

JOSEPH R. FREEMAN



THE CRACKED
MIRROR

A M Y S T E R Y

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The chill in the air brings on the pain in my shoulder. I always get it in the midst of a storm. The doc says it has to do with the nerve damage the bullet caused when it tore through my shoulder. Makes sense, I guess. Standing here in the middle of a cold graveyard doesn't help. Still feels like yesterday. But the grass over Mike's grave site reminds me of how long it's been since his body was lowered into the ground.

The photo I had engraved on Mike's stone makes me smile. I can only imagine what he'd say about the likes of me today: private investigator. He'd never believe it. Huge difference from when we worked the streets together. I can still hear his voice. "Here, Paul. Taste this." When I concentrate hard enough, I can still taste that awful cooking of his. If there truly is life after death, I sure hope he's a better cook now than he was back then. Funny the things you miss after someone you love is gone.

The sound of the squawking crow overhead makes me think of the Falcon — the featherless beast that ripped Mike and me apart. I do my best not to think about it, but the pain in my shoulder and the inscription on Mike's stone weaken me like cracks in a dam, and the horrid memories flood through me.

Beloved Partner and Friend ... Never to Be Forgotten

It's true. I never will forget. How can I? All I have to do is look in the mirror and I'm reminded. And Mike wasn't just my partner—he was the love of my life.

Although I didn't have my PI license back then, the Falcon was my first case. Of course, in this new line of work, I try to help, try to make a difference. But it wasn't always that way with me. Hard to believe the things I used to do, from hustling tricks to busting crime. Not exactly the life story of your typical private investigator. I'm not saying I'm proud of it. I'm not afraid to own up to what I

used to be. No sense in trying to hide from it. I've never liked thinking we're defined by our bad deeds, anyway. I like to think we're more than that—perhaps the sum of all our deeds, both good and bad. But then again, when I think about the Falcon, I realize how cruel life can be. Perhaps doing more good now doesn't make me a better person. Maybe all it does is help lessen my guilt over everything and the evil I brought to Mike. Of course, he wasn't the only one. He's the one that hurts the most. Sometimes, I

wish I'd never met him. He'd still be alive if I hadn't. They'd all still be alive. Of course, I had no idea back then that I was a walking death sentence.



The heat was blistering the day I met Mike. The street kids were playing outside. Most everyone else was indoors in their air-conditioned apartments, looking out at the kids and surely wondering, *How can they stand to play in all this heat?* The Los Angeles Fire Department had taken to cracking the fire hydrants in the lower-income communities in an attempt to cool off the neighborhood and score some points for the mayor. You know what they say: cool heads mean less crime. There was a muddy mayoral campaign going on at the time. The incumbent was having an affair with the wife of one of his opponents. Huge mess, splattered all over the TV and papers. He took every opportunity possible to imprint a better image of himself in everyone's minds.

It was only as the sun started its descent that the warm air began to be cooled by the western evening winds. People were starting to make their trek home from a long day. That's what I'd always heard them call it: "the trek." The nightlife was about to begin in Hollywood—city of dreams, refuge for the brokenhearted.

I was headed to the Glass Slipper off Western and Fifth. It's a lonely dive, alright, but one with no hassles, no straights, and no weird looks; I like that. I grab a bite to eat and a couple of beers—anything to help take the edge off before facing my night's work. As I cut through the alley behind the liquor store, I came across this leather-clad biker guy, what our kind would call a bear, trying to pick up on what was obviously a new kid on the block. His wide eyes, curly blond locks, and clean-cut appearance gave him away. That and the fact that he was about to break every rule in the book.

“I don’t live far. Climb on the back of my bike. I’ll bring you back when we’re done,” the biker told him.

“Uh, I don’t know, man. You sure you don’t want to go to the motel around the corner?” the new kid asked.

“Come on. I ain’t gonna hurt you. It’s a lot safer than any place around here. No cops.” The biker grinned.

“Well ...” the new guy answered.

The golden rule in our line of work was to never do anyone “new” by yourself—to always have someone with you to watch your back the first time. The second rule was never at their place or in a car. If you weren’t in a motel or hotel or on your own turf, then fuck it. From the likes of the conversation, this new kid had no idea what he was doing and was about to make a serious mistake. Remembering my first few days on the streets, I couldn’t help but step in.

