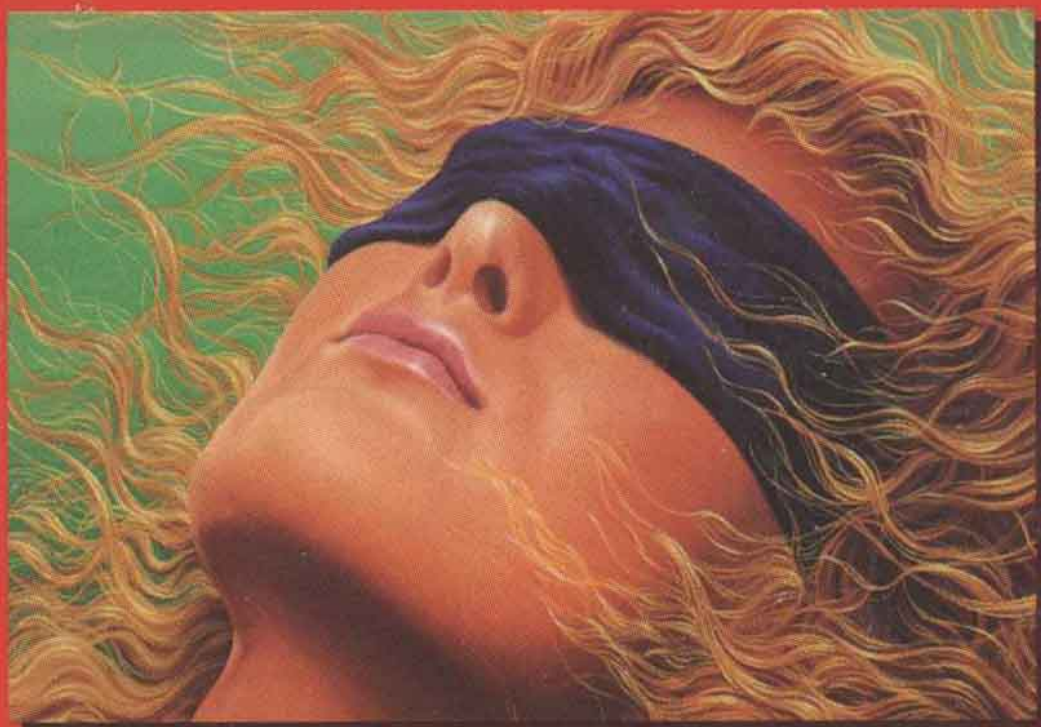


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Faye Kellerman

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THE RITUAL BATH
SACRED AND PROFANE
THE QUALITY OF MERCY
MILK AND HONEY
DAY OF ATONEMENT

As usual for my family

*And for Liza Dawson, Leona Nevler, and Ann Harris
—thank you*



ONE

WORKING OFF DUTY MEANT DOING THE SAME JOB WITHOUT pay. But since the call's location was only twelve blocks away and the case would wind up in his detail anyway, Decker figured he might as well jump the uniforms. Cordon off the scene before the blues could trample evidence, making his on-duty tasks that much easier. He unhooked the mike, answered the radio transmitting officer—and turned on the computer screen in the unmarked Plymouth. A few moments later, green LCD lines snaked across the monitor.

A female assault victim—suspected sexual trauma—no given name or age. The Party Reporting had been female and Spanish speaking. The victim had been found by the PR in a ransacked bedroom. Paramedics had been called down.

Decker made a sharp right turn and headed for the address.

The interior of the Plymouth was rich with the aroma of newly baked breads—a corn rye loaded with caraway seeds, two crisp onion boards, a dozen poppy-seeded kaiser and crescent rolls, and assorted Danishes. Goodies just pulled from the oven, so hot the bakery lady didn't dare put them in plastic. They sat in open white wax-lined bags, exhaling their yeasty breath, making his mouth water.

Fresh bakery treats seemed to be Rina's only craving

during the pregnancy and Decker didn't mind indulging her. The nearest kosher bakery was a twelve-mile round trip of peace and quiet. He enjoyed the early-morning stillness, cruising the stretch of open freeway, witnessing the fireworks on the eastern horizon. He reveled in the forty minutes of solitude and resented the intrusion of the call, the location so close he couldn't ignore it, his mind forced to snap into work-mode.

