

Gloria Stern



A  
Time  
To  
Die

**A Supernatural Crime Novel**

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## Prelude

Los Angeles...the city that never sleeps.

It is where the heart of the civilized world sinks into the ocean. Where the pretty people come to play, chase their dreams, struggle, and eventually die, lonely, alone, and jaded.

LA is where the movers and the shakers come to ply their craft, where the stars and the crème de la crème live up in their hillside compounds, sheltered safely away from the very people who made them great.

Here live the celebrities, the demi-gods, the hunks, the divas, and the lofty fallen angels who the world used to worship, with their cat eyes and boob lifts, driving Bimmers and Hummers, going out each day to greet the world with a fresh coat of shiny face plastic.

So soon to be forgotten are the deeds, the stellar performances, and the bitter words said in the heat of the drunken moment. Inevitably faded into the constant background noise, cast aside like so much jetsam set adrift in a sea of obscurity, and in its place floats a thick layer of desperation, doubt, and self loathing. Yet if you look close enough, past the façade, past the illusion, there, lingering beneath all the eye candy and fantasy there is a faint glitter of shimmering gold.

Every day, they come in droves from all over the world, the dreamers, the rockers, the actors and the risk-takers, scraping and scabbling up the side of that insurmountable precipice, reaching up, just as others are sliding back down.

The mystical city of Los Angeles runs much deeper than the sculpted beaches, the rolling hills, and the beautiful people of which the tabloid tales tell. She is a

myth, a legend, and an enigma. From the tourist-filled shops of Rodeo Drive, to the knife edged slums of the barrio, to the illustrious Holmby Hills, with its fifty thousand square foot mansions and gated cliff side estates.

This is the town that spawned skateboarding, the French Dip sandwich, the Viper Room, plastic surgery, Barbie Dolls, gangsta rap, Hot Wheels cars, bikini waxes, partial birth abortions, gum bleaching, and high tea.

It is the entertainment capital of the world. The cultural Mecca of sun kissed actors and actresses all vying desperately for their next big part. One great seething mass of four million plus people, all living, breathing, eating, shitting, and dying, on the same piece of cramped barren real estate by the ocean.

LA is Americana in its most basic sense, a legend in the making, pop culture as it is happening.

# Part

# I

## Chapter 1

Wilhelm Franz adjusted the focus on his well-worn army surplus binoculars and sighed. *I've been watching this building for over two hours now and I still haven't seen a thing.*

His inside informant had told him that there was supposed to be a major gathering tonight and that if Wilhelm wanted to find out what was really going on, he should meet him in the parking lot at eight o'clock.

*You mean eight-thirty?* He glanced at his watch again and shrugged, *the time must have changed. I guess I'll wait a little longer.*

Just then, a glossy black antique Ford Thunderbird convertible breezed into the parking lot and took a space next to the rear entrance of the building. A large shadowy figure in a hooded cloak climbed out, waved a badge in front of the sensor, and hurried through the big metal security door. A few minutes later, more people began arriving.

The parking lot was almost full by the time Wilhelm grew tired of waiting for his contact. With no one else in sight, he stepped out of his car and strolled over to the back door. After nonchalantly trying the handle and finding it locked, he looked both ways before slipping a credit card out of his pocket and fishing it around the latch. Glaring headlights sliced through the misty still darkness as another car chose that moment to pull in.

Wilhelm ducked behind a clump of bushes growing near the entrance and held his breath. He willed himself to be invisible, even though he knew that someone would probably still be able to see him if they looked hard enough.



A small man in a dark suit, half ran, half walked up the sidewalk, he scanned his card, carelessly leaving the door swing open wide for a couple of seconds while he hurried off down the hallway. Wilhelm jumped out of the bushes and dove desperately for the door just as it slammed shut in his face with a boom of finality.

He rolled over slowly and frowned up at the night sky, *and to think, I could have been a plumber.*

In spite of the mounting setbacks, he stood up and started looking for another way in. After circling the building two times, Wilhelm spotted a window on the first floor that looked like it was ajar. He reached up with one hand and was vindicated when he encountered very little resistance pushing it open. No one was about so he hoisted himself up onto the sill and crawled through the opening, immediately dropping four feet to land heavily on his back.

Gasping for breath and lamenting his career choices for a second time that evening, Wilhelm picked himself up off the floor in a series of unstable jerky movements. With the full moon illuminating his path, he limped down the hallway of the darkened building.

He wandered past empty rooms, listened at locked doors, peeped through windows searching for any sign to explain where all the people had gone and at the same time; he vaguely wondered what ever happened to his contact.

After another half hour and no luck, Wilhelm Franz finally gave up, went back out to his car, and waited for the meeting to break up.

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The dark hooded figure stood behind a heavy red velvet curtain and gazed out at the crowd of initiates assembled in the secret throne room.

The dark hooded figure smiled and shook his head, *and to think there are so many of the faithful still out there in the face of all the influence from the big three one true religions.*

*Still, there will always be those who want more, those who seek real power and control over their destinies, and so they turn to me.*

The figure pulled his voluminous hood back to reveal a large bull's head. Glowing red eyes and great twisted black horns jutted out from either side like two deadly weapons. When he stepped onto the stage, a low chanting began.

"Sybra ta tae, Sybra ta tae, Sybra ta tae."

The figure chuckled to himself.

In the art of invocation, the chant is purported to be essential as an ancient focus for the powers of the mind. In this case, it was purely symbolic, used solely to make the worshippers feel special. In the absence of anything better, he just made up his own chant.

*It's actually Eat at Arby's, pronounced backwards.*

The bull headed man smiled serenely and walked slowly across the wooden stage. He carefully selected a reed from the glowing ceremonial brazier and reverently lit each of the sacred candles on the altar. When he was finished he turned to the assembled, bowed deeply and sat down on the ornately carved throne.

He raised his arms up and out, "Sybra ta tae brothers," he paused meaningfully. "We are gathered here

tonight to give honor to the great one and to ask for his blessings in our endeavors." He lowered his arms, and stared pointedly out at his followers.

*Pathetic sheep*, he thought with a sneer, *they don't even realize how stupid they look with their hooded cloaks and delusions of grandeur.*

"The great one wants you to succeed in all that you desire and he will aid you when you need it most. Sybra ta tae!"

"Sybra ta tae," the crowd's voice echoed back at him from the stone walls of the basement.

Presently the super secret religious order numbers less than fifty initiates. That figure fluctuates regularly as novices enter into the mystery and semi-regular sacrifices in turn thin their ranks. The hard-core followers believe that to sacrifice one's self is the ultimate form of servitude to the great one, who in exchange will grant the worthy eternal bliss.

*...and these fools are falling for it*, he chuckled softly. *Look at them clamoring all over each other, lining up like sheep to forfeit their lives to a religion that hasn't been relevant for well over two thousand years.*

"I come here before you tonight because we have a problem," he bellowed out to the sound of obedient silence. "It has been brought to my attention that there is a traitor in our midst." He panned the crowd slowly, searching for tell tales.

"It brings me great pain to think that any one of you might plot against the all seeing and all knowing great one."

He nodded to his assistants waiting in the wings. Two burly men wearing ill-fitting cloaks that barely hid

their massive physiques stomped out onto the stage dragging another smaller hooded figure between them. One of the goons pulled the hood back to reveal a man with dark purple and yellow bruises all over his face and a ball gag in his mouth.

"I inint ooh any ing," the prisoner pleaded through the gag, "aease et e oh, oh od, haease et e ooo."

"SHUT UP YOU FOOL!" the bull headed figure shouted. "You should have thought about that before you plotted to betray me!"

"Sybra ta tae, Sybra ta tae," the crowd started chanting again, growing louder and louder with each round. He walked up to the traitor and gazed into his terror-filled eyes. The man squirmed helplessly.

"Sybra ta tae, Sybra ta tae, SYBRA TA TAE, SYBRA TA TAE," the crowd roared.

When the chant had reached a fevered pitch, the bull headed man dipped a hand into his cloak and drew out a large dagger.

The hideous knife was over a foot long and black as night, with a great golden scarab fashioned into the hilt. Repulsive eldritch symbols danced across the heavily etched blade as it shimmered in the dim underground chamber, sizzling and impossibly sucking the light out of the air.

The faithful were in a frenzy now.

Grinning with delight the bull headed man swung the dagger in a swift tight arc, severing the man's throat in one stroke. A fountain of blood spattered the stage. He stuck one hand out and casually collected from the flow, bringing it up to his mouth and consuming the traitor's life

essence before stepping back and allowing the initiates to swarm forward and drink from the crimson stream.

When they were finished, the victim collapsed heavily on the floor, a soulless bundle of bones and meat, dead, but still twitching ever so slightly out of reflex.

## Chapter 2

According to the Hollywood rumor mill, the parties held at the Freiderer mansion on Mapleton Drive were never ending.

Truckloads of booze and food magically appeared at the gate behind the complex day and night, to be unloaded, cooked up, and served with a smile by faceless and nameless workers. Armed security guards constantly prowled the perimeter of the sprawling twenty-two acre estate like uniformed panthers stalking for prey, absolutely guaranteeing the privacy for the select few invited to grace the palatial grounds with their presence.

