

GHOSTS OF BUNKER HILL

By Paul D. Marks

I stood at the bottom of the hill, staring up at Angels Flight, the famous little funicular railway in the Bunker Hill section of Los Angeles, that brought people from Hill Street up to Olive. I desperately wanted to ride those rails up to the top. But now the two twin orange and black cars were permanently moored in the middle, suspended in mid-air, ghosts from another time.

Back in the day, the Hill was home to the swells. When they moved west, the desperate moved in. John Fante rented a room on the Hill, wrote Ask the Dust and Dreams from Bunker Hill there. By the time Raymond Chandler wrote about it he was calling it old and shabby town. If Chandler thought the streets were mean back then, he should see them now.

It finally rained in Los Angeles. It rained on Angels Flight. Seems like it rained a lot more when I was a kid. Sharp needles of clear water dancing on my skin. Washing it clean. Cleansing the air.

Somebody stole something from me. Something I didn't know if I'd ever get back.

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I was playing hooky from work on a Friday. Just needed an extra day off, lazing about, streaming Chinatown. It was just about the end, my favorite part. The doorbell

rang. Damn. Somebody always wanted something. If the telemarketers didn't get you the door-to-door salesmen would. I opened the door.

“Kevin Birch?” He had a package in his hand. Long, skinny white box. Looked like flowers. Who would be sending me flowers? I was looking at the package, not his face.

“Yes.”

He dropped the flowers. The box split open, the flowers bleeding onto the front porch. A glint of shining metal flared in the sunlight. Nothing compared to the flare when he pulled the trigger.

“Oh shit...” I hit the ground. He didn't stick around to see if he'd done the job successfully. I tried to impress his face, his clothes, on my mind, but all I could see were those damned flowers. My eyes faded shut.

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“Who're you?” a uniformed cop with attitude asked the black man, as he walked up to the crime scene tape choking off the perimeter of our property on Carroll Avenue. The cop moved to block, gave him the once over. The twice over.

“Howard Hamm.” Howard reached for a sleek, streamlined sterling silver business card holder inside his Armani coat. The cop's hand instinctively landed on the butt of his holstered pistol. He couldn't take his eyes off Howard. Howard stood six feet tall. Dressed like a model out of Ebony or GQ. Clothes make the man, he always said. His razor thin Cab Calloway moustache just added to the effect. He thought the twenty-first century needed a little classing up.

“Well, Howard Hamm, this is a crime scene.”

“I’m a friend of the victim. I’m also a licensed private investigator.” He gingerly handed a business card to the cop.

“Or maybe the perp returning to the scene of the crime.”

It looked like it was about to get ugly.

“Howard,” my wife, Nicole, called from the front porch, interrupting things just in time. She ran up to him. “It’s okay,” she said to the cop. “I called him. He’s a friend of the family.” The cop reluctantly let him slip under the yellow tape.

“Nicole?”

“It’s awful, Howard. Someone shot Kevin.” Nicole wasn’t an emotionally demonstrative person, but she actually had a tear in her eye.

“Why? What happened?”

“I don’t know.”

“They have any suspects yet?”

Nicole shook her head. The tear rolled down her cheek. “My nosy neighbor Sally called on my cell. She found him. I couldn’t believe it—still can’t.”

“Where’s Kev now?” Howard said, handing her a sparkling white linen handkerchief for the tear.

“They wouldn’t let me see him.”

Howard and I were best friends, an odd couple. We’d met at USC, though we were Bruins at heart. The only two dormies more interested in movies than video games and Trojan football. It made us fast friends, even though we were from different worlds, different sides of the tracks if you will. That only made us closer. We had a curiosity

about each other, each other's backgrounds, cultures. Nothing weird, just curiosity. I grew up in Los Feliz. He in South Central. Same city, different universes.

“If you want me working officially you have to hire me, so I have standing with the cops.”

“Of course, Howard. I knew I could count on you. To the cops it's just another shooting. Another statistic. But you're his friend. How much?”

“A dollar. Just to make it legal. Check, not cash.”

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That's Howard, a buck to make it legal. He didn't want the money, he'd do it out of friendship. He'd find the SOB who shot me and figure out why. He was a damn good P.I. He had the background for it, cop, DA investigator. Did some time in the service. He wouldn't talk much about that. I figured it was Top Secret and all that.

