

PROLOGUE

She was hot.

A California girl, with long blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, emerald green eyes and lips bathed in Revlon's Raspberry Mousse. The dress was by Calvin Klein, bright red, *notice me red*. It clung to her skin, served up the swell of her breasts, stopped at the top of her muscled thighs. Too short for most women, it looked perfect on her. Her long tanned legs curved down to a pair of Manolo Blahnik fuck-me pumps, her toes were painted to match her lips. And she had something else, attitude. She walked in long, confident strides, almost a swagger. She was on the prowl and tonight, this bar was her jungle.

If you'd glanced at your watch when she walked into Havoc, L.A.'s hottest body exchange, the little hand would have been on the one and the big hand just past the six; 1:32 a.m. to be exact.

Late, so the herd was cut by now, most everyone paired off and flirting. I say most everyone because one of the universe's absolute truths is that there are *always* more single guys in a bar than single girls. And tonight's loser was Colin Wood. He'd gotten to Havoc late, about 1:15, after all the available nubile were taken. Frustrated, he'd ordered a Jack on the rocks, figuring he'd down it quickly and head home. He'd been working late, stuck on location in Redondo Beach, shooting in an abandoned power plant. Colin was an actor. Not a star, but a working actor; tall, handsome in a John Cusack sort

of way, getting eight to ten jobs a year. Enough to pull down about 150 G's, including residuals. Enough to get recognized every so often, though no one could ever place his name. Enough to usually get him laid when he went clubbing. But not tonight; tonight he was too late. Frustrated, he finished his drink, dropped some money on the bar and turned to the door. And that's when she walked in.

Heads swiveled as she crossed the room, some drawn by her beauty, others just sensing her, well, sex. Colin could almost feel the regret as a lot of the now occupied guys reconsidered their hastily chosen partners. And to Colin's delight, she moved down the bar and took the stool next to him. "London or Paris?" he asked.

"Excuse me?" Daisy, Gatsby's wet dream, might have had a voice that was full of money; this babe's smoky timber sizzled sex.

"For our honeymoon. London or Paris?"

She actually smiled. "Does that line ever work?"

"No. But there's a first time for everything."

She appraised him slowly. Her green eyes drinking in his tousled brown hair, hazel eyes, freckled nose, dimpled chin. "Too hunky for a real job," she said. "Model or actor?"

"Brain surgeon."

An appreciative smile. "Too quick for a model. That means actor."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"For breeding, probably not, but most actors are shallow, self-absorbed egomaniacs who think an intelligent conversation starts and ends with me, me, me."

"Then, let's focus on the breeding part."

She laughed, and then she cocked her head to the side, tucked her chin into the palm of her right hand and said, “Okay.”

“Okay, what?”

“Let’s focus on the breeding part.”

Yikes, Colin thought. Does she mean what I think she means? “Do you mean what I think you mean?” he asked.

She leaned forward and kissed him. Her tongue darted into his mouth, did a quick, tantalizing tango with his tongue, then slipped out again. “You got a car?”

“In the lot out back.”

“Let me guess, Porsche?”

“Guilty.”

She put her hand on his crotch and squeezed gently. She felt him stiffen through his jeans. “Stick shift?” she whispered.

“Yes,” he answered thickly.

“Vroom. Vroom...”

They walked out of the club hand in hand. The Lady in Red leaned against him, her hip touching his hip, her thigh brushing against his thigh. He could smell flowers in her hair and Chanel on her skin. “I live nearby,” Colin said. “A couple of miles up on Crescent.”

“Perfect,” she purred as he opened the door for her. She got in, sighed happily, her fingers relishing the hand-stitched leather. As Colin got in she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him again. Nothing playful this time; the kiss was pure lust. Her

hand was back in his lap, rubbing his cock. His right hand went to her breasts, rubbing them through her dress. Real tits, he thought, thrilled. She even has real tits!

She moaned, took his left hand, put it under her dress, on her panties. He rubbed her mound, his finger searching, finding her clitoris. That brought a grateful groan and her right hand went to work on his belt, unfastening it. Colin lifted up and she slipped down his jeans.

Jesus Christ, Colin thought. This babe is unbelievable. She wants to do it right here, in this tiny fucking car. He pulled away from her voracious kiss. “Unless you work for Cirque du Soleil,” he said, “we should wait ‘til we get to my house.”

“Don’t want to wait,” she said, her hand freeing his erect penis from his boxer shorts. “I want you now.” She bent down, taking him in her mouth.