Usually populated with the hottest of the movers and shakers that the world has to offer, this particular party was the exception to the rule. It was the official neighbors only gathering, and of course, everyone on Mapleton Drive show up, because after all, Hans Freiderer has the best parties.

LA is about seeing and being seen.

The super private neighborhood get togethers occurred semi-annually; and this one was the Summer BBQ Bash.

Everyone attending is someone of significance, they have to be, or they wouldn't be residents of one of the richest neighborhoods in Los Angeles County's Platinum Triangle, where the starting price of an acre of land is \$20,000,000.

Staying in theme with the down-home American summer tradition, this soirée is nothing less than top notch. Hand basted whole suckling pigs turning slowly on a hickory pole spit, a full bar with a mix master and fifty different brands of beer on tap. Five-star chefs preparing

tenderloin steak and prime rib hamburgers over a shaved mesquite fire, complete with all the fixings. In addition to the obligatory BBQ items, there is also fresh South African grilled lobster, extremely rare Russian wild beluga caviar, and coconut breaded colossal white shrimp as long as your hand shipped in just this morning from the Ecuadorian coast.

The Freiderer Mansion is one of the largest and most opulent estates in the neighborhood. Lake sized swimming pools and swimming pool sized water fountains, each adorned with gaggles of cheeky frolicking Italian marble cherubs, carved in various positions of gracefully pissing into the fountain's vitamin C infused crystal-clear waters.

Everyone loves Hans Freiderer, even his ex-wife Barbara, who lives just down the street from his sprawling mansion. Worth well over \$100,000,000,000 in liquid assets alone, Hans is by far the richest resident on Mapleton Drive.

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Janine Joliette-Connard gently nudged her husband Bruce and pointed knowingly at wealthy newspaper mogul Randolph Medlock and his tall graceful Japanese bodyguard wife Shi, walked past the table of Mr. "Bill" Ching, the multimillion-dollar Chinese restaurant chain owner and his short bitter Pinay wife Ling.

Ling scoffed and muttered something at Shi as they walked past. Janine thought that she heard the words, "Yup-Boon-Jie."

Shi stopped in her tracks and hissed at Mr. Ching's wife. Her hands curled into tight fists and she stepped back to form an attack pose. Mr. Ching stood up quickly and

rattled off something to his wife in Mandarin causing her to bow her head and nod obediently. He then turned to Randolph and his wife and put his hands up disarmingly.

"Please, no offense, she has problem with her head," he smiled weakly and made a circling motion beside his ear.

Randolph nodded curtly and his wife relaxed. Shi tilted a perfectly sculpted nose up and turned to walk away, pausing just long enough to shoot a look of barely veiled contempt at the much smaller woman and her now kowtowing husband.

With almost certain disaster averted, Janine panned the rest of the crowd curiously.

In one corner by the pool sat multi-platinum selling rapper Punchy Furious and his multifarious posse of homies. They were accompanied by a colorful cloud of dancing big-bottomed girls, wearing nothing more than skimpy dental floss string bikinis and bright red lipstick.

In another corner sat Hotelier David Merillian and his boy toy George. They were chattering away with the world famous fashion designer Devon, (no last name used) and Baron Stefan Von Lichtenstein of Germany. The young Baron was rumored to not have any money at all, but lives on Mapleton Drive with his grandfather, who made the family fortune decades ago in the petrochemical industry.

Barbie Freiderer was once again accompanied by a different bronzed, blond-haired, beefcake, muscle stud than the last time, and was sitting by the waterfall talking to Hollywood producer Ben Granger and his actress wife Jen and the wealthy philanthropist Max Shelling and his



wife Gigi, who all live on the other end of the neighborhood.

Janine and Bruce live just across the street from Hans. She doesn't care much for any of her neighbors. *They're all too cliquy for my tastes. That being said, I always consider it rude not to at least show up and be seen, even if I do plan on sneaking out shortly after the food is served.*

Janine's husband is Hans Freiderer's personal finance coach. His attendance is practically mandatory given the amount of money involved with the account.

Living at the top of the heap has its advantages, but when you are isolated from the rest of the world by steel security gates and twenty-foot tall hedges, sometimes it's easy to forget that there is anyone else out there.

*It isn't that I mind having to share the world with others,* Janine thought as she gazed out over the group of privileged partiers, *it's having to actually rub elbows with them that bothers me.* She nodded and smiled, *Oh to hell with the rest of the world; life is good, damn good.*

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Maria Estevez wheeled her pearl white Mercedes-Benz 500 Series sedan into the parking garage of her multi-unit apartment building.

*Another hard day of swimming with the sharks,* she thought as she pulled into her reserved space and shut off the engine, *it feels good to be home safe again.*

The thirty-five unit apartment building is her haven and nest egg in the hardscrabble urban jungle that is East LA. Her boyfriend Nelson is supposed to be the maintenance person for the complex, but for some reason

he never seems to be around when the work needs to be done.

Today was no exception.

Mr. Chavez in 6B met Maria as she stepped off the elevator. "Hot water heater still needs fixed," he frowned at her from his half open door.

Maria cringed and instantly shifted into apology mode, "I am so sorry Mr. Chavez. I told Nelson to deal with that yesterday. I will get it fixed, even if I have to call someone in."

The older man smiled sympathetically, "I mean no offense Maria, but *que no sirve para nada*, you need to lose that boy, he's bad news."

"I'll get the water heater fixed tomorrow Mr. Chavez," she nodded tiredly, "I promise."

Nelson Vega is the one thing from Maria's past that she just can't seem to shake. They have been friends forever. Having grown up together in the Barrio, she thought that taking him out of the gangsta life would give him some incentive to better himself, but so far, all it has done is make him even more good-for-nothing.

She pulled her cell phone out and speed dialed his number while she removed the wooden stick from her stamped leather hair barrette. Her long shiny black tresses cascaded down in waves about her shoulders.

"*Ola*," she heard her boyfriend answer casually over the Chicano rap music playing loudly in the background.

"Don't you ola me Nelson. Where the fuck are you?"

"*I'm working baby,*" he said to the sound of rude male snickers.

"Don't lie to me," she growled, "you're hanging out with those worthless batos again, aren't you?"

Instead of denying it, Nelson whined, "*Oh baby, don't be like that. They're not worthless, just a little misunderstood.*"

"That's bullshit and you know it. I told you how many times?" She fumed and laid into him, feeling her Chicano side come out. "I work hard every day to make things better for us and all you do is piss it away. Well, you know what? You got one more chance Mr. Playa Esé Deadbeat. If you aren't here to fix Mr. Chavez's water heater tomorrow, don't even bother coming home, your shit will be out in the street."

"*Aww come on baby...*" she heard him say as she disconnected the call and barely resisted the urge to throw her phone across the room. She remembered what happened the last time. Not only did she have to replace the \$1500 cell phone, but she also had to have the plaster patched and repainted where her temper left a perfect I-Phone shaped hole in the wall.

Maria grew up dirt poor, the direct result of having parents who had been cast a bad lot in life and were convinced, for one reason or another, that they were stuck in that lot and had no right to even think about changing things.

*The caste system at its finest,* she thought ironically, *still alive and well in hometown America.*

Maria was born in the slums of East LA, where unemployment, teen pregnancy, suicide, and high school

dropout rates were well over the national average, and day-to-day survival was a constant struggle.

The streets of LA aren't just a fairy tale or a reality TV show for people like Maria, they are the real thing. At the age of seven, she learned how to use a knife, at the age of ten, a 9mm Glock pistol. By the time she was twelve, she had already lost two of her close friends to gang violence. By the time she was fourteen, she lost her father in the unintended crossfire of a drive-by shootout between two rival gangs...*he was walking home from work that night, his only crime was being at the wrong place at the wrong time.*

Along with her Mexican heritage, Maria also has Native American blood coursing through her veins. Her mother Penelope "Little Bud" Estevez was born on the Lost Winds Reservation, a full-blooded member of the Yerba Indian tribe. In her late teens, Penelope fell in love with an outsider and left the reservation to marry him. When Maria's father died, her mother moved back, dragging Maria from the desolate wasteland world of the Barrio to the desolate wasteland world of the Indian reservation.

Maria never fit into either world very well. In the Barrio because she is part Indian and on the reservation because she is part Mexican. Shortly after she arrived on the reservation, her grandfather took her under his wing and taught her the ancient rituals. He home-schooled her and helped her discover her spirit guide. When she turned sixteen, he taught her how to drive the old pickup truck that he used for work. When she was eighteen, he helped her prepare to take the college entrance exams.

Her mother never got over the death of her one true love and husband of fifteen years. Doing without a

father was bad enough for Maria, but to have found love and then have it taken away would be unbearable. Apparently, it was too much for Penelope too. Two months after she moved Maria back to the reservation they found her dead, a bottle of whiskey and an empty container of sleeping pills on the nightstand.

Life has a strange way of throwing things at you. *Sometimes it hits you too hard and you curl up and die, but sometimes...you can absorb it and become superhuman.*

From the beginning, Maria was determined to do something with her life, and so far, she's done pretty well. She made it through her formative years OK. She put herself through college, even graduating valedictorian of her class with a master's degree in financial management. Slowly but surely, step by step, she has worked herself into a lucrative position as a third year senior analyst for a midsized investment firm.

*I earn my living by helping people make financial decisions, in some cases involving hundreds of thousands of dollars, of which I get 15% on the gross return of each investment.* This year alone, she was on track to clear over \$200,000 in commissions.