“Hey, sorry, man, but he isn’t going anywhere with you,” I said.

“Who the fuck are you?” the biker asked.

“I’m the fuckin’ pimp fairy, asshole,” I answered. “Come on, Curly. Let’s go,” I instructed, pulling him by his arm.

The biker got off his motorcycle. He was bigger than the both of us and obviously not happy with me intervening. He grabbed the new kid by the shoulder and stopped him in his tracks. “You listen to me, you little bitch! I tell you what the fuck to do!”

In that instance, my Italian temper got the best of me. I swung back and hit that bear with all I had, knocking him flat on his ass. The new kid looked at me, completely confused.

“Let’s go, Curly! Move it!” I yelled.

I sprinted up the alley with the new kid about a stride behind me. As we cleared the corner, I heard the revving of a motorcycle engine and tires screeching into motion. I grabbed the new kid by the cuff of his shirt and yanked him down behind a nearby Dumpster. Within seconds, the motorcycle rumbled around the corner, gained speed, and then passed the Dumpster and went on down Santa Monica Boulevard.

With the sound of the motorcycle in the far distance, I stood up and blew out a heavy sigh of relief. The new kid remained crouched behind the Dumpster. I will never forget the look on his face. He was scared shitless.

“It’s okay. He’s gone,” I told him.

He rose to his feet. After a couple of deep breaths, he said, “I can’t believe you clocked that guy! Thanks, uh ...” “Paul,” I said.

“Hey, Paul. I’m Mike,” he said, reaching out his hand, a gesture I was no longer familiar with.

I looked at his hand and then gave it a quick shake. “You’re new around here,” I said.

“Yeah. Got in from North Dakota a couple of weeks ago.”

In taking a closer look at him, I figured he was in his early twenties, about ten years younger than I was.

“Know anyone?” I asked.

“Uh, no. Not really.”

“Well, if you’re gonna survive in this town, you gotta know people. Only way to keep from being swallowed up by the streets. Where you staying?”

“At the motel around the corner. Won’t be staying there much longer, though, if I don’t make some cash soon.”

I looked Mike up and down. He was like a fawn lost in the woods. “You hungry?”

Mike nodded.

“Come on. I know a place we can grab some grub. Local hangout.” Once inside the Slipper, I pointed Mike toward some tables and went to the bar and ordered a pizza and two beers. As I walked over to the table to join Mike, I heard Sal call out, “Yo! Wassup, homeboy?”

Sal was a longtime friend as well as my ex-lover. From the moment we met, Sal had believed we were soul mates due to the fact that we shared the same birthday, right down to the year: March 12, 1968. It wasn’t until we tried living together as a couple that we proved to be better friends than anything else. I think I had known that from the very beginning; I never had the heart to tell him.

I learned a lot about hustling tricks from Sal. In fact, I did my first threesome with him. I can't say it was much different from going solo, just that the money was better. Sal was never hurting for money. He was very popular and had a lot of regulars. I think a lot of that had to do with his long dreadlocks and petite frame. He had a certain feminine quality about him, one that a lot of men found themselves drawn to. But for me, it was Sal's goofy smile. It was so contagious that it was hard for me to look at him without cracking a smile myself. I couldn't help but like him.

"So who's the fresh meat?" Sal asked, sitting next to me at the table.

"This is Mike. Mike, this is Sal," I answered.

"Hey, Sal." Mike reached out his hand.

Sal smirked. "Oh, how cute," he said, directing his comment my way and then taking hold of Mike's hand as if amused.

"Just got in from North Dakota and already trying to get himself killed," I added.

"Well, now. A Dakota boy. What brings you to the jungle?" Sal asked.

"Just always wanted to live in California. A lot warmer than where I'm from," Mike answered.

"Well, a cute thing like you should do fine around here. I'd be happy to show you the ropes. Any friend of Paul's is a friend of mine. Do you need a place to stay? I've got an extra bedroom," Sal said, flashing his big, goofy smile at Mike.

