

Chapter 1

Asher was in the garage inspecting a beast of a lawnmower when the police arrived. The grass needed mowing, and he was determined to get it done himself. After all, wasn't that the whole point of living alone in this quiet neighborhood, in this small house? The aging ranch with its shaggy lawn and overgrown shrubs, tucked away in the Los Angeles suburbs, was a clear indication of his meteoric fall. Torrence was the closest he allowed himself to get to Hollywood. Any closer and he was sure he'd get into trouble. Asher didn't question the hows and whys of where he was now. He was alive, and he was here. That was all he needed to start over.

The mower was heavier than he had expected. It smelled of grease and gasoline. The arbitrary upbringing his parents had begrudgingly provided hadn't included a lot of practical instruction, like cooking, laundry or starting a lawnmower. He was poking around in hopes of finding a manual when a shadow crossed the doorway. Asher blinked against the glare reflecting off the cement to see two figures in black suits approaching.

"Asher Blaine?" A balding man and a blonde woman presented badges. "I'm Detective Bledsoe," the man said. He indicated the woman, "and this is Detective Smythe."

Asher's heart sank and with it, his place in the present. How many times had he been arrested for being over his head in his vices? A stampede of memories—handcuffs, rough hands and angry voices engulfed him. A car honked out on the street, and his persnickety neighbor's scolding reply brought Asher hurtling back to his new reality. He was clean and innocent of any wrongdoing. He might not have a clue as to what he should be doing with the shiny new life he'd struggled to create, but everything in it had to be done right.

With a sincere smile, he offered his hand. "Pleased to meet you."

The woman looked surprised. She had that look on her face that sized him up and found him lacking. He'd seen a version of it on the faces of teachers, nurses and pretty girls who wanted stability in a husband. One more obstacle for him to work through.

"What can I do for you, detectives?"

"Your fingerprints showed up in a murder we are investigating," Bledsoe said.

Asher backed up a step. "Murder? My God! Who's dead?"

"Where were you between the hours of midnight and two am on Tuesday?" Smythe asked, a look halfway between boredom and disgust on her face.

"Asleep."

"You answered that too fast," she said.

"I'm a good boy now, in bed by eleven."

"Alone?" Bledsoe asked as he pulled out a notebook.

"Yes."

The detective made a note that seemed a lot longer than a simple affirmative. Sweat slid down Asher's back despite the cool air in the garage.

Smythe glared at him. "Can anyone confirm your whereabouts?"

Asher ran his hands through his hair leaving a smudge of grease on his temple. "You want proof I was asleep?"

The detective frowned at him. "Yeah, I do."

Despite the frown, Bledsoe had a much gentler look to his round face. His full lips and brown eyes were bracketed by assorted smile lines. Stocky, but not pudgy, his clothes fit him comfortably.

Unaccountably, Asher found himself wanting his approval. "No, I don't have any proof that I was home, alone in my bed, asleep."

The synthetic jingle of an ice cream truck trickled in around his rising hysteria making it that much more surreal.

Asher's eyes strayed beyond the detective's shoulder to see the imminent circus brewing out front. There were patrol officers stationed across the front yard. He could see at least two police cars, with lights flashing, parked in the street, and a growing crowd of neighbors. All it needed was a covey of reporters and a ringmaster.

"OK. Look, this is a mistake. But I'll do whatever, you know, to sort this out. What do you need? Urine sample? Blood? I didn't do anything."

Smythe pulled out her handcuffs. "We've got evidence that says otherwise."

Asher's eyes locked on the cuffs. This *had* to be a nightmare. "I, I really didn't do this." He took a breath to steady his voice. "But I'll go with you. Do we really need . . ." He nodded toward the cuffs.

Smythe looked angry enough to spit. She seized his wrist in a bruising grip. "You're a murder suspect. What do you think?"

Chapter 2

The interrogation room was small and chilly. Most of one wall was taken up with a large mirror. A scarred table with four metal chairs stood in the center of the room. Asher, in rumpled shorts and sweaty tee shirt, sat staring at his folded hands. So far, things had been quite civil. When you were polite and cooperative, the police tended to be polite right back. That was a revelation for him. His previous arrests were inebriated blurs, but he was quite certain that neither *polite* nor *cooperative* had been involved.

