matching his scarf. Maybe the hoops were secret code for being into chaps and spurs.

"Can I help you?" he said in a manner that suggested he'd enjoy watching me get nibbled to death by wild badgers.

I might've preferred the badgers – or even BSS – over this visit. But I had to know. "Who's in charge here?"

"This is a collective. Nobody's 'in charge' like the 'take me to your leader' cliché. All are welcome and valued equally; gays, dykes, bi's, queens, trannies... which are you?"

I badged him. "Pig."

"I see," he sniffed. "Perhaps you should talk to Samuel. He knows a thing or two about bacon."

I followed the blonde rooster past a series of gunmetal desks to a back office, the only one with a private door. Without knocking, the receptionist pushed through, saying, “Someone’s here to see you.”

In his late-thirties, Samuel had close-cropped hair that was so tight on the sides I mostly saw scalp. On the tale of the tape, I had the advantage in height and reach, but his upper body had more circumference. His T-shirt – with the slogan “We Will Not Retreat” – stretched across developed pecs, the sleeves cutting across a tattoo on his coiled right bicep, revealing hints of an eagle claw and anchor.

When he took my offered hand, the motion was smooth as a panther. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m Officer Z. Katz, LAPD.”

“Lovely. What’s it this time?”

“Excuse me?”

“Harassment, stalking, restraining order, demonstrating without a permit?”

Samuel’s eyes were so dark that I couldn’t tell where the pupils started and stopped.

“I’m afraid you’ve got the wrong idea. I’m not here on a beef.”

“Must be my lucky day. Have a seat then.”

I took in his immaculate office – no flashes of color, just rolled maps and dark filing cabinets. The smell of sour milk hung in the air.

“So what do you do here?”

Taking a seat across from me, Samuel made a steeple of his fingers. “We champion gay causes – force community leaders to face their responsibilities.”

A word in his statement caught my attention. “Force?”

“Our methods aren’t always appreciated, but they’re within the law. All we’re asking is that gays and lesbians in positions of power stand up and be counted.”

“And these methods would include?”

“Phone calls, picketing, feeding information to various publications – that sort of thing.”

“Interesting. The name, DOOR, stands for...?”

“Dragging Out Our Role-models.”

“Catchy.”

“Gets people’s attention.” He reached under the desk and came up with a folded brochure. Glancing at the cover, I saw an image of a large, blue door swinging on its hinges. Underneath, in bold type, it read:

**SOMETHING HAS GOT TO BE DONE AND IT HAS TO BE DONE FAST. AND YOU ARE IN THE POSITIONS TO DO IT. Be a part of the solution instead of part of the problem. If not, then get the fuck out of our way. Because we are coming through and nothing is going to stop us. And if that means we have to pull you down, well, then, have a nice fall.**

**--Michelangelo Signorile, *Outweek***

I looked up to find Samuel measuring my reaction. My face felt warm, but I tried to play it off. “I like the color of the door. Blue’s very soothing.”

Samuel cleared his throat, not appearing to accept the compliment. So much for my second career in Feng Shui.

“You look like a straight,” he said. “So if you’re not here with an injunction and you’re not here to volunteer, what’s going on?”

“I’m investigating the death of a fellow officer, Ray Wilson. Name ring a bell?”

Samuel fixed me with those black orbs and shrugged. “Don’t really follow the news anymore. Everything’s propaganda or press releases.”

“He was murdered in a drive-by shooting. Did you know him?”

“Should I?”

“I heard he volunteered here.”

“Oh, you ‘heard,’ did you?” He threw me the irritation vibe.

I returned the favor. “You want to help a current homicide investigation, or do you want me up in your shit? I’d be happy to run down outstanding complaints against your organization – sounds like there should be plenty. I’ve got the means and the free time to make your life very unpleasant. So I’m going to ask nicely, once more, do you know Ray Wilson?”

“Never met the man.”

I pulled out Ray’s department head-shot. “You absolutely sure?”

“Sure I’m sure.”

“Could he have worked here without you knowing about it?”

“Not a chance.”

“Fine. Thanks for the trouble.”

*Woo-hoo!* Massive surge of relief. Like I knew, Paula was full of it. Shouldn’t have wasted my time coming down here in the first place. Turning on my heels, I yanked open the office door.

To my back, Samuel asked, “Did you work with Officer Wilson?”

I answered over my shoulder. “Partners.”

“Then you must’ve known him well.”

“Better than his ex-girlfriend, that’s for sure.”

## Thirteen

Sonny Mix looked surprised to have any guest, especially this white boy.

“Sheeeeeeiit,” he said by way of a greeting. “Must be my mutherfuckin’ birthday.”

“Long time no see. Looks like they’ve been feeding you well.”

“I get my three squares. This a social call or you checkin’ to see how the black half live?”

“Just happened to be in the neighborhood.”

“Sheeeeeiiiiit. Whaddya want, po-leece?” He proceeded to suck his teeth, the sound inmates use to give a non-verbal ‘fuck you’ to their guards.