I could tell by the way Sal was eyeing Mike that he was quite fond of his boyish looks, and his offer meant a lot more than Mike knew. For whatever reason, this bothered me. Maybe it was because I knew Sal all too well. I knew what he'd do with Mike if he had the chance. I wasn't jealous by any means. Sal just had a way of taking things too far. I knew that if I turned Mike over to Sal, he'd teach Mike more than he was ready for.

"Actually, he's gonna stay with me for a while," I answered.

Mike looked at me with both surprise and gratitude. Hell, I was surprised myself. I had just met the guy, and here I was inviting him to stay with me. I had no idea why at the time. I felt the need to protect him for whatever reason. Maybe it was something in those misty blue eyes. A certain innocence that you don't come by very often—something I had lost a long time ago.

Our drinks arrived at the table, along with the extra-large pepperoni pizza I ordered. I took a few chugs of my cold beer while Mike sipped at his. Made me wonder if he had ever had a beer before. Sal slapped a slice of pizza on each of our plates.

“Oh! Did you hear about Brad?” Sal asked.

“Hmmm?” I mumbled as I took a bite of pizza.

“No one’s seen him for the last four days.”

Brad was an old-timer of the streets. Though only in his mid-twenties, he had hit the streets at the ripe age of sixteen. He had come to Hollywood to be an actor. Didn’t they all. He knew the streets as well as any of us. Sal went on to tell me that Brad had last been seen driving away with some old dude.

“There you go,” I said. “Probably found him a sugar daddy and milking him for all he’s worth.”

That was Brad, an opportunist. He would take advantage of any situation that he thought he could turn into easy cash.

“Yeah, but not even Scott has heard from him,” Sal answered.

“Really?” I added.

Now, that part sounded odd. Scott and Brad had been a couple for the last two years. It was rare to see one of them without the other. Even then, it wasn’t like Brad to hook up with someone without telling Scott. It wasn’t like him to take off with someone he didn’t know. Only AIDS victims and young fools like Mike took risks like that.

“Maybe it was one of his relatives, like his dad or something,” I suggested.

Sal shrugged. “Maybe. You’d still think he’d call to let Scott know what’s going on.”

“Have they been having problems? You know, in their relationship?” I asked.

“Who knows? You know how those two are, always bickering about something.”

“I’m sure he’ll turn up sooner or later.”

“Yeah,” Sal said, snapping his fingers at the waitress. “Honey, can you bring me a Coke, please? Thanks, love.”

After finishing off my beer, I reached for another slice of pizza. I glanced over at Mike to find him chomping on what had to have been his third slice. I

couldn't help but smile. It was like finding a stray puppy—all innocent and hungry and in desperate need of a friend. I'm sure that's how I came across to Sal when he first met me.

After a couple of more beers and another pizza, we all left the Slipper. Outside, in the heart of the corridor, an area two blocks deep within vice land, had grown crowded, filled with activity and people all about. The streetlamps illuminated the sidewalks; there were young homosexuals, old homosexuals, all flavors of transgender people, and bisexual men on the down low, as many of them were married—all products of a generation in which homosexuality was considered a mental illness. There were drivers cruising down the street in search of their own pleasures. Old hookers trying to look young enough to catch a trick for one more night. There were even a few rough traders scouting for young men and women, their choice of prey for sexual violence. They were the viciously dangerous homosexuals that trolled the area. Those that knew of them made sure to keep their distance. Those who didn't, well, you could bet it only took the once to learn.

The night had begun. I looked over at Mike. He smiled. I wasn't sure if it was out of nervousness or if it was his way of thanking me. All I know is that I had earned his trust. Sal had already taken off to his usual spot. As we walked down the wild side of the street, my side of the street, I could feel the buzz of the nightlife in the air. The streets were divided, with the Twinkies—gay slang for an attractive young boy—and the MTFs, males-to-females, on one side, and the hookers, pimps, FTMs—females-to-males—and hustlers on the other. The hustlers were the ones you had to watch out for. They were known for taking advantage of the new arrivals, me included, first getting them strung out on drugs and then selling them off to whoever had money. Mike and I

walked down the street and stopped at Hudson and Santa Monica. Positioning ourselves, we began to scout the area. Not long after that, I noticed an older Mercedes-Benz, silver in color, cruising slowly along.

“You need some money, right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Mike answered.

“Okay, then. Let me do the talking. You follow my lead.”

