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By Christopher Pike

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The heartbreaking loss.

Turns out, discovering Witch World was just the beginning.

The riveting Witch World saga continues in a sequel packed with even more shocking twists and sexy suspense than Book One...

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Black Knight (Witch World) By Christopher Pike Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1399609 in Books
- Published on: 2014-12-02
- Released on: 2014-12-02
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.25" h x 1.60" w x 5.50" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 464 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Christopher Pike is a bestselling author of young adult novels. The Thirst series, *The Secret of Ka*, and the Remember Me and Alosha trilogies are some of his favorite titles. He is also the author of several adult novels, including *Sati* and *The Season of Passage*. *Thirst* and *Alosha* are slated to be released as feature films. Pike currently lives in Santa Barbara, where it is rumored he never leaves his house. But he can be found online at [Facebook.com/ChristopherPikeBooks](https://www.facebook.com/ChristopherPikeBooks).

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Black Knight

CHAPTER ONE

PREMIERE NIGHT AT GRAUMAN'S CHINESE Theatre. Roll out the red carpet and prepare to welcome the hordes of beautiful people in their Mercedes S-Class sedans, Jaguar convertibles, Beamers, and Bentleys—and a bevy of other cars worth more than most U.S. homes.

Because he was a parking attendant for Grauman's—now legally the TCL Chinese Theatre, a name no one in Hollywood was even aware of—the majority of people his age would have assumed Marc Simona loved riding in such cars. The truth was he didn't. He just parked them, usually drove them less than two hundred yards. He never got to feel how they handled on the open road, and besides, even if he'd been given a chance to drive a sports car up the California coast, he wouldn't have cared. The only thing that mattered to him was how much trunk space each vehicle had.

The space was what mattered.

That and what kind of jewelry the owners of the cars—specifically the ladies—wore to the red-carpet events. Because Marc didn't park the cars for tips. Being a valet was just a role he played so he'd know which trunk to climb into at the end of the night.

Most people would have called Marc a thief.

He liked to think of himself as a professional.

Either way he was raking in huge bucks.

During his last trip to New York City and its famous Diamond District—he'd driven cross-country all by himself, in three days no less—he'd fenced a pair of sapphire earrings studded with diamonds and netted twenty grand in cash. The gaudy blue stones had been five carats each, and the lonely eared woman he'd swiped them from had also been wearing a gold bracelet laced with rubies that he'd sold for another ten thousand.

It amazed him that the vast majority of celebrities had no taste. He was something of an expert on the subject. He'd seen with his own eyes how difficult it was, if not impossible, for a certain category of rich or famous women to resist the temptation to drape themselves in the bulk of their jewelry box while attending a red-carpet event.

For Marc that group was easy to spot: female stars who were a few too many years past the cursed number forty, and whose phone had stopped ringing; or else trophy wives who had visited their plastic surgeons one too many times to suction off fat that would have better been shed with diet and exercise. Either group was, to Marc, the equivalent of walking pawnshops.

“Scratch it and you’re dead,” a producer snapped at Marc as he handed over the keys to a black Mercedes sports coupe, while another parking attendant helped the man’s wife out through the passenger door.

Marc recognized the guy—Barry Hazen, executive producer on tonight’s film. By all rights Hazen should have been the man of the hour. Yet Marc knew—as did anyone remotely connected to the business—that Hazen had not worked on the film at all. The guy was filthy rich. He and his partners owned a medium-size production company. All he did was write checks. He never made creative decisions. Yet, with his cash, he was able to put his name on films he probably couldn’t even follow.

That was fine with Marc. Because even though Mr. Hazen was sixty years old with snow-white hair and an Armani tux, Mrs. Hazen was a thirty-year-old redhead wearing a diamond necklace with a central rock the size of a golf ball. It was so big it must have started forming back when the dinosaurs walked the earth. Marc could only dream what he could hock it for.

Marc smiled as he took the man’s keys. “Have no fear, Mr. Hazen. I know a secret spot I can stow this baby where God himself couldn’t touch it.”

Mr. Hazen nodded his approval. “We’ll be here late. Stay behind and pick it up for me and I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Absolutely,” Marc said. He always stayed late for the after-picture party so he could prey on that one couple he’d select who would return home so tired and drunk that they’d fall into bed the instant they entered their house. But whoever that couple turned out to be—so far the Hazens looked good, but Marc knew he’d have several candidates before the night was over—he’d have to clock out before they returned for their car.

Why? The answer was simple. He had to be finished with his work so he could ride home with the couple in their trunk.

Marc hopped in the car and headed straight for Hollywood Boulevard without bothering to check the back, tearing around the block. Grauman’s had been built ages ago, in the era of black-and-white films, and its parking lot could accommodate only a fraction of the valet traffic. Nowadays the best place to stow a Mercedes was in the mall next door. It had a ten-level parking structure and from experience Marc knew how early the bottom level emptied. It was perfect; it gave him more than enough privacy to keep up his lucrative side job.

He stashed Hazen’s sports car in a spot he reserved for his most promising candidates. Besides being physically isolated, it was outside the range of any security cameras and had a seldom-used janitor’s closet where he could store the tools of his trade and work without being interrupted.

Marc hurried to that closet and locked the door behind him. From a box hidden in the corner beneath a filthy sink, he took out a flat, two-inch-square steel case loaded with putty. Separating the Mercedes’s key from the rest of Hazen’s keys, he placed it inside the case and pressed the top shut.

Making the impression of the key was easy—the remainder of the process took patience and skill. Opening

the case and removing the key, he reached for a tube of oily brown goo that could best be described as “plaster-glue,” and squeezed it into the impression.

Marc didn’t know the exact chemical makeup of the material, nor did he care. All that mattered was that it dried fast and hard, which it did when heated. That was its only drawback and the main reason why it wasn’t as easy to duplicate keys as most people thought. To speed up the process he kept a battery-powered heater running in the janitor’s closet. He kept extra cases on hand as well. There were nights he’d go through a dozen of them and prepare a dozen spare keys.

Yet in the end he’d use only one key and sneak into only one house—if he was lucky. A lot of factors had to come together for his plan to work. So far, after a year of parking celebrity cars and working over twenty red-carpet events, he’d managed to slip into only seven homes. And out of those seven he’d only struck gold four times.

Of course, the gold had been attached to jewels . . . so he couldn’t complain.

Marc finished applying the plaster and again closed his steel case and held the top tight for a minute without moving an inch. Then, after opening it and leaving the case and the key atop the heater to dry, he cleaned Mr. Hazen’s original key with a paper towel soaked in alcohol and bleach. Whenever he managed to steal something beautiful and expensive, he knew there was no easier way for the police to trace the crime back to him than if he left even the tiniest residue of putty on the original car key.

