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Twisted

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one

May brought azure skies and California optimism to Hollywood. Petra Connor worked nights and slept through the blue. She had her own reason to be cheerful: solving two whodunit murders.

The first was a dead body at a wedding. The Ito-Park wedding, main ballroom of the Roosevelt Hotel, Japanese-American bride, Korean-American groom, a couple of law students who'd met at the U. Her father, a Glendale-born surgeon; his, an immigrant appliance dealer, barely able to speak English. Petra wondered about culture clash.

The body was one of the bride's cousins, a thirty-two-year-old CPA named Baldwin Yoshimura, found midway through the reception, in an unlocked stall of the hotel men's room, his neck twisted so hard, he looked like something out of *The Exorcist*. It took strong hands to do that, the coroner pronounced, but that was where the medical wisdom terminated.

Petra, working with no partner once again, talked to

every friend and relative and finally unearthed the fact that Baldwin Yoshimura had been a serious lothario who'd made no distinction between married and unmarried conquests. As she continued to probe, she encountered nervous glances on the bride's side. Finally, a third cousin named Wendy Sakura blurted out the truth: Baldwin had been fooling with his brother Darwin's wife. The slut.

Darwin, a relative black sheep for this highly educated clan, was a martial arts instructor who worked at a studio in Woodland Hills. Petra forced herself to wake up during daylight, dropped in at the dojo, watched him put an advanced judo class through its paces. Stocky little guy, shaved head, pleasant demeanor. When the class was over, he approached Petra, arms extended for cuffing, saying, 'I did it. Arrest me.'

Back at the station, he refused a lawyer, couldn't wait to spill: Suspicious for some time, he'd followed his wife and his brother as they left the wedding and entered an unused banquet room. After passing behind a partition, said wife gave said sib enthusiastic head. Darwin allowed her to finish, waited until Baldwin went to the john, confronted his brother, did the deed.

'What about your wife?' said Petra.

'What about her?'

'You didn't hurt her.'

'She's a woman,' said Darwin Yoshimura. 'She's weak. Baldwin should've known better.'

* * *

The second whodunit started off as bloodstains in Los Feliz and ended up with a d.b. out in Angeles Crest National Forest. This victim was a grocer named Bedros Kashigian. The blood was found in the parking lot behind his market on Edgemont. Kashigian and his five-year-old Cadillac were missing.

Two days later, forest rangers found the Caddy pulled to the side of the road in the forest, Kashigian's body slumped behind the wheel. Dried blood had streamed out of his left ear, run onto his face and shirt, but no obvious wounds. Maggot analysis said he'd been dead the entire two days, or close to it. Meaning, instead of driving home from work, he'd made his way thirty miles east. Or had been taken there.

As far as Petra could tell, the grocer was a solid citizen, married, three kids, nice house, no outstanding debts. But a solid week of investigating Kashigian's activities gave rise to the fact that he'd been involved in a brawl two days before his disappearance.

Barroom melee at a place on Alvarado. Latino clientele, but Kashigian had a thing for one of the Salvadoran waitresses and went there frequently to nurse beer-and-shots before retiring to her room above the saloon. The fracas got going when two drunks started pounding each other. Kashigian got caught in the middle and ended up being punched in the head. Only once, according to the bartender. An errant bare fist and Kashigian had left the bar on his feet.

Kashigian's widow, dealing with her loss as well as the

new insight that Bedros had been cheating on her, said hubby had complained of a headache, attributing it to banging his head against a bread rack. Couple of aspirins, he'd seemed fine.

Petra phoned the coroner, an unconscionably cheerful guy named Rosenberg, and asked if a single, bare-knuckle blow to the head could be fatal two days after the fact. Rosenberg said he doubted it.

A scan of Bedros Kashigian's insurance records showed hefty whole life and first-to-die policies as well as medical claims paid five years ago, when the grocer had been involved in a nine-car pileup on the 5 North that had shattered his skull and caused intracranial bleeding. Brought into the E.R. unconscious, Kashigian had been wheeled into surgery where a half-dollar-sized piece of skull had been sawed off so his brain could be cleaned up. That section, labeled a 'roundel' by Rosenberg, had been reattached using sutures and screws.