He forced himself to keep a calm façade. That was one skill that he had retained from years of acting. His breathing was fast and shaky. That was a little harder to control. Clenching his hands tighter, he dragged air deep into his lungs. He needed to stay calm. Hysteria would only make it worse.

How could this have happened? They arrested him for murder. Obviously, a terrible mistake had been made. He would tell them the truth, cooperate in every way, and it would be all right. He hoped. But an insistent sliver of fear asked what might have happened in those stretches he couldn't remember. There was a fertile ground of possible catastrophes lurking in his unremembered hours. He had vague flashes of speeding cars, late night swims and carousing through dark alleys. People came and went in his life, access controlled by his well-meaning keepers. Many had disappeared. Had he lost them as friends or was the absence more permanent? Were there actual deaths to be tallied to the long list of collateral damage he kept in his heart? Could his apparent disregard for the lives he'd so disastrously impacted lead some to believe that he was cold-blooded enough to kill?

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On the other side of the two-way mirror, the detectives stood looking in at Asher. Bledsoe could feel his partner bristling. Her thin lips were pressed into a flat line.

"Drug addicts," she said.

Bledsoe nodded patiently. He'd worked with Smythe for six years. She was a good cop, but she had her baggage like everyone else. Normally she was level-headed and methodical. They made a good team, but he could see that this case was going to push her buttons.

"No sign of gunshot residue," he said.

"He could have washed it off."

"Forensics said the house was clean."

"But I doubt he is," she snapped back at him. Her hazel eyes sharp with anger. "Have you seen his rap sheet?"

Bledsoe nodded but kept his eyes on Asher. "Preliminary tox screen should be back soon." He gave her an apologetic shrug. "He is being very cooperative."

"Depending on what he was on, he might not remember. He could believe he's innocent."

Her voice held a very old, bitter anger. Bledsoe wondered if she'd ever get past the loss. Drugs had taken her sister, too young, too sudden. It was an old pain that smoldered underground most of the time. Cases like this made it flare up into a wildfire, destructive and furious. He had to keep her in the here and now.

"If that's true, the full tox screen will show it when we get that back. One step at a time, Smythe. The evidence will lead us to the killer."

One of the younger lab techs delivered the results of the urine test to Smythe. She flipped the folder open to read it as Bledsoe's phone rang.

"Damn. He is clean." She scanned the list of substances tested for detectable levels. "Maybe it's a designer drug. That might not show up."

Bledsoe leaned over her shoulder to read while listening to the terse report from a forensic tech at the house. "Huh. OK, thanks," he said, ending the call. "They checked the neighbors' trash cans. No bloody clothes or shoes. Doesn't make sense. Why leave the murder weapon with your fingerprints but get rid of any other evidence?"

Smythe pulled her suit jacket tight against her as if chilled. "Drug addicts live in their own crazy little worlds. None of it will make sense to us."

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Asher looked up hopefully when Detective Smythe entered the room holding a file. Her face was drawn in an expression of distaste. She was all sharp angles, thin and sinewy. The cut of her pantsuit emphasized her thinness and the dark color made her skin seem very pale. He thought she had a sparse beauty, a slim-lipped mouth, a slender nose and just a pencil line of brows. Curly blonde hair and big hazel eyes eased the severity of her looks. She took a rigid stance in front of the table, pulled a photo from the file and placed it before him.

"Recognize this?"

"It's a gun," he said politely, determined to be extremely cooperative.

"Is it yours?"

Asher shook his head. "I don't own any guns."

She stabbed the photo with her finger. "It has your fingerprints on it." She paced a step or two, as if she had to move or explode.

"Oh." He could feel her anger and wondered if she'd known the victim. He rubbed his face and thought hard, shaking out the ragged cloth of his memories. He'd handled a lot of weapons over the years, guns, swords, knives, even a raygun or two. There was something familiar about this one. "Oh, OK. Is it a Beretta?"

"Yes." She took off her jacket and put it on the back of a chair. The white silk blouse she was wearing was short sleeved with a scoop neck. He found it surprisingly feminine. Restlessly, the detective paced to the side of the room. She crossed her arms and leaned against the wall. She was slender but solid. Her arms were ropey with muscle and the tendons in her throat stood out when she spoke.