I struck a teasing and alluring pose, signaling our intent. The Mercedes drove slowly past us. The tinted windows made it impossible to see inside. I wondered if we were the wrong type, but when I saw the Mercedes turn at the corner and circle back around, I knew I had him on the hook. The Mercedes pulled over to the side of the curb a few feet away from us.

“Come on, Mike,” I said. “Let’s see what’s on the hook.”

We walked casually toward the car. I then directed Mike to hold back a bit and keep a look out for cops. The blackened passenger window slid down, and I leaned forward and took a look inside. The man behind the wheel looked to be in his late thirties, with sparse, dark-gray hair combed back over a bald spot. I could tell he wanted to keep things on the down low, his eyes hidden behind a pair of gold-rimmed sunglasses. It was hard to make out his face due to the shadows cast by the streetlights, but a quick glance at his suit and Rolex told me all I really needed to know: he had money.

“How much?” he asked, his voice slow and serious.

I played my usual game and mimicked the same words back to him, acting as if I didn’t know what he was talking about. With undercover cops on the streets, you had to be careful. My instincts hadn’t failed me yet.

“Depends on what you want,” I said. He didn’t have the stench of a cop on him. I motioned for Mike to come over to the car. He walked up and leaned down next to me. “Can you handle partying with the both of us?” I asked.

The man lowered his sunglasses and looked Mike over. “Hi, handsome,” Mike said.

“How much?” the man asked.

I took a risk. “Three hundred.” I felt Mike nudge my leg. I knew it was high, but I figured the guy could afford it.

The man gave me a nod and then hit a switch that unlocked the car doors.

I opened the passenger door and climbed into the front seat. Mike sat in the back. When I heard the click of his seat belt, I couldn’t help but roll my eyes.

“Where to?” the man asked. He seemed to know the drill.

“There’s a motel not far from here. Take a left down the street,” I answered.

The man hit a button, and the passenger window slid closed. He then pulled away from the curb and drove slowly down the street.

“So, you gotta name?” I asked.

“Why?”

“Helps add to the fun, if you know what I mean.”

After a long pause, the man answered, “Noble ... Noble Knight.”

You hear a lot of names in this business, most of them fake. So what the hell—this was a good one. Noble Knight it was.

We turned left. “Go down two more streets and make a right. Park in the lot at the Motel High Life,” I instructed.

Noble followed my directions. After pulling into the parking lot, he asked, “Will my car be okay?”

“It’ll be fine,” I said. “We ain’t gonna be here long.”

Noble removed his glasses and slid them into his visor. He looked at me for a moment. I figured he was thinking about the money and wondering if I was going to try to cheat him out of it, but he didn’t say a word.

Mike’s voice came softly from the backseat. “Don’t worry ... it’ll be worth every penny.”

Noble turned his head back toward Mike and looked him over again. A smile formed across his thin lips. I could tell Mike was going to be the center of attention this evening. That meant it was going to be up to me to play housemother and keep things cool.

“Go ahead and get the room. We’ll wait here,” I instructed. “Tell the guy you want short time. He’ll charge you about twenty dollars.”

Noble looked at me, got out of the car, and walked over to the registry window.

Mike put his hand on my shoulder. “What do you think?”

“One time around the world and we’re out. Keep following. Got it?”

“Got it.”

A few moments later, Noble returned to the car. Both Mike and I opened our doors and got out.

“Room 162,” Noble said, and then he pointed his keys at the car. A quick chirp of the horn sounded, and the doors locked.

The room was nothing fancy, your typical motel room, fairly sterile, with beige carpet and blue-and-white striped wallpaper. There were two twin beds and a

round table with a couple of chairs around it. There were also two mirrors—one above the bed, the other on the wall—two more than I would need.

Watching wasn't my thing. It was hard enough doing the things I did. I didn't need to see myself doing them.

As Mike and I kicked off our shoes, Noble's demeanor suddenly changed. He began fidgeting and looked confused and nervous. I had a hard time thinking this was his first time based on how easily the initial transaction went down. But small beads of sweat now covered his brow, and his eyes began darting back and forth between me and Mike.

"You okay?" I asked.