*Not too bad for a Cholo half-breed from the Barrio,* she thought as she plopped down on the couch and reached for the remote control to check the news.

The TV started blaring and she flipped through the channels. *The Los Angeles police department is still investigating the bizarre death of a local businessman. They are offering a reward for any informa..."click," and even though the plight of the sea otter is still unsure, there's hope that things will continue to improve in..."click," NOW FOR A LIMITED TIME, GET 2 GYROS*

*FOR SIX BUCKS. THAT'S RIGHT, THAT'S TWO ALL MEAT AND PITA SANDWICHES LOADED WITH..."click," oh yeah I saw him come right out of there and he looked like he was on something, you know, all eyes glowing and stuff. I didn't know what else to do..."click," Asian markets finished broadly higher today with shares in Japan leading the region. The Nikkei is up 1.39% with Hong Kong's Hang Seng also up 0.26% and China's Shanghai Composite is down 0.05%..*

Maria turned the sound down and massaged her temples.

*I just wish Nelson could have gotten with the program. She closed her eyes. We've been together forever, it seems like such a waste for it not to work out. I used to admire him, she smiled and thought back through the years, but then frowned and shook her head bitterly, and now I can barely stand the sight of him.*

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Lisa Moore gazed out across the crowded dining room of Nick's of Bel Air and waved the bouncer over.

"Sorry to bother you Hal," she whispered discreetly when he walked up, "but we've got a live one at the main bar. I think he's had too much to drink and he just won't let it go."

Hal nodded and headed in the direction of the bar with Lisa stepping lively to keep up with his loping long legged gait.

The customer in question had his back to them when they walked up. Hal waited patiently until the man stopped and turned around to look behind him. When he did, his head slowly tilted back trying to fit all of Hal's six

foot nine inch frame into his view and then kept right on tilting back until he lost his balance and fell onto the floor.

Hal frowned and looked down on him, "I understand there is problem?" he stated/asked in his thick Americanized Greek accent.

"N, no, no problem here," the man scrambled to his feet unsteadily and started toward the door, "I was, a, just leaving." Hal brought his massive hand down on the other man's shoulder, stopping him dead in his tracks.

"After you pay bill, no?"

"No," the man nodded frantically, "I mean yes, I mean, I was just going to pay it now," he squeaked, holding his wallet up and walking backwards slowly in the direction of the cashier. They both watched until the cashier waved back, signaling that the man had paid his tab.

"Thank you Hal," Lisa said gratefully, "I hate it when they get like that."

"Is no problem," he shrugged, "is my job."

Halirrhothius (meaning the son of Poseidon) Kiriakopoulos, a.k.a "Hal," is a distant cousin of the owner. He spent his formative years working in the Grecian shipping port of Piraeus, leaving him with the physique of a veteran linebacker. She watched his hulking shoulders as he stalked back out to his station near the front door.

Located at the end of a winding cul-de-sac up in the hills of Los Angeles, Nick's of Bel Air started out as a speakeasy during the turbulent years of prohibition. A lot has changed since the bad old days and most importantly, the grandson now runs the club. Lisa is the manager of all three of the bars located throughout the five-star

establishment. She makes good money. Her main responsibility is to ensure that the alcohol flows smoothly but she is also in charge of booking the weekend entertainment for the club.

Along with being a trained Shodan 1st Degree black belt in Isshin-ryū karate, Lisa is also a classically trained concert pianist. Born quite literally with a silver spoon in her mouth, she started taking karate when she was four and piano lessons when she was six, and while she gave up the martial arts years ago, she still loves playing the piano whenever she can. The original Steinway Concert Grand that has been a staple at Nick's since the prohibition days still sits in the corner of the main dining room.

Nick Pedropolis III runs a high-class establishment and it shows. Monday through Thursday, reservations sell out well before noon, with Friday and Saturday's a week in advance in most cases.

Lisa walked back to the main bar and stood looking along the edge, casually keeping an eye on both sides. Somebody did a jazz hands gesture in her direction. She smiled when she recognized her husband, but she frowned when he walked up, "Hey wait a minute, I thought you were going to be out of town until next week?"

Brock shrugged, "I managed to get off early, you aren't disappointed are you?"

"No," she tilted her head, "just surprised. You know how anal I am about things. Failing to plan, is a plan for failure," she declared as she pulled the pen out of her hair and held it up proudly.



Brock nodded and smiled back, "...and spontaneity is the mother of chaos, but you don't see me freaking out do you?"

"Yeah well, if you had any idea what I have to go through to keep things going around here," she wagged a finger at him knowingly, "you'd run screaming."

He laughed, "Oh I'm sure, but let me tell you international sales isn't exactly a walk in the park either. The people I have to deal with, uhh," he waved a hand dramatically and shook his head in mock disgust, "Philistines every single one of them."

Lisa laughed and looked at her watch, "I'm off in a few, you wanna stick around?"

"Nope, I was just stopping by to let you know I was in town. See you back at the house?"

"Okaay," she stuck out her lower lip. "I'll get there as soon as I can. Don't start without me."

He winked over his shoulder and walked out the door.

Lisa and Brock have only been married for six short months. She is still a little leery of him, *but how can I be leery of someone who treats me so well?* In spite of all that, in the back of her mind, she still hears that age-old expression, *if it seems too good to be true, then it probably is.*

Brock has been the perfect gentleman from the very beginning, unlike just about every other man that she's had a relationship with. *It's like I have "screw me over" written in big letters somewhere on my forehead.* From the boy she lost her virginity to at a party when she was eighteen, to her last live-in boyfriend, she's had a long string of losers.

Brock's job is the only drawback for her, as it involves him traveling abroad, often for weeks at a time. In some ways, it's a blessing. Lisa's job at the club is also very time consuming, especially the evening and weekend hours. He doesn't seem to mind, he tells her "*the time spent apart just makes our time together all that more precious.*"

*He's perfect*, she thought, *he says and does all the right things*. Three months after their first date, they were married in a quiet little ceremony on the main balcony of Nick's.

*Now here we are six months later*, she smiled dreamily, *and for once in my life, I'm actually happy.*

### Chapter 3

Janine Joliette sat alone in her magnificent garden drinking her morning tea. The sun was just peeking over the exclusive Hollywood Hills neighborhood and birds were singing in the trees. In spite of everything, she was feeling depressed. *Here I am, pushing sixty, she thought, and what have I done?*

*Well I used to be a star,* a little voice inside her head replied stoically.

*I mean lately,* another other voice interrupted, *how many years has it been since you quit?*

*I didn't quit,* the first one replied defensively, *I just got scared.*

*Scared?* The other voice sneered, *of what, succeeding?*

*No! I mean yes! I mean I guess so. Maybe I was afraid of succeeding so that I wouldn't have to worry about failing.*

Janine shook her head sadly, *and you see what that's gotten you.*

As a child, Janine was always singing to herself and making up little songs in her head, but her whirlwind singing career actually started with an after school and weekend job waiting tables.

It was a slow Saturday morning at The Pineapple Grove, an upscale LA restaurant just down the street from where she grew up. A young man and the owner of the club were at a table in the corner of the nearly empty dining room having a heated conversation. When Janine walked by on her way to the kitchen, the younger man

pointed at her, "You there," he called out, waving her over with a sideways nod, "come here."

She looked behind herself before pointing shyly at her chest.

"Yes you," he insisted, "come here."

Mr. Goldstein shrugged at her sympathetically and nodded. As she walked up to the table the other man asked, "What is your name young lady?"

She pushed her glasses up shyly and half stuttered, "It's J Janine sir."

"Can you sing?"

"I don't know," she fidgeted, "sort of."

"You see," he put his hand out and smiled at Mr. Goldstein as if her answer was all he needed to hear. He turned back to her, "Would you sing something for us Janine?"

"Oh, I don't know," she looked at Mr. Goldstein pleadingly. The owner smiled softly and rolled his eyes as if to say, *just humor this clown and then we'll leave you alone*, but instead he nodded and said out loud, "Go ahead Janine, it's OK."

Flustered by the attention, a young Janine pursed her lips and closed her eyes in concentration. She imagined herself all alone on a stage, standing up tall and stately in a long glittery dress. Once she had that image, she started humming a slow, haunting melody. After a few bars, she crooned some of the words that were constantly floating around in her head.

*"Oh, what is this feelin, this set my heart reelin,  
this crazy, crazy feeling inside? Where can I go? Cause  
baby I know, it's a longing I just can't hide."*

*I'm under your spell, but what can I do?*

*It's the, I got it bad and that ain't good blues."*

When she was done, both men stared slack jawed. The younger man was the first to come to his senses. He glanced sideways at the owner and exclaimed, "You see, you see?"

"Oh balderdash," Mr. Goldstein frowned accusingly, "she's a ringer. You planted her here to make your point."

"No honestly," he insisted, "Janine have we ever met?"

"No sir," she shook her head and answered innocently.

"You see?" He stuck his tongue out at the owner, then turned back to her and asked softly, "What was that you were singing Janine?"

"Oh it was nothing, just a song I made up in my head."

"You wrote that song?" he asked doubtfully.

"Well I didn't actually write it," she corrected him, but when she saw him nod and roll his eyes, she pointed at her head and continued, "but I have it all up here."