He turned left onto Valley Canyon Drive, the roadside cutting through wide-open areas of ranchland. In the distance was the renowned Valley Canyon Spa Resort—a two-story pink-stucco monolith carved into the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. It looked like a giant boil on the sandy-colored face of the rocks. The guys in the squad room had shortened the spa's name to VALCAN, which in turn had been bastardized to VULCAN. The running joke was that VULCAN's clientele were secret relatives of Mr. Spock beamed down to get ear jobs. VULCAN had hosted more stars than the sidewalks of Hollywood Boulevard, its facilities among the most exclusive in the United States. That, and the fact that the place was run by Davida Eversong's daughter, made it a national draw for rich anorexic women wanting to exercise themselves skeletal.

Davida Eversong was one of those self-proclaimed *grandes dames* of Old Hollywood. Scuttlebutt had it that she had burrowed herself into a bungalow on the spa's acreage. Once Decker had spotted her at a local mom-and-pop market. Her features had been hidden by sunglasses and a black turban that wrapped around her cheeks and tied under her chin. It had been her getup that had attracted his attention. Who dressed like that at night except someone wanting to be noticed? But only he had given her a second glance. To the rest of the shoppers, she had been just another L.A. eccentric.

Decker was barely old enough to remember the latter part of her long film career—the last three or four movies where she'd been thrown some bones—courtesy parts. Then came the talk-show circuit promoting the autobiography. The book had been a best seller. That had been about

fifteen years ago and nothing public since. Still, the name Eversong conjured up images of studio Movie Queens and Hollywood glamour. Eversong's daughter was certainly not inhibited about using the connection. Maybe she was genuinely proud of Mama. Or maybe it just made good business sense.

Scoring the base of the spa's mountain was a single file of multicolored sweatsuits; the ladies coming back from their morning aerobic hike. From Decker's perspective, they looked like Day-Glo ants encircling a giant hill.

He reached inside one of the paper bags, broke off a piece of warm cherry Danish, and stuffed it into his mouth. Chewing, he called Rina on his radio, telling her why he wouldn't make it for breakfast. She sounded disappointed but he couldn't tell what bothered her more—his absence or the absence of her morning kaiser roll.

Not that she didn't enjoy his company, but she was more preoccupied than usual. That was to be expected. Though he kept hoping her self-absorption would pass, he'd come to realize it was wishful thinking.

El honeymoon was *finito*. Time to get down to the business of *living*.

He remembered the physical exhaustion that accompanied a newborn—long nights of interrupted sleep, the bickering, the tension. His ex-wife had looked like a zombie in the morning. Acted like one, too. He also remembered the joy of Cynthia's first smile, her first steps and words. He supposed it would be easier the second time around because he knew what to expect. But damned if he wasn't going to miss being the center of Rina's attention.

He bit off another piece of Danish, wiped crumbs off his ginger-colored mustache.

Well, that's just life in the big city, bud.

He pushed the pedal of the unmarked, the car chugging its way up the curvy mountain road. The address on the computer screen corresponded to a ranch adjacent to the spa. The pink blob and its next-door neighbor were separated by ten acres of undeveloped scrubland, but he couldn't find any definitive line dividing the two properties.

He found the numbers posted on a freestanding mailbox at the driveway's entrance. Turning left down a winding strip of blacktop, he parked the unmarked in front of the ranch house. It was a white, wood-sided, one-story structure sitting on a patch of newly planted rye grass. Bordering the house were rows of fruit trees—citrus on the left, apricot, plum, and peach on the right. Between the trees, he could make out crabgrass and scrub, the foliage gradually thickening to gray-green shrubs and chaparral as the land bled into the base of the mountains.

He punched his arrival into the computer—a whopping two minutes, twenty-two seconds response time. Nothing like being blocks away to skew the stats in LAPD's favor. He stepped out of the unmarked and gave the place a quick glance. Although the house was modest in size, there was something off about it.

The wood siding sparkled like sun-drenched snow—not a flake of paint dared to mar the surface. The flagstone walkway held nary a crack, and the wood shingles on the roof were ruler aligned. The porch was also freshly painted. It didn't creak and held a caned rocking chair decorated with crocheted doilies draped over curved arms. The place was a perfect ranch house. *Too* perfect. It looked like a movie set.