Noble's eyes grew wide. He quickly turned and walked over to the window. As he peered through the blackout curtains, Mike gave me a strange look. I had no idea what was wrong with the guy, I just shrugged my shoulders. Mike walked over to Noble and ran his hand down the back of his arm.

"Hey, it's all cool, man. We're good guys. How about you take your coat off and get comfortable?" Mike said.

Noble took a deep breath, and his demeanor resumed the same sense of calmness he had when he picked us up. As he slid off his shoes, I couldn't help but think that this was one weird dude.

"We need to take care of business first," I said.

Noble reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a fat wallet. He took out three fresh hundred-dollar bills and tucked them into Mike's hand. *Damn*, I thought to myself. *I should have asked for more.* Thoughts of jacking the guy crossed my mind, but it really wasn't my style. I found it best to be cool with the tricks—good karma and that sort of shit.

Noble slid his suit jacket off and draped it over one of the chairs. Then, to my surprise, he walked over and stood in front of me. I thought he was going to ask me a question or something, but he didn't say a word. He stood there, waiting and staring. So I took that as my cue. I knelt down in front of him like an innocent altar boy revealing my sins when I reached up and unfastened his belt buckle. After undoing his pants, they dropped with ease to the floor. Mike approached the guy from behind and then reached around and caressed his crotch over his silky black boxers. I tucked my thumbs under the elastic

waistband of his undershorts and slowly slid them down to his ankles. As I took hold of his semierect penis, I looked up for a moment, expecting to see the usual expression of anticipation—eyes closed, head titled back ever so slightly, mouth agape. Instead, I found Noble staring coldly straight down at me, his head hung low, lips pursed together, nostrils flared.

His glassy green eyes locked with mine. This was a first for me. Tricks never looked me in the eye. In that brief moment, I saw an image of myself like never before. It was like looking into a cracked mirror, with a disfigured reflection looking back at me. I looked away. As his penis hardened, I felt my stomach turn. I felt as if I had traveled back in time to my very first time. But this was far from my first. If I had to put a number on it, I'd say I had done this hundreds of times before. Yet there I was, doing my best not to spew pizza and beer all over this guy.

I felt Mike's gentle hands slide over mine. I looked up at him. His tender blue eyes showed an uncanny understanding. I released my grip and let Mike's hands take over. Attempting to regain my composure, I dared not look back up at Noble. But knowing what I know now, maybe I should have. Instead, I walked over to the other side of the room and waited for Mike to finish him off.

2

Home was a little bungalow in West Los Angeles, not too far from the boulevard we frequently worked. It wasn't much, but we liked it. Mike planted a garden along the side of the house within days of moving in. He said homegrown vegetables always tasted better than the ones at the grocery store. All I could do was hope they tasted better than his cooking.

Mike tended to the garden every day, caring for it like a loving mother cares for her baby. I asked him once, "What is it with that damn garden?" He said it reminded him of home, of his mom. He never told me too much about her, only that she was killed in a car accident when he was twelve. He looked just like the picture of her that he carried in his wallet. He said his mom grew fresh vegetables in a garden outside the back of their house. I gathered she was a really good cook, only because every dish Mike made started with "Mom." Mom's fried chicken. Mom's pot roast. Mom's spaghetti, which, by the way, was the absolute worst. With my mother being Italian, I knew what spaghetti was supposed to taste like, and Mike's so-called spaghetti was nowhere near it. It was more like rotten ketchup with chunks of burned meat.

It was the day after our rendezvous with Noble that I found out Mike was a morning person. Although we didn't get back to my place until some time after 2:00 a.m., by the time I had gotten my lazy ass out of bed, Mike had already showered, read the paper, made coffee, and fixed breakfast—at least that's what he called it. Here I was still in my boxers, rubbing sleep out of my eyes. I couldn't remember the last time I had eaten a meal before lunchtime.

For me, breakfast was a couple of cups of black coffee.

Mike removed the foil from the plate of food he had made for me.

"Do you want me to warm it up in the microwave?" he asked.

"I don't have a microwave."

"Oh ... yeah, right," he answered as he looked around the kitchen.

Still tired as hell, I shuffled over to the coffeepot and poured some coffee into my Snoopy mug. I pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. Mike slid a plate of food in front of me.