He stood with Nicole, shielding her from the inevitable reporters and stringers who sit around all day listening to the police band, waiting for an “if it bleeds it leads” story they can jump on. A uniformed cop stood with them, making sure they didn't concoct some kind of story, as if they'd need one. As if either of them had anything to do with this.

Howard's eyes scanned the knots of people gathering on their front stoops and behind the crime scene tape. Neighbors, delivery people, gawkers. Even Charles Powell, one of my co-workers. What was he doing there?

Nicole walked Howard toward our house, my beautiful Queen Anne Victorian. They walked up the front steps to the porch, dodging the blood and body outline. We

were only the second owners since the house was moved from Bunker Hill. This house was my—our—baby.

Criminalists, cops and all the usual suspects were all over everything—fouling my beautiful house with fingerprint powder and other tools of the trade. My skin crawled.

“Kevin would go insane if he saw what they’re doing to the house,” Howard said. That lightened the moment for Nicole. Brought a slight smile to her face.

Detective Sergeant Sandy Baker and D1 Erin Bowen finally showed up. Took charge. Bowen’s pant suit and flat shoes, gave her a utilitarian look, though not unattractive. The searching eyes said cop. Baker didn’t seem to care much about clothes either. Looked like he bought his suit from one of those three-for-the-price-of-one places down on Los Angeles Street.

Howard and Nicole were ushered into the study to the left of the foyer. He sat in a Victorian parlor chair, she on the fainting couch. It had taken forever to find just the right couch for that room. Baker and Bowen entered. Baker grabbed a delicate needlepoint chair, dragging it across the parquet floor. Not just any parquet floor, but the original floor from when the house was built in the 1890s. The sound of it made me squirm the way chalk on a blackboard does. Baker leaned the chair back on its hind legs, the top rail digging into the wainscoting, the rear legs into the floor. They creaked. I wanted to go after him. Howard cringed. Nicole just looked numb.

After some basic preliminary questions, they left Howard in the room with a uni, took Nicole across the hall to the parlor. Yes, we call the living room the *parlor*.

Howard traced his finger along the gash Baker’s chair had made in the wainscoting. Shook his head. He paced the room under the watchful eyes of the cop

stationed at the door. He examined the antique books and old-fashioned reproduction William Morris wallpaper, but I was sure in his mind he was figuring what his first move would be.

Bowen returned. Told—ordered—Howard to sit back in the parlor chair. She sat opposite him in the chair Baker had used, but didn't lean it into the wall. She hit him with harder questions, as if he was a suspect. It was clear he didn't know anything.

“I'm as curious as you,” he said.

“I hope you're more curious than that.” She winked. He smiled back. She left him alone again.

Electric orange sun streaked in through the window, making a parallelogram of light on the parquet floor. The sky frosted silver at the edge of the clouds, and the sun sank into the ocean somewhere off to the west. Street lamps came on shedding golden light on the street. Houses lit up, inside and out. It was a postcard-beautiful night—the kind of night that made me fall in love with Carroll Avenue. A trip to the past and an oasis of calm in the heart of L.A. A safe oasis, until today.

Nicole came into the study.

“How'd it go?” Howard asked.

“They were fine. Didn't shine a light in my face or anything.” She twirled her wedding ring. “They always suspect the spouse.”

“Ask you anything unusual?”

“Just where I was. Did we have any marital strife, that's what they said ‘marital strife.’ But no, nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Well, they'll be back at you till they fully clear you.”

“I’m not concerned. I didn’t do anything and I was at work when it happened.”

The thin blue line of cops, criminalists and other functionaries eventually departed, leaving Nicole and Howard and a polluted trail of chemical spray residue, fingerprint powder and the other detritus of a crime scene investigation, not to mention a Rorschach blot of dried blood fanning out from the door on the front porch. He ran his finger over splotches of black fingerprint powder on the inside banister.

Nicole offered Howard a cup of tea in the kitchen. He sat on a stool by the counter. Most people wanted new, streamlined kitchens, stainless steel and wood du jour. Our kitchen retained its Victorian flavor with white cabinets, porcelain sinks and a reproduction stove that looked old, but ran new.