“Two days ago, some cockroach rolled up and shot my partner. I scanned my memory banks for notable pests and your name crawled up.”

When we busted Sonny, aside from the drugs and illegal weapons, the search turned up a remarkable collection of garden gnomes. The plaster figurines had the run of his house – overflowing cabinets, standing on bookshelves, sharing wall space with posters of Tupac Shakur.

Slumped in a chair behind the security glass of the LA County Men’s Central Jail, Sonny now resembled one of his collectables. Wispy beard. Belly stretching the waistline of his jumper. He was twenty-nine years old, putting him well past the normal life-expectancy of an OG.

“I heard ol’ Wilson took two in the chest. Cryin’ shame.”

“What do you know about it?”

“Only what they print in the paper. Was gonna call to say ‘whaddup?’ but couldn’t find a mutherfuckin’ quarter.”

“On that topic, when you rang me and Ray, what’d you mean when you said you were looking forward to paying us a visit?”

“Just being neighborly.”

“How about we quit dicking around? You have anything to do with the hit?”

“Do you really think I’d just out and tell you if I did?”

“Yes or no?”

“I’m all locked up, you feel me? How you think I pull that off?”

“We both know you could’ve called one of your Mad Swan buddies to pull the trigger. Cinderella or Pookie.” Funny how the bigger the gangster, the sillier the nickname. It’s only the lightweights that give themselves bad-ass nicknames like Rambo and Killjoy.

“I don’t run with those niggers.” He pulled up his sleeve to show off a fresh jailhouse tattoo. “Nation of Islam, Five Percent. I been readin’ Malcom X and shit.”

“I would’ve figured you for renting the movie. You’re telling me you didn’t have anything to do with it?”

“If I wanted to pop you or Wilson, you sure ain’t be sitting here today.”

“So, in theory, you *could* still arrange a 187?”

“Don’t go twistin’ my words – I didn’t say nothin’ like that.”

“How’d you get our home phone numbers?”

“Little birdy told me. Man, you two never got up in my shit, I still be playin’ the ponies. Now, I make twelve cents an hour folding other people’s underwears. You know how many hours it takes to buy one ticket?”

“Didn’t realize you could bet the trifecta from your cell.”

“Sheeeeeiiiiit. You get ‘bout anything done if you got the flow, you feel me?”

“I feel you. Thanks, Sonny, you’ve been singularly unhelpful.”

“No need to go rushing off – we still got couple a minutes. How ‘bout if we talk all normal like? My bunkmate’s a paisa, so he’s no good to chat with.”

*Was he serious?* Sonny Mix blamed me and Ray for putting him behind bars, and now he wanted to shoot the shit?

“I can’t imagine what you’d consider normal conversation.”

“We can talk ‘bout anything.”

“Anything? Like the Israel-Palestine conflict? You want to break that down?”

“Well, personally, I think we got enough problems of our own – don’t much see the point of sticking our noses into their mess.” Sonny rocked back, taking on the air of a tenured college professor. “‘Sides, it’s simple. All you gotta do to fix that shit is take all the money spent droppin’ bombs and build those A-rabs a bunch of schools an’ hospitals. Ain’t nobody more dangerous than a man who got nothing to lose.”

\* \* \*

“You’re late.”

“Traffic was brutal.”

Dr. JoAnn cut me off with a wave of her manicured nails. “This is LA – traffic’s no excuse. Would you show up twenty minutes late for a shift?”

“No, but–”

“Then I expect the same level of respect for my time. This is your only warning, understand?” She motioned for me to take a seat. “Lecture’s over. So, how are things going?”

“I’m just taking it one day at a time, you know. Trying to focus on the task at hand.” Gotta love sports clichés – millions of household uses. There’s no ‘I’ in team, but there’s two in psychiatrist.

“I heard you lied your way back into to your stationhouse yesterday.”

“Sorry. I meant to pick up some stuff in my locker, then kinda got sucked into looking over a few reports.”

“Your Lieutenant has requested I provide written confirmation before he changes your status. I agreed that your actions have forced those measures.”

“We’d save time if you gave me the letter now. I’d even buy you lunch.”

“I also got a call about you volunteering to help Robbery-Homicide find your partner’s ex-girlfriend.”

“That never happened. I mean, yeah, they dangled it in front of me, then backtracked the second they tracked her down. Slammed the door in my face without so much as a howdy-do.”

“Don’t you think that’s best? There’s a multitude of reasons to avoid having officers work cases in which they have a relationship with the victim.”

“There’s also good reasons to not marry your sister, but that didn’t keep me from sneaking peeks when Ingrid was in the shower.”

That random tangent got Dr. Williams’ fingernails tapping against her desktop. Perhaps she was sending an S.O.S. to her superiors. “I thought you were an only child.”

“I said I wasn’t a middle child. Technically, Ingrid was more like a step-sister, since my mom only dated her dad. But we hit puberty together, so we bonded over raging hormones. Lost track of her after she married a construction worker. Too bad, ‘cause you never forget the first time playing doctor.”