After hearing about the accident, Rosenberg had changed his mind.

'The roundel was anchored by scar tissue,' he told Petra. 'And the darn thing grew back thinner than the rest of the skull. Unfortunately for your guy, that's exactly where he took the punch. The rest of his head could have withstood the impact but the thin spot couldn't. It shattered, drove bone slivers into his brain, caused a slow bleed, and finally *boom*.'

'Boom,' said Petra. 'There you go again, blinding me with jargon.'

The coroner laughed. Petra laughed. Neither of them wanting to think about Bedros Kashigian's monumental bad luck.

'A single punch,' she said.

'Boom,' said Rosenberg.

'Tell me this, Doctor R., could he have driven to the forest out of confusion?'

'Let me think about that. With shards of bone slicing into his gray matter, a slow bleed, yeah, he could've been hazy, disoriented.'

Which didn't explain why Angeles Crest, specifically.

She asked Captain Schoelkopf if she should pursue homicide charges against the guy who'd landed the punch.

'Who is he?'

'Don't know yet.'

'A bar fight.' Schoelkopf flashed her the *are-you-retarded*? look. 'Write it up as an accidental death.'

Lacking the will – or the desire – to argue, she complied, then went to inform the widow. Who told her Angeles Crest was where she and Bedros used to go to make out when they were teenagers.

'At least he left me some good insurance,' said the woman. 'The main thing is my kids stay in private school.'

Within days after closing both files, the loneliness set in. Petra had made the mistake of getting intimate with a partner, and now she was working and living solo.

The object of her affections was a strange, taciturn detective named Eric Stahl with a military background

as an Army special services officer and a history that had unfurled slowly. The first time Petra had seen his black suit, pale skin, and flat, dark eyes she'd thought *undertaker*. She'd disliked him instinctively and the feeling appeared mutual. Somehow things had changed.

They'd started working together on the Cold Heart homicides, coordinating with Milo Sturgis in West L.A. to put away a scumbag psychopath who got off on dispatching creative types. Closing that one hadn't come easy; Eric had nearly died of stab wounds. Sitting, waiting, in the E.R. waiting room, Petra had met his parents, learned why he didn't talk or emote or act remotely human.

He'd once had a family – wife and two kids – but had lost everything. *Heather, Danny, and Dawn*. Taken from him cruelly. He'd resigned his military commission, spent a year doped up on antidepressants, then applied to the LAPD, where connections got him a Detective I appointment, Hollywood Division, where Schoelkopf had foisted him on Petra.

Whatever Schoelkopf knew he'd kept to himself. Uninformed, Petra tried to get along, but faced with a partner with all the warmth of ceramic tile, she soon gave up. The two of them ended up splitting chores, minimizing the time they spent together. Long, cold, silent stakeouts.

Then came a night full of terror. Even now, Petra wondered if Eric had been trying to commit Suicide by Perp. She'd never brought it up. Had no reason to.

She had not been the only woman in his life. During the Cold Heart investigation, he'd met an exotic dancer, a

bubble-headed blonde with a perfect body named Kyra Montego aka Kathy Magary. Kyra was there in the waiting room, too, stuffed into too-small duds, sniffling into her hankie, examining her nails, unable to read the dumbest magazine out of anxiety or what Petra suspected was attention span disorder. Petra outlasted the bimbo, and when Eric woke up, it was *her* hand holding his, *her* eyes locking with his bruised, brown irises.

During the months of recuperation, Kyra kept dropping in at Eric's rented bungalow in Studio City, bearing takeout soup and plastic utensils. Offering plastic boobs and batting eyelashes and Lord knew what else.