Since Hazen was his first candidate of the night, Marc was out of practice and it took longer than usual before he was able to exit the janitor’s closet—six whole minutes. The process should have taken him half that time.

Damn, he thought. His boss, Steve Green—a rough-voiced ex-sailor from Australia and the head of the valet parking—was going to wonder what was taking him so long.

Yet when Marc finally did leave the janitor’s closet, he did so without the fake key in hand. From practice, he knew it was best to let it dry on the heater for at least twenty minutes. The hotter it got, the harder it got.

When Marc got back to the theater, his boss did in fact ask where the hell he’d been. “Got caught behind a couple of cop cars while swinging around the block,” Marc lied.

“Did they stop you?”

“Almost. I was speeding.”

Green grinned his approval. He was famous for taking Jags and Porsches out for a spin during the downtime in the middle of the movie.

Marc grinned along with his boss but cringed inside. The fact Green had noticed the delay was not good. It was reason enough to cross the Hazens off his list of candidates.

“Where’d you park Hazen’s Hard-on?” Green asked. It was a common belief among the people who worked valet that most celebrity cars were phallic symbols.

Marc handed over the keys to his boss. “Next door, level G, south corner, slot nineteen, away from everyone

else. You know how that asshole is about his wheels.”

Green nodded as he hung the keys on the appropriate hook. “You can’t be too careful with the guy who’s paying for the party. He can get us all fired.”

Marc relaxed as he noticed how fast his boss dropped the matter. But it was a warning he’d have to pick up his duplicating pace. At the same time, he’d have to be more selective about whom he chose as candidates.

Yet he knew he couldn’t control all aspects of the heist. A large part of being a successful thief was luck. For example, how late a couple was going to leave, and how drunk they were going to be—he couldn’t predict that ahead of time. That’s why he had to make so many extra keys. He had to play the odds.

The time for the premiere drew near and traffic picked up. Marc found himself running back and forth from the valet booth with hardly a chance to catch his breath. However, he did manage to identify another three targets.

First came Mr. and Mrs. Kollet, who were connected to the studio that was distributing the film. They would definitely be staying late for the after-film party. Mrs. Kollet was wearing a diamond bracelet that literally dazzled Marc’s eyes. As an added bonus, the couple stumbled getting out of their car and he needed only a whiff of the vehicle’s interior to know they were already drunk—always a plus.

Second was Cynthia Parker, one of the most brilliant scriptwriters in the city. Although she wore a relatively modest red gown, around her neck was a string of pearls that looked like they had once belonged to a European court. The individual pearls were not excessively large but had a silver-white color that gave them what the muse in Ms. Parker might have called an “angelic sheen.” Marc was careful to park her car next to the Hazens’ and make a copy of her key.

Finally, there was the star of the film, Silvia Summer, and her football star boyfriend, Ray Cota of the San Francisco 49ers. They arrived late in a white Jaguar and received the loudest cheers from the gathered fans. Ms. Summer was young, but rich and successful—in the top three on the A-list of talent in her age bracket—eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds. She’d been the lead in two hits; this would probably be her third.

Ms. Summer wore a heart-shaped emerald at the end of a gold necklace. Marc had seen plenty of emeralds in his time and knew the stone was notorious for its number of inclusions—natural flaws that showed up as dark spots under close inspection. Yet because he opened the door for her and because her breasts would have stolen the eyes out of the head of any red-blooded American male, he inadvertently got a closer look at the emerald than he planned and could have sworn it was close to flawless.

“Welcome,” Marc said with a genuine smile as he shut the car door behind her. “It’s an honor. I’ve seen all your movies. I hear you’re great in this one.”

Unlike most stars of her wattage level, she took the time to look him in the eye and reply. She even leaned close so that only he could hear. “I look good because everyone else sucks,” she confided.

Mark had to laugh. “I heard that as well.”

She paused and stared at him. She was blond and beautiful, sure, but sharp as well. He could spot her intelligence in the way she studied him, and it made him wonder if it was wise to choose her as a candidate.

Stealing a necklace from a movie star was one thing—not getting caught was another. It might have been a mistake to speak to her. Her gaze continued to linger.

“You don’t look like the sort of guy who should be parking cars,” she said.

Marc shrugged. “It pays the bills.”

Again, she came near. “For now. But there’s something in your eyes. Trust me, one day you’re going to be somebody.”

It was a moment, a special moment, but it didn’t last. At that instant her boyfriend swept around the Jaguar, tossed his keys high in the air to Marc—who caught them without blinking—and led Ms. Summer onto the red carpet and toward the theater entrance.

Marc was fortunate to end up with the keys. Ordinarily the driver handed them to whoever opened the driver’s door. Marc was as far from superstitious as a guy could be. Even as a four-year-old, bouncing from one orphanage to another, he’d realized Santa Claus had been invented to sell more toys. But he trusted his gut and didn’t feel it was a coincidence that he’d ended up with the keys to Ms. Summer’s car. He thought somebody was trying to tell him something.

It turned out her Jaguar was the last car he parked before the film began. Marc put it near the Hazens’ Mercedes, on the bottom level of the mall lot. He took his time making an impression of her key, and took even more time cleaning the original.

He had selected only four targets, which was unusual for him—last time he’d had ten at this stage. Yet all four were prime: They had the jewels; their connection to the picture was such that they’d all stay late; he’d been able to make an impression of their car key; and they all had plenty of trunk space.

Now it was all a question of timing.

It was against the rules for the valet crew to watch the film, but Green was a laid-back boss and let Marc and a buddy of his, Teddy Fox, slip into the theater fifteen minutes after the movie started. All the seats were taken and they had to stand at the rear, but Marc didn’t mind. He found a marble wall to lean against and rested the back of his head on the cool stone. It was a relief to rest for a few minutes and the film wasn’t half bad.

It was a romantic comedy structured around a mystery. A couple were only an hour away from getting married when both their wedding rings vanished. At the start the story focused on a search for the clever thief, but it was the buried doubts about the marriage that the crime suddenly raised in the bride and groom that created the bulk of the laughs. Silvia Summer had been too hard on the film. The crowd spent most of the movie laughing out loud. Ordinarily Marc was demanding when it came to films, but even he couldn’t resist chuckling a few times. He especially enjoyed the lead actress. Ms. Summer was even more stunning on the big screen.

He kept thinking how he’d like to see her again, socially. A silly thought, sure—she had a boyfriend and he was a nobody. But the remark she’d made getting out of her car—it had stayed with him.

What had she seen in him? It couldn’t have been his face, although there were plenty of girls who thought he was worth a second look. It was like they had connected for an instant in some mysterious way. The simple

fact was he liked her, and he found it ironic that the feeling made his desire for her necklace even greater, when it should have been the other way around.