“Kevin’s right, such a beautiful house,” Howard said. “They have to wreck everything. They know the guy didn’t get beyond the front door. I know they have to dig out the bullets, but why spray everything up?”

“They’re just doing their jobs.” He looked around the house, the ornately carved door frame and strategically placed antique knick knacks. “As many times as I’ve been here, I never really took a good look at the house, but while you were in with the detectives—. I thought it was old, just old. I stopped looking after that. But it really is something. I think I’m seeing it through Kev’s eyes for the first time.”

“It’s nice. I like modern better though, like you. But Kevin loves it here. I think if he could have lived in the 1940s he would have been happy,” she said. “He always wished he did.”

“There are two kinds of people, those who escape to the past and those who want to escape from it,” Howard said. “Either way they always think there’s something better

than where they are right now. But the past always looks better in hindsight, kind of like coffee, the aroma always promises more than the taste delivers.”

She set her coffee cup down, her eyes roaming the room. “I always felt second fiddle to this house.”

Howard smiled. “You’re jealous of the house?”

“It’s worse than a mistress. Takes more time and more money. Money we could have used to travel or invest, but I guess now’s not the time to be worrying about that.”

“I guess not. How you holding up?”

“Well, I’ve had better days,” Nicole said in that ironic, understated way that helped me fall in love with her. I remember the day I met her. Howard and I were at a mixer and he dared me to ask her out. I watched the two of them in the kitchen now, thought about what a nice couple they made. If I hadn’t married her, I wonder if she would have ended up with Howard? I felt a twinge of jealousy.

“Yeah, I bet.” He put his arm on her shoulder. She fell into him, soft sobs landing tears on his Zegna shirt. She went to sit, he pulled the chair out for her.

“It’s funny. You’re kind of old-fashioned, chivalrous, but also very modern. Kevin dresses modern, but lives in some fantasy Los Angeles of the past. That’s why we live down here, you know.”

“I know.”

Howard slipped a little digital voice recorder from his pocket. Flashed it at Nicole so she knew she was being recorded.

He said, “I guess I’ll start with the standard question, did Kev have any enemies?”

“You knew him as well as I did, maybe better in some ways.” She toyed with her hair. “But no, I don’t think so.”

He stopped, gazed up the stairs, as if he’d seen something. Someone. Shook his head and it was gone.

“What is it, Howard? Do you see something?”

“I see a lot of things—things I never noticed before. Feel them too.”

“Feel what?”

“Ghosts. Ghosts of the past here. This house has history.”

* * *

Nicole says I live in the past. Not even the real past, but a romantic past Los Angeles, made up of the likes of Raymond Chandler, John Fante and James M. Cain. If only I could get some help from them, Chandler and Marlowe or Fante and Bandini. I guess you can’t only live in the past. Wish I could have though.

Howard and Nicole wanted to escape the past; I wanted to escape into it. For me, Nicole moved to our classic, refurbished Victorian on Carroll and I’ll love her always for that. In the 1960s someone had the brilliant idea to tear down the old Victorians on Bunker Hill, many of which had become SROs and flop houses, and build a sparkling new downtown of gleaming high rises, but it won’t be long till they’re shabby town too—high-rise shabby town. Luckily several of the grand old dames were saved, moved to Carroll Avenue a few miles away, including ours.

Every time I walked those creaky wooden floors, I felt the presence of the past. The people who’d lived there. Not ghosts, but history, something Los Angeles often doesn’t appreciate. Carroll Avenue was close to downtown, where I worked. But the

whole short street looked like something out of early 1900s L.A. I loved everything about it.

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Rain-cleansed blue skies pushed the bright, cheery SoCal sun through the kitchen window, where it landed in a hard wedge of light on the island, splintering off Nicole's first coffee of the day. The cheery sunlight and Nicole's mood were at odds. I knew her well enough to know her mood would win.

Nicole thumbed through the mail—there wasn't much else to do. Face drawn tight—worried about me, I guess. She reached for the phone.

“Howard, it's Nicole. Something's come up.”