"Oh you do, do you?" He smirked, "Well we need a singer, do you think you could do that again?"

"Oh sure," Janine laughed, "I have hundreds of songs," she pointed at her head again, "up here of course."

It wasn't until later that she found out the young man was Larry Barry, an accomplished piano player and small label record producer.

\*\*\*

Lisa Moore stood alone on her tiny balcony looking out over the city of Los Angeles. Brock was away on business for a few days so she was flying solo again.

Nighttime had fallen on the hills and the skyline twinkled and sparkled magically as it lay out before her. Off to the right she could see the Central Business District, with the colossal behemoths of the US Bank Tower, the Aon Center, Two California Plaza, and the Wells Fargo Building, all lined up glistening and reaching upward like so many glowing phalluses on a midnight backdrop of sky. Off to the left, the iconic Hollywood sign sat in the dark, while in the distance; the Long Beach Naval Base, Hollywood Boulevard, and The Sunset Strip were lit up like a million lighthouse beacons in a raging storm.

Far below her, a steady stream of bright glowing ants marched out the tangled up paths of I-405, I-210, CA 110, and the dreaded widow maker US-101, as they slithered like bioluminescent intestinal worms through the city and surrounding neighborhoods. Further up in the hills, faintly tracing out by the roads and terraces of Mulholland Drive and Benedict Canyon, sat the exclusive West Los Angeles neighborhoods, where the stars fall from the sky on a daily basis.

The view was oddly soothing.

*It's hard to be lonely with so many people around you, she thought, even if you don't know any of them.*

Lisa has always been a loner.

Raised in the Beverly Hills area of Los Angeles, Lisa never really fit in with the social climbers. Having an uncanny resemblance to a real life Barbie Doll didn't help matters. Naturally blonde haired, blue-eyed, and tall, just

made the other rich girls in her class jealous and vindictive.

Lisa's father was a high profile criminal lawyer. He only represented the rich and famous. If you had to ask his hourly rate, you couldn't afford him. He died of a massive coronary when she was a junior in high school. *I still remember coming home that day and finding him on the bathroom floor.* After that, life changed considerably for Lisa and her mother. Without the high dollar income, they had to move to a more reasonably priced neighborhood.

Lisa applied for a job at Nicks straight out of high school, *and ten years later, I'm practically running the place.* The only thing that sucks about the job is that she doesn't have a life. Her career is so all encompassing that there really isn't much time for anything else, *eat, sleep, work, repeat.* She frowned, *I make good money, but at what point is the money enough, and which is more important, your career or your life?*

*It sounds like the choice an armed robber might give you, she thought, but it's true, how much of my life have I thrown away to get where I am today, and am I really happy?*

Lisa's analytical side kicked in.

*Happy - Webster's Dictionary defines happy as, feeling pleasure and enjoyment because of your life situation: showing or causing feelings of pleasure and enjoyment: pleased or glad about a particular situation, event, etc.*

While somewhat vague, the definition pretty much described how Lisa felt. *I guess I'm happy, it's just...*

She shook her head and walked back into the empty house alone. Her footsteps echoed hollowly around the living room. *I've just got the blues, maybe some housework will snap me out of it.*

She went over to her desk and rolled the lid up. Stacks of papers spilled out onto the floor. *Well, here's as good a place as any to start.*

Once Lisa had cleared off the top of the desk, she attacked the many little cubbyhole shelves that lined the back. One of the holes had two letters in it. Without thinking, she tore them open. One was a bill; the other was the application for a car registration that she didn't recognize. She flipped the application over and looked at the name and address.

*Oops, oh crap, I just opened someone else's mail.* The name on the document was Bruce Connard and the address was Mapleton Drive in Beverly Hills. She frowned; *Hmmm, I wonder how we got his stuff?*

Still confused, Lisa stuffed the letters back in the cubbyhole, making a mental note to ask Brock about them when he came home. She moved on to cleaning the drawers out, when she was done, she went to bed.



## Chapter 4

Nelson never did show up to fix Mr. Chavez's hot water heater. He never came home at all. The threat that Maria would throw all his shit out in the street was hollow at best. She knew he didn't have a pot to piss in.

As much as she hated to admit it, Nelson Vega never had a chance growing up. All excuses aside, he was brought up under what she would consider the worst of worst conditions.

His parents were worthless thieves. His mother was a habitual drunk and his father was a drug addict. Nelson wasn't potty trained until six, didn't start school until eight, and was still drinking his afterschool chocolate milk out of a baby bottle at the age of ten. By the time he hit adolescence, he was sadly behind intellectually and in no way fit for public society. His only skills were stealing things and selling drugs.

Now that she looks back on their relationship, Maria understood her feelings a little better. At first, she loved and admired Nelson because he was always there for her. He was the strong one, the smart one, the protector. He was nice to her. She remembered one time when Nelson got beat up pretty bad trying to stop a bunch of bigger kids from picking on her. Later in life, she felt responsible for him.

When she moved back to East LA after college, it was to take Nelson away from it all. Unfortunately, she learned a little too late, that you can take a gang banger out of the hood, but you can't take the hood out of a gang banger. Nelson never adjusted to his new lifestyle, it was almost as if he didn't think that he was worthy or

something, or maybe he just lacked the imagination to picture any other life than bangin, partying, and stealing.

Once Maria made up her mind that it was over she had the locks to the apartment changed. She was sleeping when Nelson showed up at her door late last night.

He rang the bell repeatedly. When she didn't answer, his voice came over the intercom. *"Hey baby, look I'm sorry. Open the door."* He sounded drunk. *"Come on baby, I know I fucked up, just give me another chance, I promise I'll make it up to you."*

She started to get up, but stopped herself angrily. *No. You see? She frowned, this is the problem. I always give in.* Tears came to her eyes as she sat there in the dark thinking, *but I love him.*

Just as she stood up to buzz him though, she heard a loud crash outside. Squinting in between the blinds, Maria could make out Nelson kicking the front door.

"I know you're in there you little fucking whore." He stopped, apparently waiting for her to react. When she didn't, he kicked it again.

Lights came on across the street. Nelson glanced around and spat. "I don't fucking need you Maria. You know there are plenty of chicas out there who would love to have my big dick in them."

After a few more minutes and no response, he started walking away, he was halfway down the block when he spun back around and screamed at the top of his lungs, "YOU SOLD YOUR SOUL TO THE GRINGOS MARIA! NO ONE WILL WANT YOU NOW, YOU FUCKING PUTA!"

He scampered away laughing in fits. Maria sat in the dark and listened until the street went quiet again.

*It's just so sad the way it ended, she frowned and lay back down, but maybe it's a good thing. Now at least I'm free to do whatever I want, even if I'm not sure what that is.*

\*\*\*

Young Janine Joliette's singing debut at the Pineapple Grove was a smashing success. At the end of her set, the crowd went crazy and her head exploded with excruciating pain. She ran from the stage in tears. Larry caught up with her just as she was heading out the back door.

"Janine wait!" He leaned against the wall to catch his breath. "You were wonderful; they loved you, why did you run?"

"I don't know, the audience, the noise. It was all too much"

"Oh that," he laughed and waved his hand dismissively, "that's just stage fright, it will get easier, trust me."

It never did.

Despite the issues, they started practicing together on a regular basis. Larry Barry immediately set to work taking the songs out of her head and composing them for the piano.

At first, they went on a tour of the local clubs with just her singing and Larry playing the piano, later they hired a string quartet to accompany them for some of the larger venues. Their act eventually caught the attention of Saul Cohen, a top name Hollywood talent agent with major connections in the entertainment industry. He liked what he saw and immediately started promoting them.

They were a hit.

Even the critics applauded young Janine's velvety smooth voice and seductive lyrics. Reviews compared her songs to every longing love ballad ever written. Audiences broke down in tears and standing ovations accompanied her everywhere she went.

Along with the ovations, the nausea and dizziness also followed Janine, accompanied by the unspeakable pain that the applause brought on with each successive show. She kept it hidden. She loved performing, but inside she was dying. It was around this time that she discovered the mind numbing affects of alcohol.

Suddenly she could face the crowds and it was OK. She started carrying a little stainless steel flask in her purse so she could sneak a nip before going out on stage, *just to calm her nerves*. Soon it was to the point where she was drinking all the time, *just to calm her nerves*. Larry seemed to be OK with it, he was a lush too, but he knew where the line was.

As fame and fortune would have it, Janine and Larry continued to be the talk of the town for many years. They put out six albums that sold well locally, but never really materialized much of a following on the East Coast or down south. Even so, Janine made tens of thousands of dollars every time she went on stage, sometimes as much as \$50,000 depending on the venue, with private shows starting in the six figures. This went on for several more years, and in a drunken haze, Janine wrote some of her best songs.

Loving You Has Got The Best Of Me, Good Heart Gone Bad, The Woman In Me, and Song For The Lonely Heart were just a few.

In the meantime, her drinking had grown progressively worse. When she started missing shows, she knew she had a problem. In the summer of 1990, Janine checked herself into an exclusive Hollywood rehabilitation facility. Halfway through the session she checked herself out again. The shows had become a literal nightmare, but she couldn't stop and her only defense was more drinking.