Decker banged on the door and identified himself in Spanish as a police officer. The woman who let him in was frazzled and babbling incoherently, evoking *Dios* between hysterical sobs. She was around forty, her soft plumpish body squeezed into a starched-white servant's uniform. Her dark eyes were full of fear and her fingers were clutching the roots of her hair. She led him into a trashed bedroom. The bed was a heap of jumbled sheets and broken glass. Drawers had been opened and emptied of their contents. But Decker's eyes focused on the center of the floor.

She lay crumpled like a discarded article of clothing, blindfolded, partially nude, her skin bruised and clay-cold. Immediately, he knelt beside her, checked her pulse and respiration. Though her breathing was shallow, her heart-beat was palpable. Quickly, Decker eyeballed the body for

hemorrhage—nothing overt. Though the floor was hard and chilled, Decker didn't dare move her in case there were spinal injuries. He ordered the maid to bring him a blanket, then carefully removed the blindfold and gasped when he saw who it was.

Davida Eversong's daughter—VULCAN's owner. He'd seen her picture dozens of times in the local throwaways. Human Interest stories: the spa hosting a Save the Whales weekend extravaganza or a special two-for-one rate to benefit the homeless. Her stunning face gracing the front page of *The Deep Canyon Bellringer*, arm in arm with a different star every week.

What the hell was *her* name? Everybody always called her Davida's daughter. Even the local papers constantly referred to her as so-and-so, daughter of Davida Eversong. Her name was something exotic. Lara? Not Lara, *Lilah*. That was it. Lilah. Lilah B-something. So she lived next door to her spa. That made sense.

He could make out her beauty even in her current state. Her eyelids were puffy, her lower lip swollen and cracked. Her neck was imprinted with red indentations, but there were no deep ligature marks around her throat. She had welts over her upper torso as if someone had whipped her.

Decker took out his pocket spiral and started noting the injuries he saw. If she remained unconscious, unable to give consent to be photographed, his record of specific marks would be valuable evidence of the crime.

The poor woman. Her nightdress had been hiked over her pelvis. Some sexual activity had occurred. Decker smelled the musky odor of semen in the room. He finished some cursory notes, then lowered her gown and covered her as soon as the maid returned with the comforter. Smoothing blond wisps off her clammy forehead, he gently touched her cheeks, hoping the heat from his hands would warm her face. Streams of gentle breath flowed across his hands.

He whispered "Lilah," but got no response. As the seconds passed, her cheeks seemed to take on color. Decker turned to the maid, told her not to touch anything, asked

her to wait outside and direct the paramedics. In the background, he could hear approaching sirens.

Brecht! That was her name. Lilah Brecht. Her father had been an artsy German director, his name often bandied about in magazine and newspaper articles dealing with foreign films. With an actress mother and a director father, Decker briefly wondered why she hadn't pursued a career in the performing arts.

His eyes went back to Lilah's visage. At least the injuries seemed superficial, her facial bones appeared to be intact. Lucky, because her features were delicate and would have easily shattered under a well-placed blow. She had an oval face, a thin straight nose, high cheekbones leading to an angular jawline that tapered to a soft mound of chin. Making allowances for the swelling, Decker imagined her eyes to be deep-set and almond-shaped.

He heard footsteps approaching, pivoted around, and saw the paramedics cross the threshold. Two of them—a man and a woman, both wearing short-sleeved blue doctor's jackets. Decker started to rise, but something immediately jerked him back down. A hand. *Her* hand! It had shot out of nowhere, clutching his arm with surprising strength. Grimacing in pain, he knelt down again, trying to ease the pressure. She was grasping his left arm—the one still recovering from a gunshot wound. As he tried to gently pry the fingers off, she increased her vise grip, forcing him to use some muscle to pull her hand away. Then he took it and cradled it in his own.

"Do you hear me, Lilah?" he whispered.

There was no response.

The female paramedic knelt beside Decker. She was young and had short, brown curly hair that accentuated the roundness of her moon face. Her name tag said Gomez.

Decker attempted to free himself from Lilah's grip, but she wouldn't let go.

"You seem to have made a friend," Gomez said, as she shone a light on Lilah's pupils. Then she checked her pulse and respiration.

"She must be conscious at some level," Decker said. "She's just not responding verbally."

"You put the blanket over her?"

"Yeah," Decker said. "She was cold and gray when I found her."