Speaking of doctors, the one examining me shook her head like I’d stepped on her hamster.

“What?” I asked. “You’re the head-shrinker. I assumed you wanted to dig into my family’s dirty laundry.”

“In that case, tell me about your mother.”

“Gahhh. Not that cheesy line.”

Dr. Williams waited until I'd finished my chest clutching and theatrical eye rolls before asking what my mother did for a living.

"She's a waitress – back home in Colorado. Been at the same dive over twenty years."

"Sounds stable."

"Except for her habit of shacking up with anybody who tipped over 15%. Mom means well, but she's got lousy taste in men. Maybe she would've found it easier to date if I hadn't turned her hair prematurely gray."

"Why do you say that?"

"I was an active kid. Hyper-active, if you can believe it. They practically had to strap me down to make me sleep."

"Where was your father during all this?"

That one got me up, pacing. "I've been meaning to ask him that same question."

"Where does he live?"

"Don't know, don't care. Until I was 16, once a year, I'd get a birthday card with a ten spot. That was it – and the return addresses were never the same. Kentucky, Montana, Michigan, South Carolina, you name it. Mom told me he was a traveling magician. He had a talent for disappearing, that's for sure."

"You sound angry."

"Why wouldn't I be? Mom worked double-shifts to pay the bills while he was doing card tricks in Bum-Fuck Nebraska. I was the latchkey poster-boy."

"We can certainly spend more time discussing your father – if you want to come to peace with his absence, you'll need to drop that baggage and move on."

"Pass. Do you have any idea how far I've already carried these bags?"

From her tight lips, I guessed I'd flunked that part of the quiz. "Zero Mostel Katz. I'll bet that led to some good times on the playground."

"Could've been worse, like Irwin Maurice."

"Wasn't Zero Mostel a famous painter?"

“Nope – the fat actor with the bad comb-over in ‘The Producers.’ This would be where you suggest I’m compensating for my birth name by doing police work, right? You know, having to prove over and over I’m not a Zero.”

“Do you feel Zero is a misnomer?”

“See, *that’s* why I should’ve studied for the GMAT. Maybe then I’d be able to use words like ‘misnomer.’”

“Do you think Ray Wilson put this much thought into his own name?”

I stopped in my tracks. “Clever. Circling the conversation right back where you wanted.”

“This is your time. We can sit here and trade quips, or we can talk about things in your life or job that are bothering you.”

“How about if we skip to the end? Are you going to green-light me for active duty, or do I keep the training-wheels?”

“Hard to say – you haven’t even been here ten minutes.”

“I’ve got things to do and this is putting a hitch in my get-along.”

“Are you ready to discuss how you’ve been dealing with your partner’s death?”

Her question floated across the room. I studied it for a minute, decided to punt. “I’m sick of talking. Ground me if you want, I officially don’t care anymore.”

\* \* \*

My cell phone could barely contain Lockett’s deep harmonics. “What the fuck? I heard you walked out of BSS!”

“The doc kept asking about my mother. Total waste of time.”

“This is no joke, Katz. If I don’t get a letter saying you’re cleared, my hands are tied. No reinstatement.”

“I just need a couple of days to clear my head.”

“I’m making another BSS appointment for you Friday afternoon. You better show up with a big fat apology, unless you want to permanently wash out.”

Before I could stow my phone, I received an incoming call from: *Private Number*.

“This is Samuel Miller from DOOR.” His voice reminded me of his pupil-less eyes.

“Yeah?”

“Why are you asking about Ray’s murder? You aren’t with homicide. I checked.”

I immediately noticed he said ‘Ray’ instead of ‘Officer Wilson’ and ‘murder’ instead of ‘death.’ The flip-flop took me off-guard, so I stalled. “How’d you get this number?”

“Paula. We may not always see eye-to-eye, but she can generally be trusted to do the right thing. So, again, what’s your agenda?”

“Ray was my partner and my friend. I owe it to him.”

“I can’t talk here. These walls have ears. Meet me at the Black Hole in an hour.”

“Black Hole? Is that some kind of astronomer’s club?”

“Santa Monica Boulevard and Orange, southwest corner. Don’t worry, it’s only a gay bar on the weekends. Monday through Friday, they let in corn-fed heteros like you.”

## Fourteen

The Black Hole wasn't the darkest bar I've ever been inside, but I hoped the drink menus were in Braille.

Traffic through West Hollywood had been light, so I'd arrived first. I circled the entire joint from the Ms. Pac-Man video game to the graffiti-scarred bathrooms – decorated with a “Cocks” sign over the men's room and “Hens” over the women's.

No sign of Samuel.

The billiards table had more scratches than a Run DMC concert, and two of the three pool cues were missing their tips. A Wurlitzer jukebox played five tunes for a buck. Piped through overhead speakers, “Melissa” gave way to the opening strains of James Brown's “Papa's Got a Brand New Bag.”

I ordered a draft and found a corner table with a view of the door.

A handful of patrons milled about, all wearing some sort of leather.