“Mom’s scrambled eggs,” he announced.

I looked down to find half-burned, half-watery eggs with a side of what I think was toast. “I didn’t even know I had eggs,” I answered.

“You didn’t. I borrowed a couple from your neighbor next door. She’s really nice!”

“Who? Lupe? She don’t even speak English. How’d you even talk to her?” I took a sip of my coffee then stabbed my fork into the middle of one of the eggs, causing the yolk to run out.

“I know a little bit of Spanish.”

“Huh. Where’d you learn that?” I scooped a forkful of the egg into my mouth.

“Took a couple of semesters in high school.”

Although it had seemed like forever since I had last eaten eggs, I still knew they weren’t supposed to crunch when you chewed them.

“How are they? Did I put too much salt? Sometimes I use too much salt when I cook.”

I took a bite of the toast covered in what I hoped was jelly in an attempt to kill the salty flavor of the crunchy eggs.

“Sorry if the toast is a little overdone. I put the setting on medium, but the toaster never popped it out. It started smoking.”

I took a swig of coffee and swallowed hard. “Yeah, it does that. You can’t leave it sit. You have to watch it and pop the lever up when you see it’s done.”

I poked around at the rest of the eggs on my plate and then took another swig of coffee. After a few minutes of silence, Mike started talking again. “Can I ask you a question?” Mike asked.

“Maybe.”

Mike smiled. I looked at him, waiting for the question to come.

“Well ... I was wondering. What happened to you last night?”

“What do you mean?” I shoved another forkful of eggs into my mouth as a way to distract myself from his question.

“You know, with that guy Noble.”

At that moment, the image of Noble’s eyes staring down at me flashed through my mind.

“I don’t know ... I just ...” I started to feel sick to my stomach. I wiped my mouth with my napkin, spitting out some of the eggs as it crossed past my lips. “I fell out of the zone, I guess. Too many beers.”

Mike sat there quietly while I poked around my plate some more. Thick silence fell over the room. Finally, Mike asked, “How long has it been?”

I gave Mike a quick glance and then took another sip of coffee. I knew exactly what he was asking. He wanted to know how long I had been working the streets.

“Six years,” I mumbled.

Mike gave me a somber smile.

I took another sip of coffee. “How ’bout you?” I asked, looking up from my mug.

Mike took a deep breath. “About two years ... except ... it’s a lot different in North Dakota.” I nodded.

It had been a long time since I’d thought about the years before my life became tarnished by the black nights of the Hollywood streets. Everyone had a story. Mine wasn’t much different: young boy chasing after a dream.

I had left Moses Lake when I was eighteen, packed up some clothes and my guitar, and hit the road in search of something better. I bummed around Canada for a while. I don’t remember much of it, though, I was stoned much of the time. I somehow ended up in Seattle after that and started getting into the music scene, playing my guitar on the sidewalks. Next was San Francisco. Some fine memories from San Francisco; I made a lot of good friends. I imagine that’s where I would have stayed had it not been for what everyone referred to as “the dark death”—AIDS. As more and more of my friends died, it got harder and harder to stay.

When I arrived in Los Angeles, I managed to stumble my way into Hell’s Nest, the junkies’ part of town. I was strung out in a bad way on Mexican mud, junk, heroin, and God only knows what else. I lived and breathed the streets 24-7. Had it not been for the street angels, a group of skid-row nuns, I doubt I

would have made it to the end of the year. They put me into the hospital for six months, cleaned me up with methadone, and helped me get through my thing.

I thought I'd get noticed in Los Angeles, with it being full of music producers, talent scouts, and all. It makes me chuckle when I think about it now. Like I was going to get discovered playing my guitar in a train station. It sounds like old Hollywood where some director would walk up to some guy in a diner and say, "Don't move, son. I'm going to make you a star!" I guess it could happen. At least I thought it could back then; it never did. Funny where the roads of life take you.

I don't know why I never shared my story with Mike. I guess it was probably because he never asked. He wasn't one to pry. He'd open the door by asking an easier question and leave it to you on how far you'd walk through. For me, I'd take a couple of steps forward and then turn back. Mike seemed to understand, though. He was the same way when it came to certain topics—his mom, mainly. I think the pain of it all hurt too much. I know how he felt now. Had we been together longer than those brief three months, I like to think we would have shared more of our stories with each other. Hell, I don't even know how Mike ended up on the streets in the first place. I never will, either.