"OK. Yeah, I used a Beretta in a spy movie I did. Tommy, Johnny something? No, it was a city name...Antwerp? Well, whatever. I remember because it was shiny like that." He pushed the photo back toward her.

"So, it is yours?"

"No. It was a prop." Her harsh regard made him elaborate. "Prop guns would belong to the armorer."

She stared at him in silence for a long minute. "When did you make this movie?"

"I don't know, six, maybe eight years ago? You want me to look it up?" He knew he was being too flippant, but his anger was rising. He was innocent of whatever they wanted to lay at his door.

She gave an exasperated huff and glanced over her shoulder at the mirror. "And when is the last time you saw this gun?"

"Back then," he said, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice. Couldn't she connect the dots on her own? But, he should cover all the bases. "I gave it back to him at the end of every day. People get pissed if you lose important props like guns."

"And what is his name?"

He bowed his head so she wouldn't see him gritting his teeth. He could barely remember that year, and she wanted to know the name of the armorer? "I'd have to look that up."

"Um hm." She took a seat opposite him, shuffled papers and laid a photo of a woman in front of him. "Do you know this woman?"

"Sure, that's Pam Mitchells."

"And what was your relationship with her?"

Asher cringed at her tone. It was as if she was insinuating that any relationship he had was wrong. He pushed back on his paranoia. He was probably just imagining it. Leaning forward he scooped up the photo. It was easily ten years out of date. "She was my business manager, but I haven't seen her since Denny fired her."

"Who's Denny?"

"My agent, well, ex-agent, Denny Croft."

"And why did he fire her?"

Asher put the photo back on the table. More bad memories. It wasn't really Denny's place to fire her, but he'd done it because Asher couldn't face her.

"Um...hand in the cookie jar, I guess."

"What does that mean?" Smythe snapped. She had a frown on her face that made him think that a head-slap was in his near future. The creases and folds of her skin said she wore that look too often.

"She was..." Asher found a dozen euphemisms popping into his head to soften the blow. Saying things out loud gave them unreasonable power. It was one more thing that he needed to face, accept and move past, "...stealing from me."

"And when was this?"

"Years ago."

"And when is the last time you saw Ms. Mitchells?"

Asher leaned back with a sudden chill, suspicions blossoming. He hadn't filed any charges against Pam. That was all ancient history. He tried to reason out why the police would come to him about her and came up with only one answer.

"Has something happened to Pam?"

"Pamela Mitchells was killed with that gun."

"No, she can't be dead." The words fell out before he had a chance to think. "No, not Pam, are you sure?" He hadn't forgiven her, yet.

The detective didn't reply. She snatched the photo off the table and stuffed it into the folder. Her chair scraped across the floor so loudly Asher winced. The door snicked shut behind her, swinging gently on its automatic closer.

Asher stared at the empty table top in shock. Pam was dead, and they thought he'd killed her. He had no reason to want her dead. She'd been a good friend once, or so he had thought. Even when he'd found out that she was stealing, he hadn't wanted to hurt her. He just wanted her out of his life. But that was so long ago that the pain was more an assumption than a presence. A small betrayal among so many others, it was easy to set aside.

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Smythe rejoined Bledsoe in the hallway. He was looking at a card of fingerprints. "He may be telling the truth."

Smythe stifled a groan. "What have you got?"

"It was just a fluke," he said apologetically. "He was protective of his hand, so it caught my eye." He showed her the card. "Right thumb. He has a recent scar across the pad."

"So?"

"There is no scar on the thumbprint on the gun."

She gritted her teeth. "And he denies seeing the gun in six years." She glared through the mirror at Asher. "It was a nice tidy lead when we started."

"We've got a little news on the weapon. The current owner died four years ago. He left everything to his wife, and she's moved to Bermuda. We've got calls in."

"Where's this gun been that there are no other fingerprints in six years?" Smythe closed her eyes and groaned with frustration. "If this bastard is guilty, we cannot let him walk."

"We won't." Bledsoe patted her shoulder. "We'll go back to the house. We'll interview neighbors. If he's guilty, we'll find the evidence."