*Was Samuel lying about this only being a gay bar on the weekends?* I tried to keep alert without giving off a vibe that invited company. Burying my hands in my pockets, I came across DOOR's brochure.

The overhead glow of a Budweiser sign emitted just enough light for me to read inside the fold:

## TO THE CLOSETED IN POWER

**An army of lovers is marching forth: women and women, men and men, arm in arm, hand in hand. Our numbers keep growing every day as we become more and more impatient with the likes of you. All of the hell you've lived through—the hiding, the sweating, the crying, the lying—is only going to become more unbearable. Unless you come out, you'll eventually be revealed as just another cowering, sad, self-loathing homosexual. You'll be remembered as just another Roy Cohn, just another Terry Dolan, just another J. Edgar Hoover.**

**Deep down, you know you have no “right” to be where you are, that you were shoved in your closet a long time ago. Deep down, you know why you must now come out and why it is wrong for you not to. It's better if you do it yourself. It's liberating and invigorating and empowering...**

**Now is the time for those who occupy the closets of power to come out and be counted.**

**--Michelangelo Signorile, *Queer In America***

I recognized one name – Hoover – from this manifesto of sorts. I'd heard the former head of the FBI liked to wear a dress once in a while, but didn't know he was *definitely* batting for the other team.

**What we have called “outing” is a primarily journalistic movement to treat homosexuality as equal to heterosexuality in the media. On a larger scale, that's the goal of the entire gay liberation movement: to raise homosexuality to an equivalence with heterosexuality in all spheres of life.**

**In 1990, many of us in the gay media announced that henceforth we would simply treat homosexuality and heterosexuality as equals. We were not going to wait for the perfect, utopian future to arrive before equalizing the two: We were going to do it now. That's what outing really is: equalizing homosexuality and heterosexuality in the media.**

--Gabriel Rotello, *Outweek*

Blah, blah, blah. 'Equalizing homosexuality and heterosexuality in the media?'  
Who the hell wants that?

Now I like to think I'm pretty tolerant compared to my Colorado buddies, but I still believe what happens in the bedroom should stay in the bedroom. If two consenting adults like to get their rocks off by playing hide the gerbil, that's their business. I certainly don't need to read about it.

Behind me, a voice asked, "Enjoying our literature?"

Samuel crossed to the opposite seat, still wearing the same T-shirt and guarded expression from earlier.

"That's me, Mister Open-Minded."

"Right." His eyes blended into the dimness of the bar, charcoal briquettes floating in motor oil.

Samuel was not what I expected. No lisp, no floppy hand movements, nothing outwardly femmy. In fact, he looked more like an ex-linebacker than the head of – as Paula had called it – a misguided and deluded gay-rights organization.

"Hang on." Samuel made his way to the bar. The back of his T-shirt had "Repeal DOD Directive 1332.14" in large white letters. He returned a few seconds later with a tall glass of a clear liquid.

"Gin and tonic?" I guessed.

"Mineral water."

"Mmmm... nice place."

"Come by Thursday nights. It turns into a club for vampires."

"Vampires?"

"Fools who *think* they're vampires. Black capes and white faces sucking down red wine and vodka cranberries."

"So... you did know Ray?"

“I did.”

“How’d you meet?” I wasn’t sure if I wanted to hear the answer.

“Poker night. Some squid named Brian introduced us. Later I found out Ray and Brian had been going out, but he was a twink, not really Ray’s type.”

“So Ray and Brian...”

“Fucked? Of course. Why else would Ray make time with that poodle?”

I gulped, wishing myself far, far away. I even would’ve preferred discussing puncture wounds with Thursday’s blood-sucking freaks over this conversation.

“Are you sure we’re talking about my Ray?”

“You mean Maureen’s Ray? The Ray who thought TV poisoned the mind, but had seen every Bela Tarr movie ever made? The Ray who was petrified of losing his hair and rubbed sunblock into his scalp five times a day, even if he was wearing a hat?”

That was my partner to a T.

“Were you two...?”

“Lovers? No, just old friends. Ray sometimes helped around the office, made a few inquiries on our behalf. He was too afraid of losing his job to ever publicly support our organization.”

Ever since my conversation with Paula, I’d been trying to convince myself that somehow she’d gotten it all wrong. The memories I had of Ray – the guy who drove our squad car as we scrambled for a call, the guy who led the way, boot first, through motel doors as we chased down suspects – was wholly incompatible with him butt-bumping a ‘twink’ named Brian. *Could I have really been so blind? How could I have ridden in the same squad car with him and not known?*

Samuel said, “Looks like you’ve been kicked in the shins by Rock Hudson’s ghost.”

“I’m just having a hard time picturing... I mean, Ray was a good cop.”

“High praise from a close-minded breeder.”

“What the hell you mean by that?”

“This whole time you’ve been freaking about Ray’s sexual preference, you haven’t once asked if I know who killed him.”

I took a deep breath, collected myself. “Fine. I’ll bite. Who?”

“That’s not asking nicely – you can do better.”

“All right, Samuel. Would you please tell this close-minded breeder who killed his partner? Pretty please, with fairy dust on top?”