Petra dealt with that by *cooking* for Eric. Growing up with five brothers and a widowed father in Arizona, she'd learned to be pretty handy around the kitchen. During the brief time her marriage lasted, she'd played at *gourmet*. Now a nighthawk divorcée, she rarely bothered to switch on the oven. But healing Eric with home-cooked goodies had seemed terribly urgent.

In the end, the bimbo was out of the picture and Petra was squarely in it. She and Eric went from awkwardness to reluctant self-disclosure to friendship to closeness. When they finally made love, he went at it with the fervor of a deprived animal. When they finally settled into regular sex, she found him the best lover she'd ever encountered, tender when she needed him to be, accommodatingly athletic when that was the daily special.

They split up as partners and continued as lovers. Living apart; Eric in the bungalow, Petra in her flat on Detroit off

Sixth, near Museum Row. Then September 11 hit and Eric's special forces background made the department look at him in a new way. Transferred out of Homicide to the newly formed Homeland Security Squad, he was sent overseas for antiterrorist training. This month it was Israel, learning about suicide bombers and profiling and things he couldn't tell her about.

He called when he could, e-mailed her sporadically but couldn't receive electronic messages. She'd last heard from him a week ago. Jerusalem was a beautiful city, the Israelis were tough and tactless and reasonably competent, he planned to be back in two weeks.

A postcard picturing the Citadel of David had arrived two days ago. Eric's neat, forward-slanting script.

P.
Thinking of you, all's o.k.
E.

Working solo suited her just fine, but she knew it was only a matter of time before some new transfer was foisted on her.

After closing Yoshimura and Kashigian, she took a couple of days off, figuring on a little downtime.

Instead, she got a bloodbath and Isaac Gomez.

two

It happened the day she started painting again. Forcing herself to get up by ten and using the daylight to copy a Georgia O'Keeffe she'd always loved. Not flowers or skulls; a gray, vertical New York city scene from O'Keeffe's early days.

Pure genius, no way could she hope to capture it, but the struggle would be good. It had been months since she'd lifted a brush and starting out was rough. But by two p.m., she was in the groove, doing pretty well, she thought. At six, she sat down to appraise her work and fell asleep on the living-room couch.

A call from the station woke her up at one-fifteen a.m.

'Multiple one eighty-sevens at the Paradiso Club, Sunset near Western, all hands on deck,' said the dispatcher. 'It's probably on TV already.'

Petra flicked on the tube as she headed for the shower. The first network she tried was running the story.

A bunch of kids shot outside the Paradiso. Some sort of

hip-hop concert, an altercation in the parking lot, gun-barrel poking out of a car window.

Four bodies.

By the time Petra got there the area had been cordoned and the victims were covered with coroner's tarp. A quartet of bundles, lying at random angles under a blue-black Hollywood sky. The corner of one of the tarps had blown loose, revealing a sneakered foot. Pink sneaker, smallish.

High-intensity lights turned the parking lot glossy. What looked to be over a hundred kids, some of whom were way too young to be out this late, had been divided into several groups, shunted off to the side and guarded by uniformed officers. Five groups, all potential witnesses. The Paradiso, a movie theater-turned-evangelical church-turned-concert venue, could seat over a thousand. These kids were the chosen few.

Petra looked for other detectives, spotted Abrams, Montoya, Dilbeck, and Haas. Now that she was here, five D's for five groups.

MacDonald Dilbeck was a DIII with over thirty years' experience and he'd be the boss on this one.

She headed over to him. When she was ten yards away, he waved.

Mac was a sixty-one-year-old ex-Marine with silver, Brylcreemed hair and a gray sharkskin suit just as glossy. Skinny, rounded lapels marked the garment as a vintage collectible, but she knew he'd bought it new. A five-eight fireplug, Mac wore Aqua Velva, a faux-ruby high school ring, and an LAPD tie-bar. He lived in Simi Valley and his

civilian ride was an old Caddy. On weekends he rode horses and Harleys. Married for forty years, *Semper Fi* tattoo on his biceps. Petra judged him smarter than most doctors and lawyers she'd met.