Okay, Colin thought. I can live with that. Now it was his turn to groan with pleasure as he laid his head back on the headrest and closed his eyes.

That’s why he didn’t see the last twenty seconds of his life.

He didn’t see her hand slip into her purse and pull out the Colt Vest Pocket .25 automatic. He did feel the gun as she placed the muzzle under his balls, but he thought it was her finger and she was just kinky. He didn’t see her pull the trigger.

POP. POP. POP.

The first bullet ripped through the sigmoid colon, shredded the small intestine, tore through the stomach and left lobe of the liver, finally severing the esophagus. Bullet two veered a little left, taking out the bladder, the ascending colon and the right lobe of the liver before imbedding itself in the spinal cord. Bullet three soared through the small intestine, took out the gallbladder, pulverized more liver, punched a hole in the

diaphragm and did a victory dance in the right ventricle of the heart.

The lady in red leaned back in her seat, watching the little jerks and spasms his body made even though he was already dead. There was much more blood than she expected, and she was surprised to see he still had his hard-on, though it suddenly started to shrink, like a balloon losing air.

She put the Colt back in her purse, took out a pair of surgical gloves, put them on, and then pulled out a scalpel. She had work to do...

ONE

The phone woke Ryan, never a good sign. He opened one eye and looked out the window. Dark. Middle of the night dark. Shit.

He picked up the phone. “Hello.”

“Duty calls, Ryan.” He recognized the voice, his boss, Lieutenant Hanrahan. “Got a very dead body in a very bloody car on the always exciting Sunset Strip.”

Ryan glanced at the clock, three-thirty. Fuck, he thought. Not because of the dead body, he was a homicide cop and it was hard to do his job without the occasional body or two. The fuck was for the hour. He liked his sleep.

Hanrahan coughed, a phlegm-filled hack from someone who gave up smoking twenty years too late. “Parking lot on the corner of Sunset and Martel. Oh, and call Syd, will you?”

Syd was Ryan’s partner. “No problem,” he said and hung up.

The sheets rustled then as a head popped out from under the pillow. Red hair cascaded past green eyes and a million adorable freckles. Syd. “That the bat signal?”

“Shining bright in the evening sky.”

“Cool.” Syd bounced naked from bed and bounded into the bathroom. She looked too young and innocent to be a cop, but Syd’s combination of enthusiasm, street smarts and second- degree black belt more than made up for nature’s disguise. “We’re

going to have to stop by my place for a minute so I can change. I can't very well show up at the crime scene in yesterday's Donna Karen... unless you're ready to go public with our relationship."

Syd and Ryan had been partners for eight weeks and sleeping together for four. They were in that wonderful pheromone-induced infatuation phase where they could barely keep their hands off each other.

It had been lust at first sight for Ryan. Whatever lizard brain criteria had been hardwired into Ryan for a sexual companion, this perky, freckled-face redhead was it. He literally got a hard-on the first time he shook her hand. Oh, shit, he thought. She's going to be trouble. He did everything he could to be business-like and professional around her. But they spent twelve to fifteen hours a day together; sitting across from each other in the Hollywood Division Homicide bullpen, sitting next to each other in their city issued Crown Vic, working the files together, conducting interviews, eating, brainstorming, and all the time, Ryan fantasized about her.

It must have been the same for Syd, Ryan realized, when late that fateful night four weeks later, they found themselves alone in the bullpen. Ryan went into the file room to return a murder book, and when he turned around he was nose to nose with Syd.

"I can't stand this," she whispered.

"What?"

"The game we're playing. Pretending to be totally professional when all we want to do is rip each other's clothes off and fuck like coked-up porn stars."

Don't do this, he thought. Be professional. You don't sleep with your partner.

"I should warn you," she said, her lips now brushing his. "I'm prone to multiple

orgasms and I love anal sex.”

Game. Set. Match. Ryan kissed her. They practically swallowed each other. They were naked in seconds and as Ryan entered Syd for the first time, he thought that doing something this wrong shouldn't feel so unbelievably good.

Back in Ryan's apartment, Ryan said, “Department policy states that partners aren't allowed to fondle each other's genitals.”

Syd stuck her head out the bathroom doorway, toothpaste foaming at her mouth. “I remember doing a lot of things to you last night, but by no modern definition would any of them qualify as fondle.” True, Ryan thought. Sex with Syd was frantic, almost desperate. Always fantastic.

“I've got a good feeling about this one,” she said ducking back into the bathroom. “This'll be the one that makes us famous.”