As a compromise, she took a few months off performing to try to get herself straightened out, but things became even worse. What was supposed to help, only enabled her reclusive tendencies. She hid away from everyone and stayed drunk all the time. When Saul and Larry attempted an intervention, she screamed and swore at them. It was at that moment, she realized she needed to do something.

She checked herself into rehab immediately, but this time she was committed to staying, even if it killed her.

That was where she met her husband.

Bruce was in rehab for alcohol addiction too, except that his stay was court-ordered. He had apparently had a little accident while drunk driving. When the police found him, his car was sitting halfway through the display window of a high priced clothing store on Rodeo Drive. It was his third DUI conviction.

Bruce and Janine hit it off right away. Bruce was fearless, he laughed a lot, and he had a certain devil may care attitude that she found endearing.

They used to sit for hours just talking by the pool. He loved to hear her sing, and strangely likened it to angels crying. When their time at rehab was up, they started dating. Meanwhile her agent was calling again,

wanting to schedule shows. Janine was terrified, both of performing again and at the same time of not having any money because she wasn't performing.

She eventually did another show and was fine, until the applause at the end. Again, she felt the room closing in. This time, without the alcohol, she freaked out and ran into the audience shoving and kicking fans in order to escape the crowded nightclub. When Bruce found her, she was sitting in her car crying.

"Janine, Honey what's wrong?"

She shook her head and tried to wipe the tears from her eyes, "I can't handle it anymore."

"Can't handle what dear?"

"The performing, I can't do it anymore." She looked up at him, mascara running down her cheeks. "It's killing me."

"Then don't do it."

"What?" she looked at him for a few seconds in shock, "but it's all I know."

"I don't care," he replied resolutely, "I won't see you unhappy one more minute."

"But I have to make money somehow."

Bruce just shook his head and smiled. He rooted around in his pocket for a few seconds before pulling out a small, red velvet covered box. He bent down on one knee and looked up into her eyes.

"Janine Joliette will you marry me?"

"Oh, Bruce," she frowned down at him, "do you have any idea what you're getting yourself into?"

He just smiled and nodded.

"Then yes," she smiled back, "of course I'll marry you."

When she called Saul the next day and told him of her decision to stop performing, he was upset, but congratulated her anyway, he told her that he was happy for her, and if she ever changed her mind to call him.

*That was over twenty years ago, she thought sadly, and not a day goes by that I don't wish I could perform again.*

Larry Barry died a couple of years back.

Life in the fast lane and all of the years of drinking like a fish hadn't been kind to him. In the end, it was a curious mixture of asthma, diabetes, and liver failure that finally sent him up to that last great gig in the sky.

Saul Cohen called shortly after Larry's passing to express his condolences. It was the first time that they had spoken in years. When the conversation ended, they vowed to get together to do lunch sometime, but it never happened.

## Chapter 5

Maria headed west on I-210 toward the San Bernardino Mountains for the two hour drive to the Lost Winds Indian Reservation. She put the top down and let her long hair fly out in the wind. She knew there would be hell to pay later with all the tangles, but right now, it just felt good.

She needed to get away for a little, *and a weekend of visiting Grampa on the Rez should be just what the shaman ordered.*

Maria's grandfather is Henry Whiteowl, the chief of the tribe. Henry graduated from Cal-Tech in the late seventies with a master's degree in physics. While he was away, he learned all that he could of the white man's ways. When he came back, he was full of fire and new ideas. Unfortunately, the leaders wanted nothing to do with it. Realizing the futility of fighting with a bunch of old men, Henry withdrew from tribal affairs.

When his wife Mary died of cancer, he became a demon possessed. He met with the leaders again, attempting to understand the problems that were keeping his people down. He organized the tribe and even ventured out into the land of the white devils again in search of investors. He had a vision. He hired anybody who was willing to work using the money he borrowed to purchase and build greenhouses. Henry reasoned that the one thing people would always need is food. They started out growing organic salad greens and spinach, crops that had short growing cycles and fast turn over.

Now days the tribe operates over a hundred, high-tunnel greenhouses year round, supplying a sizable market



share of the East Coast with certified organic spinach and leaf lettuce.

Maria pulled in beside an oversized Quonset hut and walked up to the front door. She brushed the worst of the kinks out of her hair before stepping into the air-conditioned cool of the office. Her grandfather was bent over his desk and didn't look up at first.

A faded red paisley headband held back the majority of his shoulder length wavy grey hair. He pushed his John Lennon style glasses back and started talking without turning around.

"We got another truck coming in an hour or so...oh hey," his serious, business face instantly brightened when he saw her. He unfolded his tall wiry frame from the chair and gave her a big bear hug. "Wow, what brings you here?"

Maria shrugged and feigned insult, "What? Can't I come see my favorite grandfather once in a while?"

"Your only grandfather," he corrected, and then put his hands up. "No, no, I'm just surprised to see you," he hobbled over to the desk and sat back down, "what with your high powered career and all."

"Hunh, I'm not the one with a Master's degree in Physics," she came back with a forced smile.

"Nobody said anything about...oh hey wait a minute," he frowned suddenly, and looked closer, "shit, something's wrong isn't it?"

Maria tried to keep smiling, but her lip started quivering. Henry jumped up quickly for a man in his sixties. He headed toward the only door in the little office, "Come on," he said grabbing a set of keys off the wall and gesturing over his shoulder.

"JIM!" he yelled across the parking lot on the way to his truck, "I'm going out for a few, if you need me call."

"Gotcha chief," a deep voice materialized from somewhere among the greenhouses. "Hey Maria long time no see, looking good."

She smiled and called back, "Thank you Jim, nice to um, see you again too."

Her grandfather was right. He was the only person she had left in this world anymore. Everyone she ever cared about, has either died or proven that they weren't worthy anymore, *like Nelson*. She watched him hobble stiffly over to another building and duck inside. When he came back, he was carrying a plastic grocery bag. He held it up and smiled, "Lunch."

He walked over to the same old pickup truck that she learned how to drive in and held the passenger's door open for her. Once she was in, he slammed it shut with a solid thump and hopped in the driver's side.

"Where are we going?" she asked putting on her seatbelt.

"Eagle rock, I want to show you something."

It only took a few minutes to drive up to the trail overlooking the fifty-acre mountain lake/reservoir. From there they parked and hiked to the top. A steady breeze was blowing at this height, quickly drying the sweat that Maria had worked up climbing the steep path.

Henry walked over to the right side of the cliff and put his arms out meaningfully. "So, what do you think?" he gestured around at the ground.

It took a moment, but finally Maria noticed several colorful stones piled around a large circle. She frowned slightly, "What is it?"

He smiled, "It's a medicine wheel."

"A what?"

She looked again. The crude stone circle was seventy-five feet across with outward spokes that bisected it. She counted them.

"It's called a medicine wheel, with the word medicine referring to Indian earth magic," he smiled mystically. "The lines indicate the horizon positions of the sun for the twenty-eight days of the lunar month. The six longer ones; show the horizon positions of sunrises and sunsets on the first days of the solstices and equinoxes."

Maria looked at him dubiously, "Indian earth magic?"

"Yeah," he nodded without missing a beat, "I made it last summer, kind of like Zen gardening, very therapeutic you know."

"You don't still believe in that stuff; do you?"

"What, Zen gardening?"

"No, Indian magic."

"Of course I do, why not?"

"Grampa," she tried to keep the ridicule out of her voice, "look at what the white man has done to us. Now tell me what your magic has done for you."

"It's not like that," he insisted patiently, "the magic is all about focus, drawing energy from the earth to benefit every living thing, not just the First Peoples."

Maria rolled her eyes.

He waved a hand over his shoulder and walked out to the edge of the cliff. The water far below them shimmered and sparkled. She could just barely make out an eagle soaring high above and the fluttering white specks

of seagulls as they flew across the Eagle Lake's surface in search of food. They both sat down on the edge and Henry opened the bag that he brought. He pulled out two containers filled with salad and handed one to her.

They ate in silence. When they finished, her grandfather looked her in the eye. "OK now, so what is your problem?"

She glanced at the ground, "Oh you know, the same old stuff."

He shook his head.

"OK," she reluctantly continued, "I kicked Nelson out again, this time for good."

A look of surprise crossed the old man's face before it turned hard. "Well good for you," he nodded, "no offense, but that boy was bad news. So what's the problem then?"

Tears threatened to burst from her eyes, but she choked them back. "I don't know Grampa. Sometimes I just feel so alone. I don't fit in anywhere and I hate feeling like a victim, but every time I try to do something about it, I only end up making things worse."

He reached across and patted her shoulder softly. "Oh Honey, that's just not true, you are special, you have me as a Grandfather after all. Do you remember when you met your spirit guide?"

"Well, yeah," she rolled her eyes again, "but I still don't understand it."

It was many years ago, not long after Maria moved to the reservation. Her grandfather took her aside and personally guided her through a combination coming of age rite and naming ceremony as a way of welcoming her to the tribe.

The ritual involved going out into the desert at night. Once they were at the sacred spot, he handed her a small cup. She took a sip and immediately felt like throwing up.

"Ugh, this stuff is horrible, what is it?"

"Horse urine," he replied with a straight face.

"What?"

"I'm just kidding," he laughed, "it's brewed from the peyote cactus, very spiritual."