He didn't dwell too long on the paradox. He knew the way his mind worked. He had two trains racing in the two hemispheres of his brain that unfortunately were usually on the same track and racing toward each other, which was another way of saying that he was pretty sure he was screwed up.

That was okay, he accepted it, he had to accept it; no one had given him a choice. He knew something of psychology. He hadn't had a lot of basic education but he read plenty. The fact that he had grown up without a single parent, biological or foster, and had been living on his own since the age of fifteen—often on the streets—it was a miracle he wasn't already dead or in jail.

Of course, the night was still young.

Marc rubbed his hands together in anticipation as he watched the film. He was sweating but it was a sweet sweat. He stole for money, that was obvious, but the deeper reason was the action, the rush it gave him. All the planning, all the hoops he had to jump through, the constant risk, the countless on-the-spot decisions he had to make—bundle it all together and it gave him an adrenaline high he couldn't find anywhere else. Often, he thought, he'd be a thief even if there was no payoff.

The film ended and the crowd gave it a standing ovation, partly because it was a pretty good film but mostly because the audience knew the picture's creators were in the theater and hoping they'd stand and cheer. The director and the producer delivered brief thank-you speeches, and then it was party time.

Only half the audience had passes to the party, but because the theater was so large that was still close to five hundred people. Marc knew for a fact all four of his candidates would be at the party. It was held at an elegant hotel across the street from the theater and halfway down the block. It was not unusual to hear a number of celebrities grumble as they made the short trek, although no one had to worry about traffic or lights—the cops invariably blocked off Hollywood Boulevard immediately after the film.

Marc would like to have walked with the crowd to the party and study his candidates more closely, but he had to get back to work. On average he got tipped ten bucks a car—nothing to sneeze at when he could pick up ten to fifteen cars an hour.

After ninety minutes the number of guests looking for their vehicles dropped, and Green usually let two-thirds of the valets go home. However, because Marc had been on the job a year, and Green liked him, he was always allowed to stay late.

It was at this point that Marc had to push his plan to the next level. There was no way to make a final decision on who to go home with without slipping into the party and taking a last look at his candidates. For one thing, he had to be sure they were still at the party. It was always possible a candidate could have slipped out while he was off finding a car.

The movie had ended at ten p.m. The director and producer had spoken until ten fifteen, and the party had begun at ten thirty. From experience Marc knew he could slip into the party—without a pass—from midnight on. Security grew lax as the night wore on, and besides, his valet uniform gave him a cloak of respectability. After telling Green he had to use the restroom, Marc stole into the hotel and went upstairs to the party—which was spread over three areas: a charming lounge; a massive conference room; and an exotic outdoor section that circled a delicious swimming pool.

It was a warm night—most people were outside by the pool, which glowed a haunting aquamarine while also reflecting rows of flaming torches. There were open bars inside and out and it was the rare person who wasn't drinking.

Marc spotted three of his candidates spread around the pool. The only person he couldn't locate was Cynthia Parker, the scriptwriter. She had probably split immediately after the film without his knowing. Hell, she had written the damn thing—she might have gotten up and walked out in the middle. Marc knew that most writers found it hard to see their work on the screen. They usually focused too much on how the director had ruined their material.

So he was down to the Hazens, the Kollets, and Silvia Summer and her boyfriend, Ray Cota, the football jock. Marc strolled by each couple, studying them carefully but not allowing them to see him.

The Hazens were both drunk, no question, and Marc would have considered taking them on but they were so intoxicated he worried his boss, Green, would recognize their condition and not allow them to drive home. Indeed, he might stuff the Hazens in a taxi—whether they agreed or not—and send them on their way. Marc had seen Green do it before.

Mr. Kollet was also staggering around but, surprisingly, his wife, who had smelled of alcohol at the start of the night, now appeared sober. Marc saw she was holding a glass of what looked like Coke, which made him wonder if he had misread her from the start. It was possible her husband's breath had been so strong it had polluted her aura. Whatever, she looked a hundred percent sober, which meant her diamond bracelet was probably off-limits.

Silvia Summer and her boyfriend made for an interesting mix. Ray Cota had a drink in his hand and was laughing plenty loud at every joke but he looked like the sort who could hold his liquor. Green wouldn't be worried about Ray driving home.

But Silvia Summer was a puzzle. Marc studied her a grand total of twelve minutes and saw her down two tall margaritas. Yet she wasn't laughing and socializing with her boyfriend. Indeed, she stood a few feet away, by herself, staring off into the distance. Something had upset her, Marc thought. She had been fine earlier. He could hardly believe it when, right as he was leaving the pool area, she strode to the bar and ordered a third drink.

That was a lot of booze to swallow in such a short period. She was not a big girl—her blood alcohol must have been off the chart. From a strategic point of view that was perfect. The essence of his scheme depended on the female he chose returning home too tired and too intoxicated to put her jewelry away in a secure place—like a high-tech home safe.

During his four previous successful heists, the women had invariably dumped their jewelry on top of their chest of drawers or on their bathroom counters and had then fallen into bed in a coma beside their husband or boyfriend. Tonight, all night, he had been praying that the identical scenario would repeat itself.

Yet seeing Silvia upset bothered Marc and he wasn't sure why. They'd only exchanged a few words. True, she had treated him with respect, but lots of pretty women had given him a wink and a smile. Being upset would make her careless. He should see her dark mood as a plus. Yet as he left the party, it gnawed at him that something had happened that had disturbed her.

Maybe she had hated the movie.

It only made it worse that he had almost made up his mind whom he had to go after. It should be Silvia Summer. She and her wide-receiver boyfriend fit most of the criteria on his self-made list. Plus it didn't hurt that her emerald was the most expensive piece of jewelry he'd seen all night.

He was probably going to steal it from her. She would wake up in the morning and it would be gone. That would be a shame. Of course, it was more than likely she had borrowed the necklace. Few stars her age had giant emeralds in their private collection. Chances were her stylist had picked it up at a Beverly Hills store that afternoon with the understanding it would be returned within twenty-four hours. That was standard in the business.

However, Silvia would still be responsible for the necklace. Filing a police report would not make that responsibility vanish. Granted, she probably had insurance, but he'd still be putting her through a ton of grief. And there was still a chance the necklace belonged to her. For all he knew it might have sentimental value.

There were a few other details that made him hesitant to go after her emerald. The exquisite nature of the stone, its uniqueness, the fame of the last celebrity to wear it—all these points would make it difficult to fence. Even if he drove all the way to New York, it was possible he'd have trouble finding a buyer. There was no question the stone's heart shape would have to be ground away. It was even possible he'd have to break it into a half dozen smaller stones. He was no expert when it came to the craft, but he was no slouch, either. Definitely, it would be safer to break it down.