"Shock." Gomez pocketed the light. "Her pupillary response is normal. Her pulse is weak but steady." She stared at the face. "Isn't this . . . you know . . . the movie star's daughter? The one who runs the spa?"

"Lilah Brecht." Again, Decker tried to pull his hand away, but cold fingers had locked around his palm.

"I think she's trying to tell you something." Gomez pulled back the blanket, gave the blond woman's body a quick check-over. "Lilah, can you hear me? Squeeze . . ." She looked at Decker.

"Sergeant Decker," he said.

"Squeeze Sergeant Decker's hand if you hear me."

No response.

"Maybe it's something primal," Gomez said.

Her partner—a skinny kid with sloping shoulders—came in with the stretcher.

"Can you stay with her?" Gomez said to Decker. "I'm going to help Eddie with the gurney."

"Yeah. Try not to mess things up for me."

Gomez looked around the room. "You could tell the difference?"

"It's the perp's mess, not yours." His back ached from kneeling. He sat on the floor. "Lilah, I'm Sergeant Decker. I'm here to help you. Can you hear me? Squeeze my hand if you can."

No response.

"Lilah, Miss Gomez—"

"Teresa."

"Lilah, Teresa and Eddie are going to take good care of you. They're taking you to the hospital. Everything is going to be okay."

There was no hand squeeze, but tears leaked from under closed eyes.

"Lilah, I know you can hear me, but I also know you're

too weak to talk. Don't even try. I'm going to try to find out what happened to you. When you're feeling better, I'll come to the hospital and talk to you. You just hang in. I have to take my hand away now, so the paramedics can get you to the hospital."

But as he pulled his hand away, she tightened her grip.

Eddie said, "You can hold her hand." His voice was tinny. "We can work around you."

Again, Decker tried to extricate himself. "Lilah, I'd like to look around your house. It will help me find out what happened."

Her hand remained affixed to his, fingers digging into his flesh. "Just hold her hand, Sergeant, while we load her," Teresa said. "No sense upsetting her."

Decker cooperated, but felt uncomfortable about it. Such *desperation* in her grip—and *strength*. Eerie because Lilah looked so beaten and weak. Maybe it was adrenaline reserve. He whispered, "You're safe now, Lilah. No one is going to hurt you. You're safe."

"Lilah, we're getting ready to move you," Teresa said. "I'm just bracing your neck. You're going to be okay." She turned to Decker. "As long as you're here, slip your hand under her back and help us load her."

Decker nodded.

"Count of three," Eddie said. "One . . . two . . . three, go!"

Like well-oiled machinery, the three of them loaded Lilah onto the gurney, her hand still gripping Decker's. But at least now he was able to stand, roll his shoulders to loosen his back. Again he tried to take his hand away, but Lilah wouldn't ease up.

Teresa craned her neck to look up at Decker. "From the grip she has on you, at least we know there's no spinal break . . . from the waist up, that is."

Eddie said. "Lilah, can you wiggle your toes?"

There was a slight response.

"Good, Lilah," Decker said. "That was *good*. Can you understand me? Squeeze my hand if you can."

A light squeeze.

"That's great, Lilah! The paramedics are going to take you to the hospital now. You're in excellent hands. The doctors are going to help you, run a few tests to make sure you're okay. I want them to examine you very carefully for me. Is that all right? Do you understand me?"

Another squeeze.

Decker turned to the paramedics and said, "Where are you taking her?"

"Sun Valley Memorial," Teresa said. "That okay?"

"Yeah, that's fine. Ask for Dr. Kessler or Dr. Begin and tell them it's for Detective Sergeant Peter Decker. They've both done pelvics in these types of situations and are familiar with what I need for evidence collection. The usual—all the fluids, a good pelvic- and head-hair combing, nails cleaned, the debris slid for the lab—fingernails and toenails." He stroked the hand that was clutching his. "Lilah, at the hospital, is it okay if someone takes pictures of your injuries? If I have pictures of your injuries, it will help me catch and convict the monster who did this to you. Do you understand me?"

She let out a muffled sound.

"Lilah, squeeze my hand if it's okay?"

Another squeeze.

"Good, Lilah." He faced the paramedics. "Tell the docs that I'll be sending down a police photographer. I'll also need her clothes and any other personal effects bagged. Please ask them to use *gloves*. I'll pick her stuff up myself and send it to the lab."

"You got it," Teresa said.