Howard jumped into his Mustang GT convertible for the trip from his glistening Bunker Hill apartment tower to slip back in time to our retro street that, at least on the surface, had an air of gentility and decorum. Before he was even inside the house, Nicole handed him an envelope. The return address read: VINE. Howard pulled out the enclosed letter. “Shit!”

“It never even occurred to me to tell them about Chance. He had several more years in jail,” Nicole said.

“The letter's postmarked six weeks ago.”

“I know. But it just got here today. You know how the post office is.”

Howard headed to the door, his eyes drifting toward the study. Several empty moving boxes were thrown into the corner of the room.

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My wandering tour of the City of Angels—and devils—found me standing at the bottom of the Spring Street steps of City Hall, gazing up at the granite art deco façade. More substantial than the movie sets of Hollywood not all that far away. Like so much of L.A., City Hall was the star of more movies than just about any other building on the planet. Hell, star of more movies than many movie stars, everything from the Daily Planet building in the old Superman TV series to playing itself in L.A. Confidential. Angels Flight and Bunker Hill starred in their share of movies too, like the noirs Criss Cross and Kiss Me, Deadly. And like everyone in L.A., I wanted to be the star of my own movie. And now I was a star, of a mystery. Howard was filling in for Marlowe and I was my own MacGuffin.

I barely knew how I got here, but somehow I'd made my way down Sunset Boulevard, past Chinatown, where we know things are best left forgotten. I could see Philip Marlowe taking the City Hall steps two at a time in Trouble is My Business. Lighting a cigarette. The acrid smoke tinged the air. He stood next to me. I shook my head to clear it. He was still there, maybe. But I sure as hell felt his presence. I lit a cigarette of my own as a cold wind blew up out of nowhere. I'm not much of a smoker, but what could it hurt?

Gazing up at City Hall, as if it were some kind of monumental temple to the City of Angels—I wondered if it could help me figure out who shot me. There was always something mystical about the old parts of downtown L.A. for me, the romance of Fante and Chandler, even if it had changed so much since their time. Maybe I'd read too many crime novels and now crime came home to me.

City Hall was no help. I didn't have any better idea about who shot me than detectives Baker and Bowen. I'm not saying I was a perfect angel—hell no. But I didn't think I'd pissed anyone off enough to put a bullet in me. Anyone but Bryan Chance that is.

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Howard sat on the Bunker Hill steps, that meandered up or down the hill, depending on your point of view, across from L.A.'s Central Library. He stared at the library's art deco architecture contrasting it with the tall, conspicuous steel and glass towers that dwarfed it, making it look like a relic from another time.

I could see him sitting there, thinking, trying to put it all together, but there were still too many pieces missing. The one new element was that Bryan Chance was out on early parole and he had a beef with me. An unmarked cop car pulled to the curb, lights flashing. Traffic angrily rolled around it. The driver got out, walked to Howard.

“You look glum,” Bowen said.

“Y'know, I never cared about 'old' Los Angeles. But Kevin did. He loved this city, only I'm not sure he loved it as it is or more as it was. And I never believed in ghosts, but I feel them here. He told me about what happened on Bunker Hill. How they tore it down for redevelopment. But if you sit here, looking at the old Central Library across the street and what's left of old L.A., you can feel it. Inside you.”

“You sure you're all right?”

“They say all those houses on Carroll are haunted,” he said. “Especially the ones that were moved from Bunker Hill, like Kev's. I never got why he dug that place. But I see it now. It has history. Not only his and Nicole's, but history. Like a living breathing

history of some long gone L.A., only it isn't gone, not really." Howard changed subjects.

"Thanks for meeting me on a Saturday, Detective Bowen."

"Crime never sleeps." She offered him a Lifesaver.

"I'll have to use that for the title of my autobiography someday," he laughed. "So, tell me, is Nicole a suspect? We're old friends, you know. Kevin too."

"You know the drill, all spouses are suspects till cleared."

"She clear?"

"Not yet. Looks like she will be though. Has a pretty good alibi and we can't find a motive."

"She called me to the house this morning. Showed me this." He handed Detective Bowen the letter Nicole had given him from VINE, the California Department of Corrections Victim Notification Service. The letter stated that Bryan Chance was due to be released on parole two weeks ago.

"She just got the letter in today's mail? So Chance's out two full weeks and now Birch is dead. Typical. Government red tape."