“You got a Blockbuster card?”

That startled me. “Huh?”

“Never mind. There’s a video store on the way. We can take your car.”

\* \* \*

The early evening cooled to 75 degrees – as predictable as the stop-and-go progress on La Brea Boulevard.

A lowered Caddy full of cholos pulled up on my left. I must’ve broadcast off-duty cop, because they instantly stopped laughing amongst themselves, one of the dark-haired teens going for his seatbelt. Instinctively, I scanned the car for potential threats: *Are their hands accounted for? Was that an expired plate? Where are my alternative routes in case they open up on Higgins?*

A mild case of paranoia is perfectly healthy for someone in my line of work.

“Do you mind?” Samuel asked, reaching forward.

My paranoia went straight to panic. *He’s going for my thigh!* I recoiled, flattening myself into my seat.

“Sorry, but I can only take so much Aerosmith.” Samuel turned down the stereo volume, then noticed the petrified look on my face. “What, you never seen a car full of Mexicans before?”

“No, that’s not... I’m fine. If you don’t like KLOS, there’s some tapes in the glove compartment.”

“Tapes. Cute. 8-Tracks?” Samuel flipped the latch and sorted through my fantastic music selection. “Ouch – might as well be. Eagles, Patsy Cline, Waylon Jennings... The Doobie Brothers? This is part of an undercover assignment, right?”

“Lay off the Doobies. I grew up on ‘Takin’ It To The Streets.’”

“How could you grow up on something that was outdated when I was a teenager? What are you, twenty two?”

“Twenty five. In Eastern Colorado, we cherished the three C’s: Coors, Cowboy boots, and Classic rock.”

“Dinosaur rock, you mean. Tell me you’ve at least heard of Massive Attack.”

“Massive who?”

“Never mind. After the light, you’re going to make a left into the parking lot.”

“You know, I think I’ll take a raincheck. My girlfriend’s making fried chicken and I hate cold green beans.”

“You wanted to know who killed Ray.” His voice would’ve hardened lava.

I pulled to a stop, idling behind a row of dwarf palm trees separating a coin laundry from Hollywood Video. “I don’t see why we have to stop and get a flick.”

Samuel opened the passenger-side door, engaging Higgins’ overhead light. “Don’t worry, you’ll give this one a thumb’s up. Special effects, explosions, steamy love scenes... everything a red-blooded guy like you could want.”

“But I don’t–”

Too late – he was gone, bounding over speed bumps and empty parking spaces, only to return five minutes later with a plastic case tucked under one arm.

“Do I get to see what the fuss is about?”

“Soon.” He kept the cover hidden from sight. “My apartment’s just down the street.”

I threw Higgins into gear. “You better have popcorn.”

\* \* \*

Hanging his keys on a silver hook, Samuel waved me inside. I don't know what I expected. Maybe Queen concert posters, pink sofa, or at the very least, feather boas hanging from the coat rack.

But like Samuel's mannerisms, his apartment wasn't the least bit feminine. The walls were plain, white, and occupied by a series of iron bookshelves. Though several years old, the TV and entertainment system were both higher-end models.

Framed pictures of "Jump Jets" – bomb-laden AV-8B Harriers in vertical take-off mode – hung beside a swinging kitchen door. A mottled brown tabby leapt from the arm of the black leather couch.

"Good evening, Kramer." Samuel scratched the animals' ears.

"Seinfeld fan?" I asked.

"Larry Kramer – one of the founders of GMHC and ACT UP. I don't suppose you've ever read *Reports From The Holocaust*."

"Must've missed it at Barnes & Noble."

"Your loss."

Samuel stuck in the movie – which was fortunate because I was starting to get edgy again.

"Want a beer?"

"No thanks. Long drive home."

He motioned to the couch while fast-forwarding through the previews. "You know, you're welcome to sit."

"Think I'll stand. Been cooped up in my car all day."

"Suit yourself."

He dimmed the lights and the credits started to roll. Sony Pictures and Vivendi Entertainment present... directed by Damien Miller... featuring Hunter Calloway, Janet Carney, and Milo Bogdanovitz...

“Wait a minute,” I said. “The detectives investigating killer ghosts – ‘Dead or Alive.’ I saw this a couple years ago.”

Samuel pointed the remote at the screen, but let the opening scene – in which the spirit of a dead cab-driver hijacks a Ford Escort, then mows down tourists at Fisherman’s Wharf – run without interruption. “Trust me, it’s better the second time.”

“I don’t have time for this.”

“Right, I forgot. Fried chicken night. Just watch for twenty minutes, then you can go home to your warm green beans.”

“Twenty minutes.”

The opening scene cut to the home of the paranormal investigator, played by Calloway, who gets a visit from a skeptical but desperate San Francisco homicide detective, played by the lovely Miss Carney. Of course, later the two wind up in the sack after being trapped in a Montana ski lodge.