Yet it was such a beautiful stone.

It would be a pity to ruin it.

"Shut the fuck up, would ya," Marc told his mind as he headed back to the valet station, which had temporarily moved across the street to the hotel lobby to take care of the last of the evening's clients. He knew all the cons about stealing the emerald and in the end they were all bullshit. Silvia was a near perfect candidate and she was wearing a near perfect stone.

The bottom line was what the emerald was worth. Retail, it had to cost at least five million, maybe as high as ten. That meant he could get at least a million for it in the Diamond District, maybe two million, more than all his previous jobs combined. No way was he going to walk away from that kind of cash.

It was decided.

He had to get into Silvia's trunk and soon.

"I'm beat. Would it be all right if I called it a night?" Marc asked Green as he walked up to the counter they had set up in the hotel lobby. All the guests had been previously told that this was the place to pick up their cars.

Marc added a yawn as he made his request and his boss gave him a nod. "I've still got Ted, Jerry, and Sandy running the route," Green said. "They should be enough." He added, "I hope."

"I can stay, you know, if you're worried."

Green glanced at the key hooks. "Did the party look like it was winding down?"

Marc hesitated. “Why you asking me?”

“Sandy said she just saw you up there.”

Marc kept his outward composure but inside he grimaced. If he managed to steal the emerald, any unusual behavior on his part could later trigger an alarm. Green was a nice guy but no dummy. If the cops came by later and started asking questions, he might remember this exact moment.

Marc spoke causally. “I just took a quick look at the buffet.” He added with a hint of guilt, “Well, actually, I sort of sampled the shrimp.”

Green brightened. “Was it good?”

Marc grinned. “Fantastic. And they have a huge spread of sushi. If you’re quick, you should be able to load up before they put it away.”

Green shook his head. “Got to stay here.”

Now was a perfect opportunity to negate any suspicion. Granted, it might cost him a shot at the emerald, but it would make it clear to his boss that he’d only gone upstairs for the food.

“Bullshit,” Marc said, taking a step behind the counter. “I can handle the stragglers for a few minutes.”

“You sure? You said you’re exhausted.”

“Hey. I’m nineteen years old. I never go to bed till four in the morning. Go now, quick, and put together a bag that will last you the rest of the week. There’s only one caterer left and she won’t care what you swipe. You know they just throw out what’s left over.” Marc added casually, “Oh, I saw some Alaskan crab fish.”

“Are you shitting me?” his boss asked, a gleam in his eyes. Marc had seen Green eating crab fish a month ago and knew they were his favorite. He also knew there were plenty left.

Marc snorted. “Stop yapping and go. I did graduate from high school. I can hand out a few keys for a few minutes.”

The sad truth was he hadn’t graduated from high school.

“Thanks,” Green said, turning for the elevator. Marc wouldn’t be surprised if his boss returned with several bags of goodies. Green had a pregnant wife at home and was always complaining about how hungry she was for exotic food.

As it turned out the Hazens came looking for their car while Green was gone, and Marc had to tactfully tell the bigwig that he was too drunk to drive. Immediately, Mr. Hazen started swearing at him but just as fast Mrs. Hazen jumped in between them and told her husband to shut his trap.

“Larry, you apologize to this nice young man,” she said. “He’s just doing his job and he might have just saved our lives. You know we’re in no shape to drive.”

Mr. Hazen calmed down fast enough, although he didn’t bother to offer an apology. He plopped down on a

nearby chair and belched loudly. “Shit. Somebody call us a cab.”

Marc signaled for a taxi that was waiting outside and opened the door for Mrs. Hazen, who slipped him a hundred dollars before climbing inside. Marc shook his head like it was too much but the woman insisted.

“It’s for having to listen to my husband,” she said. “He acts like an old goat when he drinks but I still love him.”

“Just get home safe, Mrs. Hazen,” Marc said. “I’ll leave a note for your car to be sent over in the morning.”

“Thank you, dear,” she said.

Green was gone longer than Marc expected—a full twenty minutes. During that time the Kollets came for their car. Now the decision had been plucked from his hands. Either he went after Silvia or waited until next time. Yet he knew it was unlikely that he’d ever have a shot at such a large stone again. That was what kept him focused. If he could steal and fence the emerald, he’d be able to quit his life as a thief and get on to something important.

Whatever that might be . . .

In reality he’d be forced to quit. As it was he was already playing Russian roulette with the LAPD. Eventually the string of missing jewels would be traced back to the theater’s valet service, and to him. No way he was hanging around until he got caught. Tonight’s job had to be his last.

Clocking out, Marc crossed the street to the mall’s parking structure and headed straight for the janitor’s closet. The battery-operated heater had warmed the confined space to over a hundred degrees. Ordinarily he’d hide the heater in the corner of the closet, but since tonight would hopefully be the last time he’d use it, he decided to dump it and the extra cases somewhere outside the mall.

The decision carried with it its own risks. It was after two in the morning and Silvia and her boyfriend would be wanting their car soon. If he left the mall to dump his equipment, one of the other valets might come for the Jaguar at that exact moment.

Yet he decided it was worth the risk. He couldn’t leave the tools of his trade behind for a detective to find. Collecting his used and unused steel cases, the heater, and two spare tubes of the magic plaster mix, he stuffed everything in a canvas bag and headed for the door.

He was out on Hollywood Boulevard in a minute. He had scouted the surrounding area earlier. Small details mattered. He knew of a family-owned pizza joint three blocks north of the mall. It had a large Dumpster that was unloaded every Sunday morning, which would be tomorrow, before ten. He considered three blocks the minimum distance to safely dispose of his equipment. Even if he managed to steal the emerald, and some brilliant cop quickly traced the theft back to the theater, he or she wouldn’t have time to search several city blocks for clues before his stash disappeared.

Yet the three blocks were long blocks and he had to force himself not to run. Running people looked like guilty people, particularly at night, and especially when they had a bag in their hands. The whole way to and from the pizza joint, he kept thinking that Silvia would have already come for her car and split.

But the Jag was still there when he returned to the mall.

He studied it before trying out his newly minted key. The trunk was on the small size—he'd glanced at it before but had failed to scrutinize it—and there was nothing worse than getting trapped in a trunk. It had happened to him only once, but that had been one time too many.

It had been an old Mercedes, from the sixties, built like a tank, and it had not come equipped with a child's safety-release lever—the kind that were nowadays standard on most vehicle trunks as well as refrigerators. Worse, the lock on the car's trunk had not responded to his usual bag of tricks, and he hadn't even been able to push out the backseat and crawl into the interior of the car. In the end he'd spent an entire night sweating in the garage of a mansion he'd never actually seen and needing to pee so bad he'd finally pissed all over the spare tire.