Decker regarded the manicured hand, long slender fingers laced around his. "Lilah, this is Sergeant Decker again. I'm going to ask you a question. Squeeze my hand if the answer is yes. Do you know who attacked you?"

No reaction.

"Okay, I'm going to ask you the same question. Squeeze if the answer is yes. Do you know who attacked you?"

Nothing.

"You *don't* know who attacked you? Squeeze if you don't know who attacked you."

Decker felt light pressure around his fingers. "Okay, that was great. I promise you, Lilah, you're safe. You're going to be all right. I have to let go now."

Her fingers tightened around his.

"Lilah, I have to let them take you to the hospital and I can't come with you." He wrenched his hand out of hers and as he did, she let out a low moan. "I'll be back, Lilah. I promise I'll come back and talk to you."

She moaned again, water trickling down her face. As they carried her out, Decker saw her hand stretching outward, reaching out to him. And those *moans*. He felt as if he were abandoning her and hoped she wouldn't hold anything against him when he came to question her . . . if she'd even remember him. Assault victims were sometimes afflicted with amnesia, especially if the ordeal was particularly vicious.

Decker stretched his long spine, then ran his thick hand through carrot-colored hair. Looking over his shoulder, he noticed the maid at the entrance to the room. She was still trembling, her hand on the doorpost for support. He told her to sit down in the kitchen and pour herself a cup of tea. He'd be with her in a minute.

From his coat pocket, he pulled out an evidence bag and slipped the blindfold inside. With a grease pencil, he roughly outlined Lilah's position on the floor. Then he unhitched his hand-held radio and asked to be patched through to Detective Marge Dunn. While waiting for her to respond, he took out a pen and his rape checklist and began to make detailed notes.



Two

TUCKED INSIDE THE REAR CORNER OF THE BEDROOM'S walk-in closet, the freestanding safe was open and empty. It was a waist-high, green-colored block, lined with three inches of high-grade solid steel, and contained an inner safe that was bare as well. As Benny the printman dusted the vault, Marge Dunn danced around shards of glass as she drew a layout of the bedroom and divided it into grids for evidence check.

The place had been tossed; furniture had been knocked over. Old-looking pieces: the skinny, austere stuff without curves or embellishments. Could have been replicas, but were probably antiques. Lots of embroidered pillows and doodads, doilies in garish colors, were mixed in with the mess. Lilah had a four-poster bed, the rumpled spread made out of chenille. Like the spread Granny used to have, Marge thought, white and full of little pompons. She smiled remembering how she picked at them until the knots fell apart.

A couple of baby uniforms named Bellingham and Potter were hanging around, not really getting in the way but not doing anything productive either. There were already a few blues outside securing the scene so the young 'uns weren't needed here. Marge called them over.

Nice-looking babies—tall and trim with well-scrubbed

faces, eyes that seemed eager to work. Their enthusiasm made Marge feel old. Depressing, since she'd just turned thirty.

"Why don't you two canvass the area?" she suggested. "See if anybody or anyone heard anything?"

Bellingham rubbed a spit-polished shoe against the floor. "Sergeant Decker told us to wait here. The nearest neighbor is the spa and he didn't want us questioning anyone without him. But if you want us to go, Detective, we'll go."

Marge thought for a moment, fingering strands of blond hair. Pete was right. These kids weren't savvy enough to handle the Vulcanites.

"I noticed a stable out back," Marge said. "Why don't you check that out? See if anyone's hanging around, if anything looks suspicious. Count how many horses the stable holds."

"Sure thing, Detective," Potter said. "Should we report back to you or Sergeant Decker if we come up with anything?"

"Either one," Marge said. "And don't spend too much time on it. Just look around, jot down some notes, and report back. Then get on with your patrols. You two together?"

"Yes, ma'am . . . er, yes, Detective . . ." Bellingham blushed. "Sorry."

Marge smiled, slapped him on the back. "Get your butts out there."

After they left, she was glad to have some elbow room. The photographer had just finished, leaving Benny in the closet. The lab boys were checking the doors and windows in the front section of the house, and Pete and the maid were in the dining room.

"Detective?" Benny called out.

"Coming." Marge squeezed her large frame inside the closet. Not an easy trick with Benny occupying most of the space. The man was big and blocky, just this side of fat. Today he was dressed in a starched white shirt and razor-pressed pants; not a spot of dust dared sully his clothes.