Back on the screen, the two investigators interview a survivor of the Fisherman’s Wharf demolition derby. Against my better judgment, I found myself getting into the movie. I’d forgotten the snappy dialogue between Calloway and Carney. And even though she doesn’t initially believe in spooks, Carney manages to keep enough of an open mind that you know they’ll wind up together.

After a few more scenes, I’d completely forgotten I was standing in the middle of Samuel’s living room. That is, until my bladder started yapping. When I drink, I’m worse than a chick, needing to hit the head every hour like clockwork.

Hot, dry thoughts. Think hot, dry thoughts. Summer golf in Palm Springs. Jogging through Death Valley. I squeezed back the flood.

Samuel paused the movie, asking if I was alright.

“Fine. No worries.”

“Why you hopping on one leg?”

“Ah...”

“Bathroom’s down the hall.”

“That’s OK. I can hold it.” But I couldn’t. Another bladder spasm and I made haste for the john, clicked on the light, immediately dropped trou. I thanked my lucky stars for not having to go number two. Intellectually, I knew the toilet seat was probably germ-free, but better safe than sorry.

Washing up afterwards, I realized Samuel’s bathroom was actually cleaner than my own. The tub looked like it’d never been used and the shower curtain didn’t have the slightest trace of soap scum or mildew.

Samuel’s toiletries were displayed on a shelf, labels all facing the same direction, organized by height. I didn’t recognize several of the bottles and tubes. Hair pomade? Cuticle softener? Exfoliating oatmeal scrub? This put Jennifer’s stash of beauty supplies to shame.

I made my way back to the living room, and without comment, Samuel re-started the movie. Another obligatory car chase, this time along the Embarcadero, with the dead cabbie taking over a school bus, playing chicken with traffic.

Commandeering a UPS truck, Carney follows after the lurching bus while Calloway, riding shotgun, desperately tries to project himself into the astral plane.

“Any minute now!” Carney barks, narrowly missing a fire hydrant.

“You know, crossing over isn’t like dialing for pizza,” Calloway replies, bracing himself against the dashboard. “Usually I do this in my study, with scented candles and soothing music.”

“I’ve got a Bic lighter and can sing a verse of ‘Oklahoma’... will that do?” she jumps a curb, taking out a row of parking meters.

Cut to the school bus. A little boy in the front seat wails. The ghostly driver, hair standing on end, turns and snarls, “If you don’t shut up, Jimmy, I’ll tell your mother what you did with her underwear last night.”

Back to the UPS truck. The camera pulls tight to Calloway’s face, his brow furrowing. He was about to unleash his spirit form when the picture froze.

“Hey!” I complained, forgetting I was watching under protest.

Samuel dropped the remote. “Do you know what ‘DoA’ made at the box office?”

Three years ago, I wouldn’t have paid any attention to gate receipts. But in Los Angeles, grosses are reported like sports scores, so I threw out a reasonable guess of \$50 or \$60 million dollars.

“Try \$90 million, domestic. Plus another \$30 million overseas. When you add DVD, cable, and broadcast rights, ‘DoA’ brought in over \$150 mil for Sony Pictures.”

“What’s your point?”

“The sequel is set to open next weekend.”

“I’ve seen the commercials.”

“‘Dead or Alive 2’ has a monumental special effects budget, with Hunter Calloway and Janet Carney making megastar dollars. When all’s said and done, the sequel’s budget will easily top \$200 million.”

“All those numbers give me a headache. I think I hear my green beans calling.”

“My point, Mr. Short Attention Span, is there’s a disgusting amount of money tied up in that franchise. Millions of dollars. Hundreds of millions.”

“So?”

Samuel gazed at the still picture on his television. “Hundreds of millions of reasons why he doesn’t want to come out.”

I followed his eyes. “Out? You’re not serious. Calloway? He’s... he’s...?”

“Queer?” Samuel prompted.

I nodded, cringing.

“He’s been careful – far more so than others in the industry. But eventually word gets around, especially in our community. Can’t have a date without a date. At a certain point, where there’s smoke, there’s fire. Or a flamer.” Samuel broke his attention from the screen and smiled, wide and genuine, for the first time all day.

“I thought he was dating that chick from MTV.”

“Calloway’s been linked to all kinds of exotic women – even been married. But his female relationships are just like Ray’s – nothing but a decoy.”

I attempted to digest this new information. “That’s all fine and dandy. If Hunter Calloway wants to shack up with dudes, not my cup of tea, but whatever. What the hell does any of this have to do with Ray?”

“You wanted to know who killed your partner, right?”

“Yeah.”

Samuel motioned to the TV set. “You’re looking at him.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” I threw up both hands. “First you tell me that one of the biggest actors on the planet is a homo, and now you say he shot my partner?”

“Maybe he didn’t pull the trigger. But Hunter Calloway was absolutely behind Ray’s death.”

“That’s insane... I’m assuming you have some proof.”

Samuel made a steeple of his long fingers, the way he’d done at our first meeting. “Not exactly.”

I reached for my car keys. “If I knew you’d waste my time like this, I would’ve stayed at the Black Hole.”