He said, 'Sorry for screwing up your vacation.' His eyes were tired but his posture was perfect.

'Looks like we need all the help we can get.'

Mac's mouth turned down. 'It was a massacre. Four children.'

He drew her away from the bodies, toward the double-width driveway that led out to Western Avenue; they faced thin, early-morning traffic. 'The concert ended at eleven-thirty, but kids hung around in the parking lot smoking, drinking, the typical shenanigans. Cars were leaving but one reversed direction and backed up toward the crowd. Slowly, so no one noticed. Then an arm stuck out and started shooting. Security guard was too far to see it but he heard a dozen shots. Four hits, all fatal, looks like a nine millimeter.'

Petra glanced at the nearest group of kids. 'They don't look hardcore. What kind of concert was it?'

'Your basic lightweight hip-hop, dance remixes, some Latin stuff, nothing gangsta.'

Despite the horror, Petra felt a smile coming on. 'Nothing *gangsta*?'

Dilbeck shrugged. 'Grandkids. From what we're hearing, it was a well-behaved crowd, couple of ejections for alcohol but nothing serious.'

'Who got ejected?'

'Three boys from the Valley. White, harmless, their parents picked them up. This wasn't about that, Petra, but what it *was* about, who knows? Including our potential witnesses.'

'Nothing?' said Petra.

Dilbeck covered his eyes with one hand, used the other to blanket his mouth. 'These are the kids unlucky enough to be sticking around when the black-and-whites arrived. All we've got out of them is a relatively consistent description of the shooter's car. Small, black or dark blue or dark gray, most likely a Honda or a Toyota, with chrome rims. Not a single digit of license plate. When the shooting started, everyone dropped or ducked or ran.'

'But all these kids hung around.'

'Uniforms arrived within two minutes, Code Three,' said Dilbeck. 'Didn't let anyone leave.'

'Who called it in?'

'At least eight people. The official informant's a bouncer.' He frowned. 'The vics are two boys and two girls.'

'How old?'

'We I.D.'d three: fifteen, fifteen, and seventeen. The fourth, one of the girls, had no paper on her.'

'Nothing at all?'

Dilbeck shook his head. 'Some poor parents are going to worry a lot and then hear the bad news. It stinks, doesn't it? Maybe I *should* fold my tent.'

He'd been talking retirement for as long as Petra had known him.

She said, 'I'll fold before you will.'

'Probably,' he admitted.

'I'd like a look at the bodies before they get taken away.'

'Look to your heart's content and then have a go at that nearest group, the one over there.'

Petra learned what she could about the victims.

Paul Allan Montalvo, two weeks from his sixteenth birthday. Chubby, round-faced, plaid shirt, black sweatpants. Smooth olive skin where it wasn't distorted by a gunshot under his right eye. Two other holes in his legs.

Wanda Leticia Duarte, seventeen. Gorgeous, pale, with long black hair, rings on eight of her fingers, five earpierces. Three chest shots. Left side, bingo.

Kennerly Scott Dalkin, fifteen, looked closer to twelve. Fair-skinned, freckled, shaved head the color of putty. Black leather jacket and skull pendant hanging from a leather thong around the neck that had been pierced by a bullet. His getup and scuffed Doc Martens said he'd been aiming for tough, hadn't even come close. In his wallet was a card proclaiming him to be a member of the honor society at Birmingham High.

The unidentified girl was probably Hispanic. Short, busty, with shoulder-length curly hair dyed rust at the tips. Tight white top, tight black jeans – Kmart house brand. Pink sneakers – the shoes Petra had spied – not much larger than a size five.

Another head shot, the puckered black hole just in front of her right ear. Four others in her torso. The pockets of her

jeans had been turned inside out. Petra inspected her cheap leatherette purse. Chewing gum, tissues, twenty bucks cash, two packets of condoms.

Safe sex. Petra kneeled by the girl's side. Then she got up to do her job.

Eighteen know-nothings.