"Here's the story." Howard continued staring at the library, couldn't take his eyes off of it. "Kevin testified against Bryan Chance in his trial for aggravated assault. He ended up going away for seven years, largely based on Kevin's testimony."

"So the trial was seven years ago?"

"More like three years ago. Guess he got out early for good behavior," he said.

"And he's been out two weeks, Kevin gets shot and the letter comes a day late."

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Of course, I hadn't known that Bryan Chance was out on parole. Just like Howard didn't know that the Bunker Hill steps were relatively new, built in the 1990s, and not some old L.A. landmark. But they'll have a special memory for some kid twenty years from now when she remembers her pop buying them hot dogs from a street vendor and eating them on the steps.

I didn't get a good look at the guy who shot me. Wondered where Bryan Chance was when the bullet hit the bone. Was he dropping a box of flowers on my front porch? Where was he now?

I wandered back toward Bunker Hill, not fearing the drifters and bangers. Found myself in the Grand Central Market, where Fante's alter ego Bandini goes to bump into girls, accidentally on purpose. The market is more upscale today, but there's still plenty of flirting to be had. And it's right across from the new and improved Angels Flight, moved a block away from the original site during all the redevelopment shuffling. The original Angels Flight ran for decades. The new one for only five years before an accident forced it to be shut down. Yup, new and improved.

I loved the smells of Grand Central, spicy Mexican foods, fruits, coffee and kombucha. And business. Everybody hustling. I made my way through the giant cavern, thinking about my situation. Seemed like the case would wrap up pretty soon, open and shut. Bryan Chance was out of prison. I had helped put him there. I had a bullet hole or two in me. Howard would figure it out. One thing leads to another—and Bryan Chance goes back to jail.

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Chance's parole officer wasn't happy about having to look up his address on his day off—Bowen persuaded him. Chance lived in the Adams-Normandie area of L.A., not one of the city's choice neighborhoods. Another place where old Victorians used to dominate. Some still lived there. USC student housing. Or in this case, parolee housing. Cheap. And no questions asked.

They cruised south on Vermont in her unmarked.

"I better call for backup," she said.

"What's wrong with me? I ain't chopped liver."

"You're not a cop either."

"Used to be. Marine too. I'm comin' in."

"Against my better judgment."

They pulled up in front of a beat up, beat down Craftsman house on 20th Street.

Bowen knocked.

A Hispanic woman answered the door. "Yes?"

Bowen flashed ID on her. "We're looking for Bryan Chance?"

"Bryan Chance? Nobody here with that name."

The woman let them look around. There were no signs of a man living on the premises.

"He gave a false address to his PO," Bowen said, as they drove off. She was on her cell to the PO before they hit the first stop sign.

"When we find him, I wish we could bust the door in like in the old days," she said.

"I thought women cops were supposed to be sensitive."

“Yeah, well sometimes you just wanna bust heads.”

Bowen couldn't reach Chance's PO. She looked up his known associates on the car's computer. They checked with two of them. They didn't even know Chance was out of jail, or so they said.

They swung by Nicole's and my house. Twilight cast its threatening shadow over the street. Darkness swept the sky, dissolving from light azure to dark indigo. Triple-globed street lamps shimmered on the retro street.

Bowen and Howard tried to get Nicole to think of someone besides Chance who might have it in for me. Nicole thought Chance was the most likely suspect. But also maybe Powell, my co-worker who I beat out for a promotion, and a guy named Reeves who'd cut me off on the road. Short list.

Howard's eyes wandered over our house again. Those eyes saw everything. What was he looking for? What was he seeing?

“Kevin always said he could feel the ghosts of Raymond Chandler and John Fante here. Especially when the jasmine or honeysuckle was in bloom,” Nicole said, tamping her emotions down. “I didn't even know who either of them were when I met him.”

“Yeah, I like to hang with Easy Rawlins myself.”

“Easy who?” both Nicole and Bowen chimed.

“Never mind.”

* * *

Still hoping for inspiration, I parked myself on a bench in Pershing Square, just a short jog from Bunker Hill. Hoping to figure out who shot me. Lit a cigarette right where

Bandini did in Ask the Dust. Smoke swirled from the cigarette like a snake enthralled by the tones of a snake charmer's pungi.