He had only managed to escape the next afternoon when the owner had taken the car to get washed. Fortunately the guys at the car wash had been mostly illegal immigrants and hadn't questioned the mysterious character who had suddenly popped out of the trunk in a white shirt, black pants, and black tie—his basic valet attire—and run like hell into a nearby alley.

Since that happened, he never climbed into a trunk without carrying a mini crowbar.

Marc noted that Silvia's Jag had a high-tech alarm system but was not overly worried. The best alarms had trouble identifying a fake key. However, as a safety precaution, it was still best to pop the trunk from inside the car, from the driver's seat, after slipping the key in the ignition and turning it partway. A retired owner of a car dealership had taught him that little trick. It reassured the computer chip in the most sophisticated car alarms.

For the first time, Marc took out the case that held the Jaguar's copied key. It had a couple of rough edges but he was able to file them off with a small tool kit he always carried on any job. It looked perfect but he nevertheless held it up to the light and gave it a final exam, once again thankful his section of the parking structure was not covered by security cameras.

Then he slid the key in the lock and turned it.

Presto! It opened without a hitch.

Moving fast, Marc climbed in the car, leaving the door open, and slipped the key in the ignition, turning it a millimeter shy of starting the car. At the same time he scanned for an interior trunk release, finding one on the bottom of the driver's door beside a gas-tank release. He pressed it and the trunk popped open. Turning the ignition off, he withdrew the key and climbed out and locked the door behind him.

Time to get in the trunk. For some reason, for Marc, this part was harder than sneaking into a couple's bedroom while they were sleeping. He'd read somewhere that everyone suffered from some degree of claustrophobia—it was just a question of how much. He wasn't sure where he fell on the scale but doubted he would have made it as an astronaut.

The Jaguar's trunk was clean and empty but tight. It made sense, it was a sports car. Christ, it didn't even have a backseat. He'd known that ahead of time; nevertheless, it still annoyed him. Or perhaps "intimidated" him would've been a more accurate word.

Marc took off his valet vest and pulled out a pair of surgical gloves and a surgical cap and put them on. He'd seen too many reruns of CSI, NCIS, CSI: Miami—and CSI: Lunar, he snickered to himself—to dare leave

behind any fingerprints or hair in the trunk. He even dabbed his eyebrows with Vaseline. Best to be paranoid when one damn molecule of his anatomy could strand him in the slammer for a decade.

Finally, Marc climbed into the trunk and pulled it shut.

It was dark inside and it felt stuffy. The only way he could fit in and maintain blood flow to all his limbs was to squeeze into the fetal position. He wiggled around with his back to the front and his face toward the rear. He had little room to move his arms and that concerned him. Later, when it was time to leave the trunk, he'd need his hands free if the release paddle failed. Of course there was no reason to think it should fail, but tell that to Murphy and the law named after him. Marc occasionally wondered who the real Murphy had been. The guy must have had a miserable life.

Marc was in the trunk ten minutes when Sandy came for the car. God, he thought, that had been close. He knew it was Sandy because she always sang to herself while she worked. Sandy was a couple of years older—she'd just celebrated her twenty-first by getting drunk with the guys at work. Marc had a lot of respect for her. She hustled to park and pick up the cars and was always polite to the clients. She never bragged when she got a big tip. But what he liked most about her was that she was unimpressed with stars—it didn't matter how important they thought they were. To Sandy they were just people.

Marc was attracted to her and knew she liked him, but he'd never asked her out because of his side business. The possibility was remote, but if he ever got busted and they were dating, the cops might assume she was working with him, or at the very least knew about the thefts. There was no way he would ever put her in that kind of position. She was a classy chick. She went to college during the day, carried a full load of classes, and was going to be a dentist or a doctor—something like that.

Sandy, though, drove like a maniac. He'd never been in the trunk of a car when she was behind the wheel, and to put it modestly, it was a novel experience. Marc swore if he hadn't been crammed in so tight, he would have broken bones. She had something against the brake—she never used it, not even on sharp corners. He literally heard bones in his back and neck crack when she swung onto Hollywood Boulevard.

They reached the hotel in record time.

Ray Cota chatted with Sandy as she handed off the Jag to him. Sandy even wished Ray good luck on his upcoming NFL season. But Marc didn't hear a word from Silvia Summer. Clearly the two were not doing well. They were on the road five minutes before Ray finally spoke to her.

"Are you going to talk to me tonight?" he asked. Marc sure hoped so. There was every possibility the car belonged to Ray, and if he didn't spend the night with Silvia, then Marc would end up breaking out of a garage and into a house with nothing to steal but sports trophies.

"What do you want to talk about?" Silvia muttered.

"She didn't give me her number because I asked for it," Ray said. "We were just shooting the breeze."

"Bullshit."

"Come on. It's late, we're both tired. Nothing happened."

"You call hustling the new phone number of an ex-girlfriend nothing."

“Karmen was never a girlfriend. I told you that.”

“You also told me that you screwed her once. Oh, no, wait. I remember now. You had sex with her off and on for six months—while she was dating your best friend.” Silvia paused and spoke in a slurred voice. There was no question she was drunk. “Maybe I should give Matt a call.”

“Matt’s in New York. All that happened in New York. It had nothing to do with what’s happening between us now.”

Silvia laughed lazily. “God, you’re one of those guys who thinks morals are inversely proportional to the distance you are from your true love.”

“Huh?”

Her tone suddenly hardened. “Karmen’s here now! She’s here in LA! And I go to the restroom for five minutes and you’re off in the corner feeling up her tits.”

“That’s a lie! I didn’t touch her!”

“You had your arm around her waist!”

Ray took a moment to respond. “She was as drunk as you are now. I shot out my arm to steady her. She could have fallen in the pool.”

“Ha! You steadied her, my ass! Your hand slipped and groped her ass the second you got her back on her feet.”

Ray had probably had too much to drink himself. His answers were slow in coming and did not win him any points. “You said I touched her tits. That’s what upset you. Now you’re saying it was her ass. Get your story straight, why don’t you.”

“Did someone crack your helmet or your head in practice or what? It doesn’t matter where you touched her! It just matters that you did.”

“She came on to me, I swear it. I didn’t even want to talk to her.”

Silvia snickered. “That I can believe! Why talk when you can just fuck? I mean, what do you have to talk about anyway? You use what’s left of your skull to smash into people for a living. I can’t remember the last time we had a serious conversation about anything. I’m not a hundred percent sure, but I’m beginning to think it’s because you’re too much of a moron to have one.”