Shortly after drinking the tea, Maria fell asleep and dreamed of being followed by two wolves, they were identical except one had blue eyes and the other had green. Right before the dream ended, they both came together and became one. When she awoke, she told her grandfather about the dream.

"The two wolves represent good and evil," he said with all seriousness. "You have powerful medicine Maria, but there is great turmoil inside you, both wolves are trying to get the upper hand."

"But which one will win?" the then fourteen-year-old Maria asked seriously.

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On which one you feed, you have to decide, are you good, or are you evil?"

"That's easy," she replied.

"Is it?"

"Of course, come on Grampa you know me."

"Yes," he nodded sagely, "but sometimes the best of intentions go astray, that is why you must stay focused, and trust in the spirit to guide you."

Maria didn't believe in the magic back then and she still wasn't convinced. *How can you believe in something in the absence of solid proof?* She shook her head in wonder; *I guess that's what they call blind faith.*

The two sat in silence for a little while longer.

After her grandfather had packed up all the lunch garbage, he reached inside his pocket and pulled out a small silver case with a tiny turquoise bird embedded in the front. He pushed a button on the side and the top flipped open to reveal a couple of hand rolled cigarettes. He took one out and flicked his lighter at it. As soon as Maria smelled the smoke, she laughed and looked around guiltily, "Grampa! I thought you gave that up?"

"What?" he smiled innocently, "No, I have a prescription."

"For what?"

"Oh you know the usual stuff, glaucoma, back pain. I'm even diagnosed as bipolar," he declared proudly, "want some?" He held up the joint.

She hesitated, but then shook her head and took it from him anyway. Maria had smoked marijuana long before she ever met her grandfather, *it was Nelson's drug of choice*, but it never really did anything other than make her sleepy.

She inhaled deeply this time and held the smoke in for a few seconds before blowing it out in a steady stream. Her head started pulsing like the blood was rushing to her face, but then the feeling softened and spread out through her body, all the way down to her feet. She handed the cigarette back and smiled serenely.

"Like I said before," he continued, "good and evil wear different faces to different people. What you might

think is a wise action, could have repercussions that affect other things negatively."

"Like ripples in a pond," she nodded.

"Exactly, but that's where the magic comes in," he replied smugly.

She rolled her eyes again and started to protest, but he stuck a finger up to silence her. He took the burnt stub of the joint, dabbed some of the ashes off the end, and carefully drew two diagonal lines underneath his eyes. A cool breeze whipped up as he walked over to the center of the medicine wheel, tore the rest of the cigarette up, and reverently sprinkled it around the circle counterclockwise. Maria giggled when he picked up a feather and stuck it sideways in his headband. He winked at her, then closed his eyes and started clapping rhythmically.

The beat was intoxicating and Maria's body responded sympathetically. Grampa started chanting softly, "huya howa huya howa," and shuffling his feet clockwise around the circle. Once every three shuffles, he would lean way back, turn his face up to the sky and flip his long grey hair back like a whip.

She watched mesmerized as the old man did his dance. Just as he was starting to go around the second time, he spun in place and put his arms up, *and suddenly they were huge white wings.*

Standing alone in the middle of the Medicine wheel was a great snowy owl perched in an attack pose. It stared at her for a few seconds then nodded solemnly and stood back down, tucking its enormous wings at its sides. As fast as the owl appeared, it was gone and her grandfather was back again still doing his slow shuffle

dance around the crude circle. When he was done, he smiled and sat down on the ground to catch his breath.

Maria didn't say anything about what she thought she saw, figuring that it probably had more to do with the effects of the weed. She spent that night at her grandfather's house. When she went to sleep, she had a dream.

She was in the desert fighting what looked like one of her spirit wolf guides. The two of them were rolling around on the ground snapping and snarling at each other. Just as things were looking bad for Maria, she woke up in a cold sweat. She lay awake staring at the ceiling of her old bedroom. *Maybe there is something to this*, she thought.

Way back when she left the reservation to attend college, she must have left the Indian magic behind too. *Maybe that's why I can't seem to get things right in my life.*

On the way home the next day, she made a vow to stay focused. As she walked in the door of her apartment, it was to see the answering machine light blinking furiously. She pushed the playback button.

*BEEP. "Hey Baby, it's me, look I'm really sorry, I don't know what I was thinking."* Maria cringed. It was Nelson. For a brief moment, she felt sorry for him. The messages went on.

*BEEP. "Baby? Hey where you at? I've been trying to call you all night."*

*BEEP. "Hey Baby, it's after midnight, just checking to see if you got in yet."*

*BEEP. "WHAT THE FUCK MARIA?"* Nelson screamed. *"YOU THINK YOU'RE TOO FUCKING GOOD FOR ME BITCH? WELL FUCK YOU THEN!"*



Maria hit the erase button and closed her eyes, waiting for the tears that strangely enough didn't come.

## Chapter 6

Wilhelm Franz adjusted his fake beard and checked the glue on his mustache one more time before stepping into the reception area of the LA city morgue.

The air was cold and clammy. Coming in out of the afternoon sun, the sudden temperature drop caused a wild shiver to run down his back. A young man in a white robe met him at the front desk. He looked to be of Southeast Asian descent and was much shorter than Wilhelm's own six-foot frame. He had a perpetually worried look about him, as if at any moment he was going to jump out of his skin.

"Can I help you?"

Wilhelm slipped into character fluidly and offered his hand to shake, "Phillip Decker, I'm here to identify my brother, they said I could find him here." He shifted his feet and looked at the floor feigning distraught.

"Yes, Mr. Decker, it's good to meet you," the morgue attendant smiled sympathetically. "I'm sorry, this shouldn't take very long. I appreciate you stopping by and helping us out." He swept his hand in front of him and smiled strangely, "If you'll just come this way please."

As they walked from room to room, the temperature dropped considerably. The smell of formaldehyde hung heavy in the air coupled with another more pungent odor. When they came to a heavy sealed door, the man paused, and appeared to put every bit of his hundred-pound body weight into wrestling it open. They stepped into a large, even colder room.

Long rows of stainless steel drawers lined both walls reaching all the way up to the ceiling. The man checked the charts on two of them, before opening one at

the very bottom. The drawer slid out soundlessly revealing a body covered with a white sheet. When the attendant pulled the sheet back, Wilhelm felt his stomach lurch.

Harry Decker lay stretched out on the gurney. It looked just like he was sleeping except there was a dark gaping slash that went from one side of his throat to the other. Dizziness overwhelmed Wilhelm for a second. He stood mortified, staring as the neck wound yawned up at him like a great pit of blackness in the never-ending void.

He shook his head, and fought the urge to gag, hiding it by bowing in grief. *This is what happens when you stick your nose in other people's business, he thought, the next time it just might be you.*

"What happened?" he asked the attendant through his dismay.

"We don't know for sure," the man frowned, "a bunch of kids found him in his car, sticking half out of a swamp not far from here."

Wilhelm shook his head.

"We're pretty sure it wasn't an accident," the man waved meaningfully at Harry's neck.

Wilhelm cringed. He had seen dead bodies before. *You never get used to it; if you do, then you should probably start wondering if there's something wrong with you.*

He hadn't really known Harry all that long. They worked together a few times before. He knew that the man had an uncanny knack for infiltration, *a skill very valuable in the field of investigative journalism*, but other than that, they were practically strangers.

For the rest of the visit Wilhelm felt strangely detached, his mind kept wandering back to the neck wound

and how it could have been him lying in that drawer. He told the attendant that he needed to go outside and get some air. When he reached his car, instead of leaving right away, he just sat there staring blankly out the windshield.

Wilhelm knew the risks.

Every time he goes undercover for a story there is the chance that he could be found out. Being a master of disguise helps considerably, the fact that Wilhelm has one of the most forgettable faces is an added bonus. Even then, he employs every concealment and surveillance technique known to the trade and even a few that he figured out on his own. Reversible jackets, rolled up hats in his pockets, pebbles in his shoes to fake a limp, and of course, glued on facial hair.

He tore the fake beard off and tears came to his eyes. The extra adhesive that he applied prior to visiting the morgue had set firmly to his face. He closed his eyes and tugged hard on the fuzzy mustache. It came off, but not without yanking the majority of his own facial hair out by the follicles. He sat in the car rubbing his upper lip and wincing.

The Satanic Death Cult story that he had been working on for so long has fallen apart again. He really thought he was on to something this time, but ever since Harry went missing, he hasn't seen any activity at the suspected meeting place. He entered the building again, but still couldn't find anything suspicious.

*It's like they closed up shop and left town.*

*That's the way it is when you're chasing a story, he thought as he leaned back and stared up at the headliner of his car. Sometimes though, the silence is a sign that you're on to something big.*

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Janine glanced in the mirror and shuddered.

*Time takes its toll on us all,* she thought.

She is eight years older than Bruce and lately she has been worrying that someday he wouldn't find her attractive anymore.

At fifty-nine, she still possesses the same regal beauty that she grew into in her early thirties, but somewhere along the way, it morphed into a matronly elegance, leaving her with a strangely Crawford-esque demeanor.

The laugh lines have grown into deep creases over the years. Her once deep honey brown hair color, is now a rainbow of grey shades ranging from almost white to dark charcoal at the roots. She keeps her hair short. Even so, it has a life of its own, preferring to hang in loose long curls just above her shoulders.