It didn't take long for our friendship to grow intimate. Two weeks to be exact. We were working the streets in the rain one night. Things were slow. Only one car stopped, but it was to ask for directions. With the rain continuing to fall hard and no bites, we decided to pack it up early. Back at the house, both soaked straight to the bone, we began stripping off our wet clothes in the middle of the living room. My jeans were a bitch to get off. I pulled and tugged, trying to shimmy them down my legs, but they barely moved. Mike thought it was funny, laughing and shit. Having worn a pair of shorts that evening, he had it easy.

After a few more failed attempts, Mike told me to lie down on the floor and put my feet in the air. He then grabbed hold of the end of each of my pant legs and pulled as hard as he could while I pushed.

"This wouldn't be so hard if it weren't for your big ass," he teased.

"Fuck you, man!" I exclaimed, smiling and struggling at the same time.

Through our laughter, we finally managed to get my jeans off. Mike offered his hand to help me up from the floor. I took hold of it as he attempted to pull

me up. But as my body started to rise, Mike lost his footing, and we both wound up ass-first on the hardwood floor. I laughed so hard I thought I was going to piss myself. Mike laughed, then groaned, then laughed, and then groaned some more.

“You okay, man?” I laughed.

“Ah, shit ...” he moaned. “Yeah, I ain’t got as much padding as you do. Hit my tailbone.”

With both of us lying side by side, staring up at the ceiling, our laughter calmed to amused chuckles.

I had grown very fond of Mike. He was different from anyone I had ever met. I’m sure that had a lot to do with where he was from. He had a very calming effect on me. Even when my temper flared, he had a way of bringing me back down to where I could think clearly. Mike was a nice guy all around, always looking to do something for me. At first, I thought it was his way of thanking me for taking him in. But that wasn’t it. That was Mike’s way. He genuinely cared about people. And I trusted him.

“Paul?”

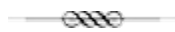
“What, man?”

Mike paused. “Would it be okay if I kissed you?”

It wasn’t the question I was expecting, not that I knew what to expect. But I already knew my answer. “Only one way to find out.”

Mike didn’t say a word. He rose his torso up and turned toward me. Hovering over me for a moment, he looked deep into my eyes. Instead of looking away, I let him see my desire, my loneliness, and my regrets. As his head moved closer to mine, his warm breath against my face, his understanding eyes closed. Our lips touched, slowly caressing, and then melted together.

It’s a night I’ll never forget. It’s the night I opened up my bitter heart and let it love someone.



The song “Midnight Rider” by the Allman Brothers woke me up the morning Mike and I first slept together. I reached over and pressed the snooze. The clock read 12:00 p.m. Morning was never my thing, and Mike had picked up quickly

on that. He never tried to change me. He'd spend the morning trying to breathe some life into his newly seeded garden.

I met the day with my usual cup of coffee, but by 1:00, the caffeine was making me jittery. I needed something to eat. Mike greeted me with a gentle kiss and then suggested we go down to the Slipper. With all Mike's cooking, we hadn't been down there in over a week. I was all too happy to have a break from the evil chef's concoctions.

We arrived at the Slipper at around 1:30. The usual crowd was there—Sal, Jim, and Robert. Scott was there too. He was posting something up on one of the walls, so I went over to have a look. Mike went up to the bar and ordered our usual.

"Hey, man! How's it going?" I asked, giving Scott a pat on the back. He handed me a flyer.

MISSING!

Brad Gonzalez

Hispanic Male, Blond-Dyed Hair, Brown Eyes

Age: 22 Height:

5' 10" Weight:

170 lbs.

Last Seen: Monday, 08/16/10, on Dover and Fletcher

A pang of guilt hit me. I had been so busy with Mike, I had forgotten all about Brad.

"It's been over two weeks, and I haven't heard a word from him," said Scott, securing another layer of tape over each corner of the flyer he had placed on the wall.

"Cops know anything?" I asked.

"Please!" Scott replied, resting his hand on his hip. "Like they're really going to help. They're about as useful as tits on a bull."