A cool breeze made my whole body shiver. It wasn't a cold wind, but it made me shiver anyway. Bandini sat on the bench next to me, smoking, just like in the book. My head felt light. I knew Bandini wasn't there, like I'd known Marlowe wasn't there at City Hall. Still, they seemed real enough. Maybe just the cigarette smoke making me light-headed. Like I said, I'm not much of a smoker.

Bandini had said there were no tall buildings in the Square. He should see it today. Steel and glass spikes sprout from every available space. And when nothing's available the wrecking ball makes a new empty lot. Much of the park greens have been cemented over, with little pinpricks of green here and there, like a garnish on the side of your plate.

I felt Bandini at my side as I stared across at the Biltmore Hotel. No, I'm not crazy. I'm not saying I saw a ghost. Just a feeling. Then, something flitted by on the edge of my peripheral vision. Across the street in the Biltmore: JFK sipping champagne cocktails at his inauguration party. Swells drinking bathtub gin in the Gold Room, a sort of speakeasy for the upper crust during Prohibition, hidden in the depths of the Biltmore. Oscar ceremonies and celebs. Mae West and Carmen Miranda partying. Ghosts of the past. Now I wasn't sure what was real and what wasn't.

And Elizabeth Short, the Black Dahlia, wandering the halls aimlessly. It's the last place she was seen alive. Maybe the last place for me too.

* * *

While waiting to get a line on Chance, Howard shot the Mustang west on Sunset. Even Marlowe did time on Sunset. I wonder if Howard felt Marlowe's presence over his shoulder. He found Charles Powell watering his emerald green lawn in the middle of the drought. Powell didn't look happy to see him get out of the slick Mustang in his fancy suit.

Howard flashed his ID. Went into his spiel.

"Yeah, he got the promotion," Powell said. "I deserved it. Sure as hell better than that poseur, Birch. I was pissed. But not pissed enough to land myself in jail."

"When was the last time you saw Kevin?"

"Thursday afternoon, at work."

"And Mrs. Birch?"

Powell was a good looking guy. Not as good looking as Tyrone Power, but better looking than Bogie. Of course, Bogie had played both Marlowe and Spade, so that gave him extra points. I could see what Howard was getting at.

"Whatever you're thinking never happened. Now get out."

His next stop was Jason Reeves, the guy who'd cut me off on the freeway. When I honked at him, he'd gone ballistic on me. Followed me for miles. I thought he was going to kill me then and there. But maybe for him revenge was a dish better served cold. I'd gotten his license, just in case. Nicole had given it to Howard.

Reeves made Howard look small. That was like saying Shaquille O'Neal made Charles Barkley look small. Howard stood his ground, even as Reeves leaned into him.

"Yeah, I'm known for my road rage," Reeves said.

"You seem proud of it."

“Been to anger management three times.”

“Working well.”

“Maybe you better leave before it stops working again.”

* * *

I rode Angels Flight, back and forth. If it went in a circle instead of up and down my head would be spinning. It was sort of spinning anyway. Who would want to do this to me? Chance was the most likely. But I'd also pissed off Powell and Reeves. And people had been known to off people for a lot less than “stealing” their promotion or getting in a road rage incident. Maybe it was someone I didn't even know I'd pissed off.

* * *

Howard stopped by our house Sunday afternoon to fill Nicole in on his progress or lack of. He parked, walked up the walkway to the house, past For Sale and Open House Today signs stabbed into the lawn. He stopped a moment, gazed at the house. At the lattice work and the fish scale shingles that I'd so painstakingly restored. The colored glass in the windows. The house, my art. My masterpiece. Every inch lovingly renovated.

The blood stain, body outline and fingerprint powder on the front porch, already scrubbed and gone. Just the echo of a little dark spot to say I had fallen there. If you didn't know you wouldn't even see it. Howard stepped warily over it.

A well-dressed woman in her thirties came up the walk. She smiled at Howard. “Here for the open house? I was just about to take down the sign, but if—”

“Not a buyer, just a friend of the family.”

“Oh.” The woman sounded disappointed. “Mrs. Birch isn't home today. We prefer showing houses with the owner out.”