“Ray had been quietly investigating Hunter on our behalf for several months. With the press ramping up for ‘Dead or Alive 2,’ now was the perfect time to expose the All-American Action Hero as a titanic closet case. Calloway had motive—”

“Did you witness him drive up to Ray and open fire?”

“I didn’t have to see it to know it happened.”

“Then you haven’t given me shit.” I put one foot in front of the other and got the hell out.

\* \* \*

Now, about that fried chicken and green beans – that was a crock. Wednesdays, Jennifer has a standing Happy Hour with college friends from Cal State Fullerton.

Since she wasn’t home, I threw a pity party for one.

After watching my mother struggle with her vices, I'm leery of alcohol, rarely drinking more than one beer in a sitting. On rare occasions, I'll cut loose with godfathers. Admittedly, it's an old man's drink – scotch on the rocks with a touch of amaretto to sweeten the burn.

After my fourth godfather and an hour of ESPN SportsCenter, I'd melted into a deep, symbiotic relationship with the sofa.

When Jennifer returned, she saw the half-empty bottle of J & B. "I see I wasn't the only one having fun tonight."

"I wouldn't call this Happy Hour."

"What is it then?"

"More like a wake."

She removed her shoes, shut off the TV.

"Here's to Ray. At least the Ray I thought I knew."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Turns out my partner wasn't who he said he was. The skeletons in his closet were wearing tutus." My mouth felt thick as I slurred the words.

"So he deserved to get shot?"

"You don't understand."

"I think you're the one who doesn't understand. Just because Ray kept some secrets, you're going to act like he offended your precious manhood."

Even after four godfathers, I couldn't help but catch her meaning. "You knew?"

She didn't respond.

"How?"

"Girls sense stuff like that."

"*How?!*"

"What do you want me to say? That Ray knew how to match his ties? That he could talk about his feelings without stuttering? That when I mentioned M. Butterfly, he knew it was an opera, not some Kama Sutra position?"

“That was an honest mistake! Why didn’t you tell me he was a fag?”

“It’s ‘gay,’ not ‘fag.’ And I didn’t tell you for exactly this reason! Because I knew you’d get tweaked out about it. Because, for some reason, I care about you. And if anybody was going to protect you out there, I wanted it to be Ray.”

Jennifer and I don’t argue very often, but when we do, it escalates fast and crashes hard. I’ve never hit a woman, even while drunk. I briefly considered throwing my drink against the wall, but remembered our \$1,500 security deposit.

Usually I’m the one to make the first conciliatory gesture, but this time it was Jennifer. “Whoever Ray happened to love in his private life shouldn’t change who he was – or what he meant to you.”

“He lied to me the whole time we worked together.”

“Can you blame him? You might be able to quote a bunch of deep thinkers, but when it comes to gay stuff, you go all Hicksville.”

Later that night, while sitting at the foot of my bed, I wondered if Ray ever checked me out while we sat in our shop.

What if the situations had been reversed – and I’d been assigned a female partner? Would I have been able to turn off my testosterone, only see her blue uniform? I’d like to think so, but wasn’t positive. Especially if she was hot.

Ray never made me feel uncomfortable. He was a better father figure than any of the jackholes who shacked up with my mom. And he’d backed me up countless times over the past 18 months – particularly when it mattered most.

Didn’t his killer still deserve punishment? Hadn’t I made a vow? Could I just pretend I’d never met Samuel Miller?

Not feeling proud of my outburst, one question loomed: How far was I willing to take it?

I thought I’d had enough godfathers to dull these thoughts. Perhaps one more would do the trick.

“Turn off the light already,” Jennifer mumbled from the bed.

Instead of fixing myself another drink, I reached for the lamp and got under the covers, cuddling against Jennifer’s back. She let out a sigh, lacing her fingers in mine.

Through the veil of alcohol, I felt waves of comfort emanate from her body.

I moved our interlocked hands to the base of her breast, where the ribcage meets sensitive flesh. Instead of slapping me away, she leaned into it and began making small grinding motions.

Now I was fully awake. Especially where it counted most. “I think you’ve just woken SuperKatz.”

“SuperKatz, huh? What exactly are your super powers?” Her voice was heavy, sleepy, but willing.

“There’s this rock hard body.”

Reaching, she cupped the front of my boxers. “At least *one* thing fits the bill.”

“I weave through crowded freeways like the Flash.”

She licked her palm, snuck it under my waistband. “You better not be *that* fast. I don’t want to be left in the lurch again.”

“Silence, woman. You’re distracting my mighty, superhuman powers of concentration.”

Her hand rubbed faster. “Are you getting distracted? Maybe this will help.”

“Actually, to be frank, you’re making it worse.” Trying not to hiccup, I felt my hips involuntarily buck.

“Oh? Who’s Frank?”

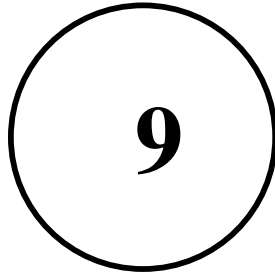
“Very funny. You know what... what I mean.”