Ray’s tone darkened. “You calling me stupid? I told you never to call me stupid.”

“I called you a moron, stupid, but let me apologize. You’re not a moron. Technically, moronic people have IQs in the fifty to seventy range. Yours has got to be at least ten points lower.” Silvia paused. “I’m calling you an imbecile.”

Marc felt the car swerve a little and heard Ray’s voice get uglier. Still, he found it hard to keep from smiling. Silvia was pretty witty when drunk.

“You want me to take you home or not?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t know. It’s not like I have a lot of options.”

Ray suddenly slowed. “I can drop you off right here if you want. Right there beside that homeless guy.”

“Are you forgetting that this is my car? Why don’t I drop you off?”

“Because you’re loaded. You couldn’t make it home with all that booze in your blood if you were bleeding to death.”

Silvia was silent a moment then started to chuckle. “Ray, if I was bleeding to death I’d go to the hospital, I wouldn’t drive home. You get it?”

“Yeah, I get it. I got it the moment we got to the theater. The way you flirted with that guy who took our keys. What did you say to him anyway? Why did he light up when you whispered in his ear?”

“I told him how cute he was and that I hoped we could hook up later because my boyfriend was a no-good, two-timing SOB and I’d probably need some company after the film.”

“And you accuse me of flirting with another girl. Bitch!”

Silvia laughed a moment then fell quiet. She spoke in a soft voice. “Just keep driving, all right? I don’t want to talk to you again tonight.”

Ray appeared to get the message and shut up. But then he turned on the radio, to a rap station, and a maze of high-priced speakers began to vibrate Marc’s brain. The ten-inch woofer was the worst—the base sounded like thunder. All Marc could do was hold his hands to his ears and pray Silvia’s house wasn’t far.

In reality he had an idea where Silvia Summer lived. It was in either Pacific Palisades or Malibu; it was one or the other. He made it a point to scan the Internet to find out if a potential target lived in a house or in a high-rise condo. Climbing out of the trunk in a condo parking lot gave him no advantage whatsoever. He was fortunate that most people who could afford expensive jewelry could afford a house of their own. It was almost never a major stumbling point. He knew from his research that Silvia had a house.

The music went on for ten minutes or so before Silvia turned it off. Ray complained but she must have shut him up with a look, because he didn’t turn it back on. They rode the rest of the way in silence. Marc’s fear that Ray wouldn’t be spending the night grew.

Then again, it was always possible Ray had picked her up at her house in his own car and would leave her alone for the night. That would be ideal. It would be easier to sneak into the house with Silvia by herself.

Ray drove for a total of thirty-three minutes before pulling into a driveway and pushing a button that opened a garage door. He nudged the Jag inside and Marc heard the garage close behind them. It was only then Ray spoke to Silvia.

“Am I staying or going?” he asked.

Silvia opened her door. “I don’t want you here.”

Ray opened his door. “Sil, we need to talk. I’m . . . I’m sorry.”

She slammed her door shut. “Not in the mood.”

Ray was desperate now. “Can we talk in the morning? We have to talk.”

Silvia seemed to think about that. “You can sleep downstairs and that’s it. Come up to my room and I call nine-one-one and have you arrested. Clear?”

“That’s pretty harsh.”

“No. Calling the woman you say you love a bitch is pretty harsh.”

They left the garage and entered the house. That was the last Marc heard of them. He knew he had reached the crucial moment. Above all else he had to be patient. He had to give them time to fall asleep. Not only to black out, but to enter a deep REM cycle, where a bomb could go off in the room and they wouldn’t hear it. The smart thing to do was to stay in the trunk and wait at least an hour—two would be better.

But Marc knew he couldn’t wait, at least not with the trunk closed. It had felt stuffy when he’d climbed into it, but now it felt as if there wasn’t an oxygen molecule left in the cramped space. He was having trouble catching his breath. He tried to convince himself it was all in his head, that the trunk wasn’t vacuum sealed, but it didn’t help. As long as they had been on the road, he had felt a faint cool breeze entering from a tiny hole somewhere. But now it was like he was locked in a tomb.

He wouldn’t enter the house, he swore to himself. He wouldn’t even get out of the trunk. But he had to open the hood. He needed fresh air.

Marc pressed the emergency release paddle and the trunk popped open. The first thing he did was break a cardinal rule.

He climbed out of the trunk and stood up and stretched. It was dumb and he knew it. Silvia and Ray had been inside only a few minutes, and a high percentage of people were forgetful and left either their cell phone, wallet, or purse in the car after arriving home, and had to run back out to the garage to get it.

He knew he should have waited at least twenty minutes before climbing out of the trunk. If he had half a brain he would get back inside. Yet the thought of doing so made his heart pound. His claustrophobia must be getting worse—another sign it was time to move on to another line of work. He swore right then that if he got the emerald that would be the end. He’d work at the theater another month or so just to allay any suspicions and then he’d quit.

He liked boats, he loved fishing. He’d always dreamed of moving to a small island near Fiji and buying his own boat and starting a fishing service. If he could get a million for the emerald, he could make the dream a reality. Captain of his own boat—lots of chicks would go for that.

Maybe even Silvia Summer.

He still hated the fact that she was his target.

Yet he hated Ray Cota more. Silvia was right, that jock’s brains were mush. Marc was confident there was

nothing Ray could say to her in the morning that would keep her from dumping him.

“Yeah, she’s going to dump him for you, right,” he whispered to himself. The truth is all would be forgiven in the morning. It was even possible Silvia wouldn’t remember the fight. She was awfully drunk.

The minutes crept by and no one came anywhere near the garage. He kept his gloves and surgical cap on. Leaving a hair or prints at the house would be just as bad as leaving them in the car. He kept his ears peeled but heard nothing from inside.

He began to pace to help pass the time. He liked to think of himself as a pro, but sitting still for long periods of time was a skill he had yet to master. He was glad this would be his last job. It would be a relief. If he ended up with a windfall, and no detectives came around afterward to ask questions, he might even work up the nerve to ask Sandy out. He realized he hadn’t stayed away from her just to keep her safe. She was smart, she was doing something with her life, she came from a good family.

The truth was she intimidated him. What could he say if she ever asked about his family? That he didn’t have one? A smart girl like Sandy would know a guy who grew up without parents would have to be damaged. And Marc had no illusions in that department—he wasn’t normal. What guy his age would be waiting in a dark garage for a famous movie star—hardly older than himself, really—to black out so he could slip into her bedroom and steal her necklace?

If Sandy could see him now she’d run the other way.

Marc managed to wait an hour. It was the maximum he could wait—the sun would be coming up soon. He had already checked the door and knew Silvia hadn’t locked it behind her. They never did—they trusted in the garage door. Plus even if she had an alarm system—say, a motion-activated one—it wouldn’t be on while she was in the house.