“Too bad she has to sell.”

“Well, you know she can’t really stay after what happened.”

“I’ll take a card if you have one.” They exchanged cards.

“It’s a great neighborhood,” she said. “Very historic.”

* * *

Bowen and Baker had checked with the other witnesses and even the jury members at Chance’s trial. None dead. None wounded. None threatened. Only me. Lucky me.

“Seems that since no one else has been threatened or hurt, someone was out specifically for Kevin,” Bowen said.

Howard had done his own digging Monday morning and found a possible crib for Chance. They drove over to a dilapidated Victorian in the Adams district, that would clean up real nice with a little TLC. Found Chance and his homies sitting on the porch, a Colt 45 in his hand, the kind you drink, not the kind you shoot. Malt liquor. But it was still a parole violation.

“Shit,” one of Chance’s buds said, and slammed over the porch railing. Chance didn’t run. He poured the rest of his bottle out over the railing into the dirt on the side of the house. Nobody would notice it there what with all the crap littering the little side run.

“Ever notice they all have that look?” Howard said. “The sharp eyes, unshaven, but not Hollywood-cool unshaven. Greasy hair. Tats.”

“Well not all, some perps wear suits and ties.”

They headed up the overgrown grass toward the porch.

“I can see you’re cops. Gonna bust me for drinking?”

“Where were you Friday?” Bowen flashed her badge.

“Friday? You expect me to remember that?”

“It was three days ago and that’s not a very good alibi.”

“I was here, all day.”

“Can you prove it?”

“I’m not famous, you know. Don’t have no paparazzi Nazis following me around all day. What’s this all about?”

“I’ll ask the questions,” Bowen said.

“And what are you guys? White lady and black dude cops. The Affirmative Action Duo? Super heroes?”

“Your mouth is gonna get you in trouble, boy,” Howard said. He turned to Bowen, whispered, “You have to arrest him.”

“Got no charges.”

“Drinking on parole. At least that can get you a hold on him so he doesn’t blow town.”

Chance jumped the railing into the side run. Ran toward the back of the house. Bowen and Howard gave chase. Bowen gave it all she had. Howard hesitated a split second before dunking his \$700 John Varvatos shoes into the muck on the side of the house. They caught Chance climbing the back fence. Yanked him down to the ground. Howard stepped on his chest, holding him down, sludge from his shoe impregnating Chance’s shirt, not that anyone would notice. Bowen called for backup.

“Not bad for a day’s work,” Bowen said, as the black and white with Chance in the back pulled away.

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I could see Carroll Avenue standing in the heart of L.A., an echo of the past. Victorians up and down the street. Old-fashioned ambience. Not enough to keep the modern world from intruding though.

I saw our house. I loved that house. I loved its history. I loved that it had been moved from Bunker Hill and refurbished. I loved living there.

I was born in the City of Angels and I knew that someday I'd probably die here. There was really no place else to go.

And then it hit me. I hoped it would hit Howard too.

* * *

Twilight rang its bell. Sunset laid down a crimson, orange and blue veil over downtown. Howard parked in an overpriced lot, walked toward the Bradbury Building, lights burning gold from most of the offices inside. From the outside it's just another non-descript downtown building. Inside, Howard marveled at the amazing Italian Renaissance masterpiece. He'd heard of it, but had never been inside its walls of wrought iron, Italian marble, Mexican tile, wood and glass. Blazing sundown light streaked in through the skylight, bathing the atrium lobby in haunting hues of sunset cream and gold. Howard looked at the card in his hand. Went up to the third floor in the open-grill elevator. If he loved old movies as much as I did, he'd know that *Blade Runner* and *D.O.A.* were filmed here. He'd feel their presence.

Some say that Marlowe had an office here in Chandler's books. Others disagree. Either way, he did have an office here in the movie *Marlowe*, starring James Garner. That was good enough for me.

Howard entered the office listed on the card. Several desks filled the inside, all topped with computers, incongruous in the 1890s building. Maps of various L.A. neighborhoods filled the walls, including Carroll Avenue.

“Mr. Hamm,” Amanda Reisner, the blonde real estate agent Howard had met at our house, said. “You’ve changed your mind—the home on Carroll?”