It was true. The police of Hollywood saw us as another subculture of filth, drugs, and disease. The gay cops were the worst, waving their badges around like they were American Express gold cards that could buy whatever sexual favor

they wanted from us in exchange for not being arrested. Fuckin' pieces of shit. Protect and serve, my ass.

I did my best to console Scott. "Hey, you know Brad. He's probably playing cabana boy to some rich geezer. He'll show up once the well runs dry."

Scott threw the stack of flyers in his hand across the room. "Everyone's been telling me that since day one! I'm tired of hearing it! Something is wrong! I know it! You're right ... I know Brad! And I know he wouldn't leave like that!"

Scott's eyes filled with tears. I didn't know what to say.

"Way to go, Paul," Sal murmured as he came walking up between Scott and me.

I had never seen Scott so unnerved. Sal placed his arm around Scott's shoulders and walked him into the men's room.

"Paul," Mike whispered.

I looked across the room to see Mike motioning for me to come over to the table. I walked over to where he was sitting. Robert and Jim moved in behind me.

"Sal said to show this to you," Mike said, handing me the *Hollywood Weekly*.

"Scott hasn't seen it yet," Robert added. "We're not sure how to tell him."

I sat down at the table and began reading the article on the page in front of me:

The Falcon's Nest

It's 12:00 a.m. The Greyhound bus turns into the downtown bus depot. Young men and women depart with wide-eyed faces. "Wow, Los Angeles!" they say to themselves. Their fresh faces are from small towns with names many of us have never heard of—Plainville, Montana; Pickford Falls, North Dakota; and Dam Hole, Texas. But they all seem to share a common dream—to leave their hometowns in search of that magazine, MTV, fun-filled Los Angeles image.

What they find, most of the time, is quite different. To them, Hollywood Boulevard is a magical place, where the lights shine bright and everyone is a star. They think that this magical light will transform them. But as those who live here know, Hollywood

Boulevard is just another street.

The story is all too common. “Where do I go? What do I do?” Their faces glow with that naive look, a look that the local sharks hunt for and flock to.

“Hey,” they say, “I can help you. Try this. . It will make you feel good.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. They all do it.”

They hear, and they blindly follow. The way home gets lost, the light gets darker, and the tunnel gets narrower. They wind up as street people hustling at night for drugs, food, money, or one more night at a motel.

This is called the Long Day’s Night, but some chilling recent events have occurred, and I hope these young people looking for their dreams don’t wind up dead.

I’m talking about the rash of young men being found dead on the freeways’ hillsides here in Los Angeles County. To date, four young men have been found, ranging in age from twenty to thirty, partially dressed, branded with the symbol of two falcons and, most horrifically, with parts of their body missing—intimate parts.

The police have no leads. Why does that not surprise me? The protection of this group has never been a priority. Yeah, the police chief (and for anyone who has not been following local politics, our next would-be mayor), Barney Nugood (or is it No-Good?), will tell the public on TV that his department is tracking down all leads. But don’t fool yourself—they couldn’t care less. The four young men are still lying in the county morgue with no identity other than toe tags that read, “John Doe.”

Suspects: Zero. Leads: Zero. Men dead: Four.

You do the math.

As I looked up from the paper. Sal and Scott came out from the men’s room. Scott walked toward us while Sal picked the flyers up from the floor. I tucked the newspaper under my leg. Scott placed his hand on my shoulder. It was obvious that Scott had been crying, his eyes wet and red.

“Look, I’m sorry for being such a bitch. I’m worried sick. Brad is my life. I don’t know what to do. It’s the not knowing that’s killing me. I just want to know where he is. No matter what, I want to know. Even if he’s left me for someone else, I wish he’d call and tell me.”

Everyone looked at one another, not knowing what to do or say, yet obviously wondering the same thing: was Brad one of those four men lying in the morgue?

Sal walked up and shuffled the flyers together on the edge of the table. It was obvious that Scott had made them up himself. I thought about what Scott said, how he wanted to know. Without giving it too much thought, I reached down, took the newspaper from under my leg, and placed it on the table in front of me. Everyone’s eyes grew wide. I cleared my throat. “Scott,” I said, “there’s something you need to read.”