That was Syd's one blind spot. Ambition. It had carried her in record time from street cop to Vice and now to Homicide. But she didn't want to just be a good cop; she wanted to be a *famous* cop. And that kind of ambition could be dangerous.

Ryan's right hand worked the stick as he steered all original 271 horses of his red '65 Mustang through the hairpin curves etched into the mountainside of Coldwater Canyon. They'd stopped at Syd's studio apartment and she'd changed clothes; now back on the road, Ryan relished the pre-dawn drive. The top was down, and though the temperature was only in the upper forties, typical for early May, the heater was blasting, modulating the chill enough so they could still savor the sweet, invigorating morning.

“Does it get any better than this?” Syd asked, her red hair whipping around her

head. “A pre-dawn expedition into the belly of the beast, a fresh crime scene bursting with clues, a sprawling city hiding a cold-blooded murderer, intent on escape, but doomed because the world’s best homicide detectives are on his ass.”

Ryan smiled. “World’s best homicide detectives?”

“Hey, we’re undefeated. In eight weeks we’ve investigated four murders and solved them all.”

True, Ryan thought, but they’d been lucky. Two of the killings had been a murder/suicide – a bitter ex-husband finalizing the divorce with a .9mm bullet to his wife’s chest before blowing out the back of his skull. Another was a gas station robbery/murder, caught on a security camera – the tape was aired on the local news and the doer was ID’d by a heartbroken mother turning in her drug-addled son. Number four was a bit more challenging, a UCLA co-ed found dead, raped and strangled in the bathroom of her apartment. They spent four hours at the crime scene, working with SID collecting evidence, talking to her roommates, the neighbors. When they first arrived, Syd noticed a guy sitting in a battered blue pick-up, parked a half block north of the apartment. She pointed him out to Ryan. The guy in the pick-up stuck around for about twenty minutes, then left. Two hours later Ryan noticed him parked a block south of the apartment. Killers often return to the scene of the crime, so maybe. Ryan didn’t dare risk approaching on foot – the suspect would see him coming and boogie. So he radioed for backup. The cops sealed off the street and then two black and whites swooped in trapping him. The suspect gave up without a fight. He was a convicted sex offender, released just two weeks earlier, working the neighborhood as a handyman. He’d arrived to do some work for the landlord, met the co-ed who excused herself to take a shower and

well, the son of bitch couldn't help himself.

So, Ryan and Syd were four for four. Not bad for a Homicide department with just a thirty-four percent clearance rate. But with two out of every three murderers going free in the city of Los Angeles, Ryan knew it was just a matter of time before the odds caught up to them.

“You got any gum?” Syd asked.

“Check the glove box.”

Syd popped it open, started rummaging around. “I hope you also have hand sanitizer in here because this is disgusting.” She pulled out a grease-stained Taco Bell wrapper, a balled up Wienerschnitzel bag, a crushed Starbucks coffee cup, a half-eaten chocolate glazed Krispy Kreme, and a wadded up McDonalds napkin.”

“In there,” Ryan said. “The gum's in the napkin.”

Syd peeled the napkin open. “It's already been chewed. You're offering me used gum?”

“Think of it as a symbol of our intimacy.” Ryan laughed. Got you, he thought.

Syd looked at him, at the smug smile, and then she peeled the gum off the napkin, popped it in her mouth and began to chew.

“Yuck,” Ryan said. “That's disgusting.”

“I've had your tongue, ear, fingers, toes, balls and cock in my mouth. This is nothing.”

That was the thing about Syd; Ryan never knew what she was going to do next.

She stuffed the detritus back in the glove box, and then noticed something. She pulled out a wrinkled lottery ticket. “I didn't know you played the lottery.”

“I don’t.”

“Then what’s this?”

“A lottery ticket,” Ryan said, confused. Then a memory flooded back. One he wasn’t very proud of. One he didn’t want to tell Syd. “Oh, yeah, I remember,” Ryan said, and then lied. “The jackpot was like forty million dollars or something so I took a flier.”

She checked the date. “It’s almost six months old. You ever check to see if it won?”

“No. I forgot all about it.” That part was true.

Syd read the numbers, “14 19 20 23 36, and a mega of 18. Any significance to the numbers?”

Ryan didn’t know, and then remembered, “No, it was a quick pick.”

“Well, today may be your lucky day.” She flipped the glove box closed. “A murder and a shot at unimaginable wealth; like I said, it doesn’t get any better than this.”