She had been reminiscing about her singing career for the three millionth time since she stopped performing, when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

*"Janine Honey, it's me Saul,"* her ex-agent paused. *"It's been a long time girl, how are you?"*

"I'm good," she smiled tensely and repeated what he always said to her, "at least as good as can be, right?" There was silence on the other end, but she could picture him smiling and nodding sadly.

*"Listen Janine, I don't mean to bother you, but I was reading an article the other day that I thought you might find interesting. It was on a newly researched affliction called Hyperacusis."*

Janine rolled her eyes and switched the phone to her other ear. "Well that's nice Saul, but what's this got to do with me?"

*"I was getting to that. In a nutshell, the affliction is sensitivity to noise at certain frequencies."*

"OK," she replied, semi-patiently waiting for him to get to the point.

*"Janine, I think your stage fright is actually Hyperacusis and that it is triggered by the audience applauding. Think about it, when did it bother you the most?"*

She stared at the ceiling for a minute, trying to remember the last time she felt the pain, the panic, and the horror. "Right after I was done performing. Oh my God Saul, you're right," she sat up in her chair, "but what can I do about it now?"

*"The article mentioned a couple of experimental treatments, but I don't think you need any of that,"* he finished confidently.

"Well then," she growled, "don't keep me in suspense."

*"I want to try a little experiment. I'm not sure if it will even work, but if it does, you could be back to performing again in no time, if that's what you want of course."*

"Are you kidding me?" she blurted out like a schoolgirl, "of course I want to perform again, I'm just scared."

*"I know Honey, let me get what I need first and then we'll see."*

Two weeks later, he stopped over for a visit.

Tears came to her eyes when she answered the door. "It's really good to see you again Saul," she said, enveloping her longtime agent/manager in a deep hug.

"Same to you girl," he whispered into her shoulder.

Saul had aged considerably in the decade or more since she saw him last. They were close to the same age, but the stress of celebrity management appeared to have really worn thin on him. She wondered how he kept going.

"So what did you have in mind for your little experiment?" she inquired.

He handed her a small ring box and smiled.

"Saul, I'm already married," she frowned and put her hand on her hip, "besides I thought you were too."

"Open the box Janine," he insisted.

She pulled the lid back to reveal what looked like two oversized earplugs.

"What are they?"

"Noise cancelling in-ear monitors, they block out everything else and only give you a signal of what you're singing, but this is the most important part, they also have a noise gate that cuts off all sound above a certain decibel. In other words, while you're wearing them, you will never be exposed to extreme loud noises again."

She looked doubtfully at the little ear buds. "I don't know Saul."

"Come on let's try them out," he said opening the other case he brought with him. "Where's your CD player?"

"In the living room," she pointed to the right. They went in and she put the disc in the player then turned it on.

It was a recording of her 1989 live show at The Hollywood Bowl.

"Can we fast forward it past the music?" he asked impatiently.

She shrugged and handed him the remote.

"First let's try it without the monitors, to see if you still have a problem."

She nodded reluctantly. He turned up the volume and advanced the music to the end of the song. Applause roared out of the speakers and Janine closed her eyes tightly against the searing pain. Her head felt like it was on fire for all of the three seconds it took Saul to hit the mute button.

"Sorry Honey," he cringed.

Janine got her wits about her again while Saul powered up the earplugs and handed them to her one at a time. Once she had inserted them, he started the CD playing again. The music was coming through the monitors just fine. When the applause started, she flinched, but when the volume only dropped slightly and stayed consistent, she smiled. She sat all the way through three minutes of standing ovation without a single twitch.

"Oh my God Saul," she said with tears in her eyes.

"I know," his nodded. "That's what I was hoping. So what do you think? Are you ready to come out of retirement?"



## Chapter 7

As a nightclub manager, a large percentage of the job is shuffling paperwork. Lisa preferred to do hers out on the deck when the weather was nice. It had been a long week and Brock was still away on business. It usually wasn't a problem, but for some reason he has been distant lately.

*I've been so busy with work, I've barely had time to think.* Two bartenders quit in the last two weeks and she has been interviewing all day. The last prospect just left and she looked like a keeper, all Lisa needed was Nick's final approval.

When it came to hiring the entertainment for the nightclub, Lisa also deferred to Nick's tastes. Being old school and in keeping with the theme of the classic ex-speakeasy, Nick had a thing for torch singers. Helen Morgan, Billie Holiday, Julie London, and Marlene Dietrich were some of his favorites, along with a local legend by the name of Janine Joliette.

The majority of the greats are gone now, some dead, the rest slowly fading away to obscurity. A few still remain, but they are reclusive almost to the point of non-existence.

Every week Lisa is forced to hire from a constantly shrinking pool of performers. Other than her agent connections, all she has is the local musician's and actor's guilds. The talent is usually a piano player and an actress who does celebrity impersonations on the side, and while they normally can sing OK, it's nothing like the chills down your spine performances of the great vixens of the oversized microphone.

She was still daydreaming when Hal walked out on the deck. He bent down beside her chair and almost whispered in spite of the fact that they were alone.

"There's a visitor to see you out at the desk," he hooked a giant thumb over his shoulder. "The man said his name was Saul Cohen."

"Oh yeah," she brightened up, "thank you Hal, I've been waiting to hear from him."

Lisa followed him out to the courtesy desk.

Saul Cohen was a business associate of Lisa's father and he has been a good friend of the family for as long as she could remember. He was one of the few people who still came around to visit after her father's death.

She tapped the older man's shoulder and gave him a hug when he turned around. "It's so good to see you Saul, how are you doing?"

"Ah you know how it is, as good as can be." He shrugged and twitched his neck to the side, "I can't be a saint all the time. How's your mother?"

"Same as ever," she replied softly.

Saul nodded and lowered his gaze ever so slightly. They walked back out to the deck and sat down.

"Hey, I have good news for you," he said, bringing his hands together with a big grin, "I think I might have Janine Joliette ready to come out of retirement."

"Oh wait, that is good news," Lisa sat up straighter. "What happened?"

"Well I don't want to get into the details, but she could be ready to play another show real soon. We're thinking something mid-sized for her first performance back."

Lisa blinked at him for a second before she realized what he was saying. She grabbed his arm. "Here? Oh my god Saul, that would be so cool! Oh wait; we can't afford her, can we?"

"Don't worry about that," he waved a hand, "she's not concerned about the money at this point. She just wants a low-key club, in case what we have in mind doesn't work out."

*A singer of her caliber would flip Nick's wig,* she thought with a smile. One day when she was bored, Lisa researched the meteoric career of Janine Joliette, from the early days at the Pineapple Grove, to her songs co-written with her pianist, Larry Barry. She thought that it was sad that someone with so much talent would hide it away.

Music has always played a big role in Lisa's life. She still has the same upright piano that she learned how to play on as a child. Brock had a fit trying to get the thing moved into the new house, but she insisted.

Every now and then when she's in the mood, Lisa sits down and pounds out some of her favorite songs. *I could never imagine not playing, it's like a virus, once you've been exposed to it, it's in your blood.*

\*\*\*

Bruce had only been home for a couple hours that morning, before he announced that he had to leave again. Sensing that he was avoiding her, Janine peppered him with questions over the breakfast table.

"Bruce Honey, I've been considering performing again and I wanted to know what you think."

"What about your stage fright?"

"I believe we have that figured out, but I want to see for sure."

Bruce appeared distracted. He was listening, but his eyes kept wandering to the newspaper in his hands, "That's wonderful Honey, where is the first show going to be?"

"A place close by here, I've never heard of it before, Nick's of Bel Air or something like that."

Bruce tensed up behind his paper. He lowered it slowly.

She gave him a curious look. "Bruce? Are you feeling all right?"

He blinked at her and smiled stiffly. "What? I mean yeah, I'm OK. It's just, I heard that place is a dive, you might want to see if you can get another show somewhere else."

"No," she shook her head resolutely, "Saul seems to think it is perfect for a new start, you know, just to get back into the swing of things again."

He nodded slowly, "Well, I probably won't be able to make it."

"I haven't told you when it is yet," she frowned.

"Well I mean, I'm booked up solid for the next few weeks, I just assumed that it would be soon."

She nodded, "Next Saturday night."

"See, there you go," he said putting his paper down and taking her hand. "Look Honey I'm sorry, I really hate to miss your first show, can you get someone to record it for me?"

"Yeah, I guess so; but I was really hoping that you could be there."

"Me too Honey, but I'm right in the middle of some sensitive negotiations on this new account. If I get it,

we're set, if not, we're going to have to start cutting back on spending around here."

Janine studied his lake blue eyes, but saw only concern for her welfare looking back at her.

"Well all right," she whined reluctantly, "but you have to promise me that you'll go to the next one."

"I promise Honey, as soon as I get these accounts squared away, I'm all yours."

Janine really loved Bruce. He is a good provider, and he honestly cares about her, she is a lucky woman, and she knows it. *I should be ashamed of myself for placing demands on him. He does his best, and that's all that I have any right to ask for.*

## Chapter 8

Lisa was in full panic mode.

She snuck a peek out at the crowded dining room floor of Nick's and felt a renewed surge of anxiety.