“I’m more into modern myself.”

“I’m sure we have something—” But she looked defeated. “Since you’re a friend of the family, I know you already know about the shooting. It’s going to be a hard sell with that and I have to disclose it. But you don’t look like someone who would be bothered by that.”

“I have been seeing things different lately. If nobody wants the house, maybe Kev would want me to have it. But, um, I’m here about something else. Can you tell me when Nicole put the house on the market?”

“I don’t know if I should.”

“I’m sure it’s public record. I’m sure I could—” That’s all the convincing it took. It didn’t hurt that Howard was damn good looking.

“Our first talks were about six weeks ago,” she said.

“When did you finalize the deal? Sign the contract?”

“March 8th.”

“So about five weeks ago?”

“That’s right.”

“Thank you, Ms. Reisner.” He shook her hand.

“Amanda, please.”

“One more question, Amanda. Did Mr. Birch sign the contract?”

“No, I don’t believe he did. He was supposed to but then, then his *accident* happened.”

“Thank you.”

His cell rang.

“Bad news,” Bowen said. “Chance is clear. Alibi checks and he’ll probably be kicked on the parole violation. Jail overcrowding and all that.”

“Back to Square One,” Howard said. He called Nicole to tell her the news. Her phone rang and rang, until the voicemail picked up. He didn’t leave a message.

* * *

Howard parked the Mustang a couple doors up from our house and waited. At eight p.m., Nicole headed down the front steps to our car in the driveway. He followed, driving a block without his headlights, before turning them on. He followed Nicole to the Angels Flight Café right next to Angels Flight. Not a place he’d normally go. Not a place Nicole would normally go either.

The retro café filled its walls with pictures of the original Angels Flight, the new one be damned. Nicole walked to a dark booth in the center of the café. Howard discreetly pulled out his cell phone. He eyed Nicole and the good looking Harry-the-Hipster type she met up with. She was a few years older than him, dressed to kill in heels and a simple but very short black dress.

The couple sat at a table about halfway into the café. They couldn’t keep their eyes, hands or lips off each other in a huge exhibition of PDA.

Bowen walked in the front door. Nicole looked up. The man with her tore for the back door, running straight into Howard. Howard grabbed his arm, twisted. There wasn't much fight in the man. Nicole looked to the rear and the front. No way out. Howard, Nicole's boyfriend in tow, and Bowen made a pincer movement on Nicole from both sides. No escape.

"Why aren't you going after Chance?" Nicole shouted.

"You just used Chance as a scapegoat. You got the VINE letter and held onto it, pretending it only came a couple days ago." Instead of triumph, Howard's whole body fell in a wave of disillusion.

"How'd you know?" Nicole's expression turned to defeat.

"You put the house up for sale on your own well before Kevin's *accident*," Howard said. "Kevin loved that house, he would never have agreed to sell it. That why you had him killed or this?" Howard glared at Nicole's boyfriend.

Bowen walked up behind Nicole. "Turn around, please." Cuffed her, then her boyfriend.

"Who's this?" Howard said.

"Just some boy toy."

"Some boy toy who did your dirty work for you."

Bowen turned Nicole and her boy toy over to uniformed cops, who walked them out to their black and white.

"I always hated that albatross of a house," Nicole said, as one of the cops put her in the back of the patrol car, her friend in another. "Kevin loved it more than he loved me."

Bowen and Howard walked to the curb in the cool night air. Howard lurched into the street, watching the black and white roll off. Was that a tear in his eye? “I can’t believe it was Nicole,” he said. He looked like he was about to launch after the car.

A mist filtered around the street lamps. Howard was lost in the haze.

* * *

I felt my wandering tour of the City of Angels coming to an end as I hit Angels Flight one last time. If there was any kind of happy ending it was that Howard bought our house. I knew he’d give it all the TLC I had. Nobody I would rather have living there.

Everything morphed into mist and haze. I could hardly see them anymore, any of them. They were fading into the night like the wisp of smoke dancing to the snake charmer. Could barely hear them now. I heard one last thing Bowen said, as she tried to pull Howard back onto sidewalk.

“Forget it, Howard. It’s Bunker Hill.” And then everything went blank.

End