Before entering the house, he pulled a black ski mask over his surgical cap. He had earlier gone over it with a fine tooth comb. There wasn’t a hair or skin flake on it. The mask would make him impossible to identify should he be spotted.

At exactly five in the morning, Marc opened the door and entered the house. He held his flashlight in his right hand but did not turn it on. He was in a compact laundry room. A light shone above the oven in the nearby kitchen. The solitary bulb would give him enough light to move around the bottom floor.

He didn’t enter the kitchen. He heard a male snoring off to his right, down a short hallway. Silvia had said Ray was to sleep downstairs and that meant Marc was looking at a two-story house.

Ray’s snoring was loud. He hadn’t closed the door to the bedroom. Still, the fact that he wasn’t in bed with Silvia was a major plus. It would be easier to face down a screaming hundred-pound actress than a two-hundred-pound NFL receiver. Yet Marc hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

Marc swung around the kitchen, near Ray’s bedroom door, and found the stairs. He’d been hoping they would be carpeted but they were solid cedar. The red wood looked cool, it smelled great, yet it would creak if he wasn’t careful.

He moved onto the stairway—it spiraled as it rose—using the handrail for support, trying to ease the impact of his weight. He was pleased with his progress until he was two steps from the top. It was then he put his

foot on a step that creaked so loud he thought his heart would burst. The sound seemed to echo through the house.

In reality it probably just echoed through his head. Silvia's bedroom door was also open—ten feet off to his left—and he could hear her soft breathing, and listened as it didn't alter with the sound of the creaking step.

Another positive sign. She was out cold.

The upstairs floor was carpeted, thank God. Marc was able to leave the stairway and peek into Silvia's room without making a peep. Her bed was king-size, off to the right a few feet, and she was sleeping on the far right side of it, away from the bathroom and the bedroom chest of drawers.

He saw all this without turning on his flashlight but it was a collage of shadows and silhouettes. He was relieved the carpet continued into the bedroom, but without another source of light he couldn't see any details. Specifically, he couldn't see where the necklace was.

His flashlight had cost him a pretty penny. It was narrow and coated with rubber so that it could fit comfortably in his mouth if he needed his hands free. More important, it had a choice of two filters he could flip over the lens: blue and red. The blue filter cut the brightness of the light by a factor of ten. The red one reduced it fortyfold.

In the past he'd used the blue filter every time. It allowed him to see a lot better. But something about Silvia worried him. She appeared to be out cold. She showed all the signs: slow breathing, lack of movement. Yet he sensed something coming from her, something he couldn't put into words.

He left his flashlight off.

He stood without moving for a long time. It might have been five minutes—maybe fifteen. It felt like an eternity and still Silvia didn't move or change her breathing or give him any other reason to keep him rooted in place. Yet there was just something about her that felt . . . off.

He finally took a step into the room; he took another. He paused between each one. Despite his claustrophobia, he was skilled at breathing softly. He breathed through his mouth, not his nose. The nasal cavities were narrow and his were stuffed up from being in that damn trunk.

He stepped all the way to the bathroom and saw and felt that he had reached the end of the carpet. From the texture, through the soles of his shoes, he felt as if he was stepping onto stone tile. He wanted to get all the way inside the bathroom before he turned on his light. He had already slipped the red filter into place and he'd long ago adjusted the switch so he could turn it on without making a sound.

Unfortunately, stepping into the bathroom was like stepping into a endless void. He didn't have a morsel of light to guide him. He could be about to step on a rubber duck for all he knew, one that quacked.

He had no choice. Aiming his light downward, cupping the lens with his palm, he turned it on. The red glow shimmered like a haunted spirit. A towel on his right leaped out at him; it hung from a gold hook. That was it, that was all he saw. He still had his hand over the lens. He stood without moving for another minute. He felt he had to wait, that he had to give Silvia a chance to betray herself.

She continued to breathe softly, like a child.

He slowly removed his hand from the lens and gasped.

Lying on the bathroom counter was the emerald necklace.

Beside it was a pair of emerald earrings.

Marc couldn't believe his luck. The gems were only a few feet away. If he took a step forward he'd have them. He'd be holding his future in his hands. He could slip an earring in both pockets, pick up the necklace, and turn off the light and walk out the bathroom door, out the bedroom door, then out the front door and begin a whole new life. It was all there in front of him and there was nothing to stop him.

Behind him Marc heard Silvia stir.

She rolled over and lay with her face in his direction.

His heart shrieked in his chest but he retained enough of his wits to flip off his light. He struggled to keep his breath silent. He wasn't worried about stepping on anything. Seconds ago, even in his exalted moment, he'd taken an inventory of the floor and it was clear of obstacles.

No, his fear was of Silvia herself. Why had she taken that exact moment to move? Had she heard something? Or had she been watching him all along, assuming he was Ray come to slip into her bed?

Marc found her timing too much of a coincidence.

It was possible she was playing with him.

Or rather, playing with Ray.

Slipping the flashlight in his back pocket, he stepped forward and put an earring in both his right- and left-front pockets. He wanted to keep them separate lest they bang into each other. Granted, they would hardly make a sound if they did collide, but any noise in a silent room was loud. The necklace he picked up with both hands. His right gripped the stone, his left the gold chain. He turned and stepped to the bathroom door and looked out.

Silvia's silhouette appeared to stare right at him. Her comforter lay halfway up her arm, barely covering her invisible breasts, and the amount of light was so low he could have been in outer space. Yet he knew she was naked. It was as if he could smell her bare skin, and what a smell it was. In that instant, for an instant, he forgot the jewel in his hand.

Then he shook himself. What was he doing? He was totally exposed! He had to get out of the room! He had to get out of the house! Silvia wasn't real. Sandy wasn't real. Nor was the first nineteen years of his life. The green jewel in his hands was all that mattered, the money it could bring, the freedom. Tonight, he could be born again.

Marc turned and walked toward the bedroom door. He was about to step into the hallway when Silvia spoke at his back in a weary tone.

"Come to apologize?" she mumbled, and even half asleep she had a note of sarcasm in her voice.

Marc thought frantically. She must have seen him, and if she hadn't, she knew he was there; or rather, she knew Ray was there. If he walked away he might annoy her. She might come after him. But how could he fake Ray's voice? His voice was totally different.

He'd done his reading, however, and knew it was difficult for people to tell who someone was when they whispered, even if that person was close to them. Never mind that it would be especially hard for Silvia to differentiate him from Ray in her exhausted and intoxicated state. He decided to risk it.