She addressed them as a group, tried coming on gently, being a pal, stressing the importance of cooperation to prevent something like this from happening again. Her reward was eighteen blank stares. Pressing the group elicited a few slow head shakes. Maybe some of it was shock, but Petra sensed she was boring them.

'Nothing you can tell me?' she asked a slim, redheaded boy.

He scrunched his lips and shook his head.

She had them form a line, took down names and addresses and phone numbers, acted casual as she checked out their nonverbal behavior.

Two nervous ones stood out, a serious handwringer and a nonstop foot-tapper. Both girls. She held them back, let the others go.

Bonnie Ramirez and Sandra Leon, both sixteen. They dressed similarly – tight tops, low-riders, and high-heeled boots – but didn't know each other. Bonnie's top was black, some sort of cheap crepelike fabric, and she'd caked her face with makeup to cover up gritty acne. Her hair was brown, frizzy, tied up in a complicated 'do that had probably taken hours to construct but managed to look

careless. Still wringing her hands, as Petra reiterated the importance of being open and honest.

'I *am* honest,' she said. Fluent English, that musical East L.A. tincture that stretches final words.

'What about the car, Bonnie?'

'I told you, I didn't see it.'

'Not at all?'

'Nothing. I gotta go, I really gotta go.'

Wring, wring, wring.

'What's the rush, Bonnie?'

'George's only babysitting till one and it's way after that.'

'You've got a kid?'

'Two years old,' said Bonnie Ramirez, with a mixture of pride and amazement.

'Boy or girl?'

'Boy.'

'What's his name?'

'Rocky.'

'Got a picture?'

Bonnie reached for her sequined handbag, then stopped herself. 'What do you care? George said if I don't get home on time he'll like just leave and Rocky sometimes gets up like in the night, I don't wanna him to be all like scared.'

'Who's George?'

'The father,' said the girl. 'Rocky's a George, too. Jorge, Junior. I call him Rocky to make him different from George 'cause I don't like how George acts.'

'How does George act?'

'He doesn't give me nothing.'

Sandra Leon's blouse was skin-hugging champagne satin, off one shoulder. Smooth, bare shoulder stippled by goose bumps. She'd stopped tapping her foot, switched to hugging herself tightly, bunching soft, unfettered breasts to the center of her narrow chest. Dark skin clashed with a huge mass of platinum blond hair. Deep red lipstick, an appliqué mole above her lip. She wore cheap, fake-o gold jewelry, lots of it. Her shoes were rhinestone mules. Parody of sexy; sixteen going on thirty.

Before Petra could ask, she said, 'I don't know nothing.'

Allowing her eyes to drift to the victims. To pink sneakers.

Petra said, 'Wonder where she got those shoes.'

Sandra Leon looked everywhere but at Petra. 'Why would I know?' Biting her lip.

'You okay?' said Petra.

The girl forced herself to meet Petra's gaze. Her eyes were dull. 'Why wouldn't I be?'

Petra didn't answer.

'Can I go now?'

'You're sure there's nothing you want to tell me?'

The dull eyes narrowed. Sudden hostility; it seemed misplaced. 'I don't even have to talk to you.'

'Says who?'

'The law.'

'You have experience with the law?' said Petra.

'Nope.'

'But you know the law.'

'My brother's in jail.'

'Where?'

'Lompoc.'

'For what?'

'Stealing a car.'

'Your brother's your legal expert?' said Petra. 'Look where he is.'

Sandra shrugged. The platinum hair shifted.

A wig.

That made Petra take a closer look at her. Notice something else about the girl's eyes. Dull because they were yellow around the edges.

'You okay?'

'I will be when you let me go.' Sandra Leon righted her hairpiece. Slipped a finger under the front and smiled. 'Leukemia,' said the girl. 'They gave me chemo at Western Peds. I used to have real nice hair. They say it'll grow back but maybe they're lying.'

Tears filled her eyes. 'Can I go now?'

'Sure.'

The girl walked away.