*Tonight is the big night, she thought, I finally managed to make a rumor into a reality by lining up the entertainment for this show and now it's all falling apart.*

A couple of times it seemed like it wasn't going to happen at all, and it wasn't until last week that Saul even confirmed that Janine Joliette would be performing. When he first told Lisa that she was anxious to play, she suggested this weekend. Little did she know that the piano player she hired was going to get into a car accident just two blocks from Nick's. Last she heard he was at Hollywood General Hospital in critical condition.

Nick walked up and smiled at her, until he saw her expression. "Oh, I'd recognize that look anywhere, what's wrong?"

"No piano player," she frowned at him in dismay, "ours was in a car accident a half hour ago, and the guilds don't have another one available."

They both looked out at the capacity crowd and then met gazes. Nick shrugged, "What can we do? Hey wait a minute, why don't you play?"

"Me?" She gaped at him wide-eyed, "Play piano for Janine Joliette? You have got to be kidding."

"Come on Lisa, I've heard you play before, you're a master." He shook his head, "How hard can it be? She has her own sheet music, you probably already know some of her songs, they've only been playing them on the radio for the last thirty years."

"Well," Lisa looked at him sideways, "all right, if you think I can handle it, but who will watch the bar?"

"Don't you worry," he patted her shoulder. "I'll take care of it, now go get ready," he turned her around and gently nudged her in the direction of the dressing rooms. When she reached Janine's door, she rapped lightly. Saul Cohen answered with a worried look that matched Lisa's. He let her in and closed the door behind her. Janine was sitting in front of the mirror putting on her makeup. She turned when the door closed.

"Oh, hello Lisa," she said with a bright smile, "I didn't expect to see you until later this evening."

Lisa cringed, "Yeah me either. Look, we have a slight problem. The piano player can't make it so I'm going to be sitting in, if that's OK with you."

"You play the piano too? Oh I am impressed." She took Lisa's hand and looked deep into her eyes, "Do you have any more unknown talents that you're hiding from us?"

Lisa laughed nervously, "I wouldn't exactly call it talent, more like years and years of practice."

Janine just nodded.

*Well at least she isn't storming out,* She glanced over at Saul, *now I just hope I'm not too rusty.*

Lisa had never seen Janine perform. Back when she was in her heyday, Lisa wasn't into that style of music. It wasn't until she started working for Nick that she acquired a taste for Lounge Lizardess's and the heartbreaking songs that they crooned. She went back out to the main dining room and scanned the crowd. Brock said that he would try to make it, but he wasn't sure if he would be able to get away in time.

Lisa frowned, *if there was one downside to my relationship with him, it's all the time that we spend apart. Sometimes I wish he could just drop everything and be at my beck and call, even though I know that's not how it works.*

When she didn't see her husband, she shook her head. *Absence makes the heart grow fonder right? She frowned and nodded slightly, I sure hope so, because I don't know what I'd do if I ever found out that he was unfaithful to me.*

In spite of Lisa's fears, Janine's comeback performance went well. Her piano playing was a little slow at first, but then her decades of music training kicked in and she coasted through it like a seasoned professional. She even had fun. When the show was over and Saul had gone home to his wife, Janine stayed behind waiting while Lisa and Nick closed up the bar.

"I hope you don't mind," the older woman shrugged, "I don't have anything else to do and it sure beats going home to an empty house."

"You too?" Lisa asked in surprise. "My husband was supposed to be here tonight, but he never showed. He left a message..." she shrugged to finish the sentence.

"That sucks," Janine declared. "Hey, what say we have a couple of drinks?"

"I don't know," she looked around, but then noticed that most of the work was already done. She smiled, "Sure, I could use one, it might help me sleep tonight."

They remained at the bar until Nick locked up and joined them. From there they moved into the dining room



and sat around the grand piano, playing and singing the old songs and laughing at the memories.

"I'm thrilled to death," Janine smiled, "after tonight, I'm thinking of trying for a comeback."

"That's great news," Nick said excitedly and stopped, "oh wait, I guess that means you'll be charging more then?"

Janine smiled sweetly and cupped Nick's cheek with her hand, "For you, I'd do it for free."

"No, no," Nick slurred, "I wouldn't hear of it, you are a goddess," he swayed a little and spilled his drink. "I'm just glad you came and played tonight."

Lisa nodded, feeling the effects of the alcohol too. "I'm hungry, hey why don't you guys come over to my place and I'll cook up something to eat?"

Nick looked at his watch. "Nope, it's been great, but I have to get going." He stood up a little unsteadily. "I've got to keep the peace at home and I'm already late."

"Good husband!" Janine and Lisa both said at the same time. They laughed as he hurried out the door.

"What do you think?" Lisa asked the older woman.

Janine nodded, "That sounds wonderful, but can we take a cab? I think we've both had a few too many to drive."

"Sounds good, it's just over the hill a little ways."

When they arrived at her house, Lisa turned on all the lights and opened the windows to let in the night air. It felt refreshing to have company over; it was usually just her and Brock.

"How's an omelet sound? I have some fresh chanterelle mushrooms I need to use up."

"Honey, you make whatever you want. I'm just glad to get away for a little while." She looked around the kitchen and back at the pile of ingredients that Lisa was stacking up on the kitchen counter. "What did you say your husband does for a living?"

"Brock?" She smiled, "He's in international sales. I'm not sure exactly what he does, but he's pretty high up in the company."

"My Bruce has his own business," Janine said putting her hand to her chest proudly, "maybe you've heard of it? BC Investments?"

"Hmmm, nope sorry," Lisa shook her head, "but I'm not very big on investing. Honestly I wouldn't know a compounded dividend from a no-load fee if it bit me."

Janine laughed again then stood up. She walked over to the window. "You have a very nice view from up here, I..."

Lisa turned around to see Janine staring down at the coffee table beside the patio door. "Are you OK?"

The older woman swayed on her feet a little, and Lisa rushed over to steady her. "Who is that?" Janine asked weakly, pointing at a picture from Lisa and Brock's wedding.

"That's my husband, Brock."

Janine closed her eyes and shook her head. "No, that can't be, it looks just like my husband Bruce."

"Wait a minute, did you say Bruce?" Lisa stopped and turned to her desk. She flipped open the lid, dug out the mail that she found last week and read the name on the registration.

"Bruce Connard, of South Mapleton Drive?"

"Oh my god!" Janine looked like she was going to cry as she dug in her purse and flipped open her wallet to the picture of a man that looked just like Brock.

They both sat down heavily on the couch.

"There must be some mistake," Lisa said, trying to keep an even head.

"OK wait, I know. Does Brock have any birthmarks?"

"Noo, oh wait, he does have a little strawberry on the back of his leg."

"Right below his balls?"

"Yep," she stomped her foot and started pacing the floor. "God Dammit, I can't believe I trusted him. I should have known when he was away all the time that he was up to something. I just thought he was working hard to make things better for us. I'm sorry," she shook her head angrily, "but I'm not very hungry now."

Janine nodded.

"SON OF A BITCH!" Lisa yelled, "Oooh I want to make the bastard pay for this."

"We could chop his dick off," Janine laughed darkly.

"No," she fumed, "that's too good for him." She looked around the room and her eyes bugged out. "I want to kill him!"

"Whoa, whoa, hold on there Annie Oakley." Janine smirked, "Don't go off half cocked. Besides you don't really mean that anyway."

"Who says?"

"I do," Janine said looking her in the eye. "You know that you could go to jail for even talking about doing it."

"I don't care, what else can I do?"

"You could divorce him."

Lisa shook her head vehemently and clenched her teeth.

"Although," Janine continued gazing blankly at the ceiling.

"What?"

"Well I don't know about Brock, but Bruce would be worth considerably more, if he were dead."

Lisa stopped and slowly turned to the older woman. "Yeah, that's right and if we make it look like an accident the insurance company pays double."

"OK wait," Janine put up her hands, "think about what you're saying. You're a little tipsy right now and you're not thinking straight." She stood up and put her hand on Lisa's shoulder. "Why don't you sleep on it and see if you still feel the same way in the morning?"

*She's right, Lisa thought, clearer heads will prevail, and then she gritted her teeth, but I don't want to be reasonable right now!*

"I can't believe he lied," she said out loud, "about everything! What an asshole!"

Janine nodded, "I know Honey, I've been married to him for twenty seven years. Makes you feel kind of stupid doesn't it?"

"Yeah!"

"It's not you Honey, you're a sweetheart, he's the one who is stupid for not appreciating us."

"YEAH! LET'S KILL HIM!"

"No," Janine shook her head, "sleep on it right?"

"Oh you're right," she deflated, "you can stay in the spare room if you don't want to go home."

Janine nodded sleepily, "That would be wonderful."

Lisa led her back the hallway to the bedrooms. She opened the closet and grabbed a comforter, laying it on the end of the bed in case it turned cold overnight. "I really appreciate you being the voice of reason in all this; I just don't know how you can be so calm."

"Oh trust me, I want to kill him too," Janine smiled with her teeth, "I just don't want to get caught and spend the rest of my life in jail."

"You're right," she nodded still furious, "I'll see you in the morning."

Lisa closed the door behind her and went into her empty bedroom. She was used to being alone, but somehow the thought of sleeping in the bed that she once gladly shared with Brock, just sickened her now.

She grabbed one of the pillows and a blanket and went out to lie down on the couch. In spite of the fire burning inside her, she drifted off to sleep in no time.

[70]

Gloria Stern

End of free preview