"Tired, let's talk in the morning," he whispered, before quickly leaving the door. With each step he took toward the stairway, he listened frantically. Yet before he even put his foot on the top step, he heard her breathing return to a child's rhythm. She had gone back to sleep.

Downstairs, standing in the kitchen beside a rack of keys, he thought of a wild idea. It came to him out of necessity. Prior to climbing in Silvia's Jag, he hadn't thought enough about the details of his escape.

Now he realized his predicament.

In the morning—or whenever Silvia and Ray woke up—they'd immediately know someone had stolen the necklace and they'd call the police. That would be fine, that was to be expected; he would be home in his studio apartment by then, probably asleep in bed.

But it would take him time to get home. From the faint sound of waves he could hear—for the first time—out the closed kitchen windows, he must be all the way up in Malibu, beside the beach. Which meant he sure as hell couldn't call for a cab to take him home. Once the theft was reported, any detective with a brain would check with all the taxi companies that serviced rich and famous Malibu to ask if they'd picked up a guy after four in the morning. That was a given.

In his four previous thefts, his escapes had been easy. He'd just hiked a few miles out of his victim's area before catching a late-night bus. He'd never been trapped in Malibu before. The town was extremely isolated, wedged in a long strip of land between the hills and the sea. Considering how long Ray had driven before they'd reached Silvia's house, he must be far up the coast. That meant the only way out of the area was to take the Coast Highway south.

But hiking along such a main road made him nervous. Cops were suspicious of guys walking alone in the dark, never mind that the sun would be up soon. True, he could stash the necklace in a tree or bush before leaving the area. If the police stopped him and searched him they wouldn't find anything.

Yet that wouldn't stop them from remembering him. And if they dragged him in for questioning, they'd soon learn where he worked and make the connection to Silvia's missing necklace.

Hiking out of Malibu was not an option.

Shit! Why hadn't he thought of all this before?

There was an alternative. He could hide the jewels nearby, then stay out of sight until ten or so in the morning before heading home. In the daylight he'd look a lot less suspicious. Later in the afternoon, driving his own car, he could return to the area and pick up the necklace.

The idea had pluses but it had negatives as well. He wasn't dressed right to hang out at the beach, and for all

he knew he was in a private beach area. Also, once the theft was called in, the cops would be all over this section of Malibu, searching for suspicious characters.

No, the bottom line was he had to get out of Malibu.

Now. That led him back to his crazy idea.

What if he jumped in the Jaguar, this minute, and just drove the hell out of here? It sounded insane but the idea had a lot going for it.

Ray was snoring up a storm but his room wasn't far from the garage, not like Silvia's. But what if Marc softly closed the door to Ray's bedroom? In their alcohol-induced stupors, would either of them hear the garage door open and close? The fact was Marc had been impressed how quiet the garage door opened and closed when they had arrived. The house was relatively new—it had the finest equipment.

Also, he was exhausted. He couldn't imagine spending the next six hours constantly looking over his shoulder, trying to creep home. If he took the Jag right now, he could be in his apartment in forty minutes, asleep in his own bed in less than an hour. And he wouldn't have to leave the necklace behind.

Even if Silvia or Ray did hear the garage door open and realized the car and the necklace were missing, by the time they called nine-one-one and the cops were able to respond, Marc knew he would at least have made it to Santa Monica—and that itself would be a great place to dump the car before finding a safe way home.

It was decided then. He was leaving in the Jag.

Leaving the necklace on the kitchen counter, Marc crept to Ray's room and gently closed the door. Ray continued to snore like a hog. Returning to the kitchen, Marc stuffed the necklace in his pocket and removed all three sets of keys that were hanging from the rack before heading for the same door he'd used to enter the house.

Sitting in the car in the closed garage, Marc decided to keep on his surgical cap and gloves but to remove his face mask. It was still plenty dark outside, but anyone who drove by and peered in his window might notice the mask. But the medical stuff—it would probably make him look like a young doctor driving home after a long night.

Marc pushed the button attached to the sun visor and the garage door opened smoothly. He backed up and pushed the button again the instant he reached the end of the driveway. The garage shut and the window to Silvia's bedroom remained dark. He paused for a minute a short ways down the road to see if it stayed that way and it did. No other lights went on.

He was in the clear. They were both still asleep.

The house Silvia lived in was half a football field from the ocean. Her road led directly to Pacific Coast Highway, and soon Marc was flying south with a crazy grin on his face. He knew he must look like a madman but he couldn't get rid of the smile. He had never known such joy. He had no words for how he felt. He just prayed that the feeling lasted.

The fact that no extra lights had gone on in Silvia's house gave him the confidence to drive the Jaguar all the way to West Hollywood. But he made one major change to his wild plan as he approached his apartment.

Before he dumped the car, he decided to swing by the place where he hid his hoard. Now he was anxious to get the necklace out of his pockets.

His hiding place was only a mile from where he lived, in an alley behind a row of buildings that should have been condemned twenty years ago. There, behind a stinking Dumpster that was no longer used, was a red brick wall with three loose bricks. Inside the wall was a narrow space surrounded by plasterboard on three sides and cheap wood paneling on the other.

Still being careful, he parked a block from the hiding spot, casually walked over to it, hid the necklace and earrings in a brand-new garbage bag, stowed it in the wall, and was back in the Jag in five minutes.

Now he had to get rid of the car. No sweat; he left the sports car locked on a residential street four miles from where Silvia had watched her film.

He was only two miles from home. It was a relief to finally be able to take off his gloves and cap. But despite his excitement, his fatigue hit him again and the two miles felt like a long way to walk. He was tempted to hop on a bus.

But even though his legs ached, walking home on the side streets was the smart move. Now that there was a glow in the east and the sun was about to rise, and he was back in Hollywood, no one would give him a second look.

The sun rose before he reached his apartment. He was only a quarter mile from home but he had to take a piss and couldn't wait. Sliding into another decrepit alley two blocks from his goal, he quickly relieved himself against a grimy wall and pulled up his zipper.

He turned to leave the alley when he suddenly realized he was walking in the direction of the sun, when it should have been at his back. He turned again and saw a second sun. For an instant he felt utterly disoriented. He turned back to the burning disk he had seen the first time and was forced to blink.

It had moved closer in the brief span he'd put his back to it, and it definitely wasn't the warm and soothing morning sun he'd known all his life. It wasn't even yellow. Rather, it had a glaring white center and was surrounded by a blazing violet halo. Both lights were suddenly so bright they momentarily blinded him and he instinctively raised his arm to protect his eyes.

A wave of intense heat swept over him.

A massive fist seemed to slam him from head to toe, from behind, shoving him toward the lights. He felt his feet lift off the ground and assumed he was about to fall forward. But for some reason he never hit the ground.

That was the last thing he remembered.

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