“Is this hurting your powers of concentration?”

“That’s my mighty– uh, mighty superhuman, ah, powers of... of...”

“I think I’ve found your kryptonite, SuperKatz.”

I didn’t argue the point.



Three million gone  
Come on  
'Cause ya know they're counting  
Backwards to zero

What does the billboard say  
Come and play, come and play  
Forget about the movement

Anger is a gift

***-- Rage Against The Machine "Freedom"***

*The first time I died, it began with a warning.*

*“You better get down, you’re not Superman.” At seven years old, Chrissy had already perfected the hands-on-hips posture of authority.*

*From my perch in the backyard oak, I made crazy-eyes with my friends, who circled around the tree’s base a good twenty feet below.*

*“Do it,” Donnie said, flashing a wicked grin. “I double-dog dare you.”*

*“I d-d-don’t think he-he-he’ll make it.” Sanjay’s treacherous tongue glowed fruit-punch red.*

*The task at hand was tricky: clear the concrete deck, miss the diving board, and dry my sneakers before mom picked me up at three.*

*“My dad said to wait 20 minutes before going in the pool.” Timmy, the birthday boy, pointed to an egg timer to illustrate his point.*

*My altitude provided a direct view into the second-story windows of the McDade house. There was Timmy’s bedroom, with a pile of unwrapped gifts left on his bed. Adult voices mingled with cheers for a televised football game.*

*“I’m gonna tell,” Chrissy said.*

*“You’d better not, Prissy,” I shot back.*

*An end-of-summer breeze swayed the surrounding branches. Being the focus of everyone’s attention heightened my adrenaline rush.*

*“If you come down, I’ll give you one of my new Transformers,” Timmy said.*

*Donnie chimed in, “If he jumps, I’ll give him two.”*

*Before Timmy could raise the stakes, the egg timer buzzed. Like any good performer, I took the cue and launched into space.*

*No problem clearing the pool deck, but my trajectory was off the mark. Instead of splashing into the deep end, I fell towards the steel ladder.*

*Arms flailing, I tried to air-brake. Missing the ladder, I unexpectedly landed on a floating boogie board – which shot out from under my feet and I tumbled backwards. A glimpse of sky, then black.*

*Weeks later, Timmy visited me in the hospital. He said it sounded like a cherry bomb when my head hit the diving board.*

*To me, it was all dark. No thoughts, no feelings. Don't even remember swallowing water.*

*It took numerous reports to piece together what happened next. Timmy turned out to be the least reliable source, as he was primarily concerned with how this would affect his Nintendo privileges. After watching my body sink to the bottom of his pool, he promptly hid behind his parents' BBQ.*

*Chrissy took her hands away from her mouth long enough to scream, "Call Nine-One-One! Call Nine-One-One!"*

*Nobody else moved. Donnie wet his pants. The little bastard never did cough up those Transformers.*

*Timmy's older brother, Chad, prairie-dogged his head through the screen door.*

*"What's going on out here?"*

*"Right th-th-there." Sanjay gestured so hard he almost fell in the pool himself.*

*"What's that, munchkin?" Ambling past the table of chocolate-smearred paper plates, Chad blurted, "Fuck me."*

*Under normal circumstances, his obscenity would've been scandalous, but in this case, the only person who reacted was Timmy. From behind the Weber grill, a tiny voice squeaked, "It wasn't my fault."*

*Fully clothed, Chad dove into the pool, using those lifeguard lessons from Colorado State University's aquatic center. He dragged my limp body to the shallow end, carrying it up the pool steps.*

*"Dad! Call an ambulance!"*

*Feeling for my carotid artery and not finding a pulse, Chad covered my nose, gave two quick breaths, and started chest compressions.*

*Mr. McDade stood at the screen door. "Pipe down, Air Force has first and goal."*

*"Ambulance! Now!"*

*My first breath came two minutes later, vomit and chlorinated water bubbling out in waves. Chad pulled away, halting the chest compressions.*

*The paramedics arrived within ten minutes. We made it to the emergency room in another eight. By then, I'd slipped into a coma.*

*I stayed in a non-responsive state for fifteen days. Mom took the bed next to mine and rarely slept. She was on a smoke break when I woke.*

*The first person I saw was a heavyset nurse. She bent over the side rail, taking my pulse with thick fingers. This was before my subsequent experience with hospitals, so I wasn't frightened. I merely opened my eyes and tried saying hello.*

*The nurse released my wrist, peering over bifocals. "Well, Mister Katz, I see you've decided to re-join the land of the living. Good thing you've got nine lives."*

*Flash forward eighteen years, and here I am burning through my third.*

*I'm shivering – despite the warm evening. Might have something to do with lying on cool concrete. And the massive blood loss.*

*The pain isn't so bad anymore, but I can barely inhale.*

*Whenever I open my eyes, the view inside the snack shack goes fuzzy. Easier to think about what could have been – all the chances I had to turn back.*

*What happened after meeting Samuel? That's right, Ray's funeral.*