

Part One

Chapter I – Jade, Los Angeles, October 24, 2003

Jade Lamont met me in the lobby of her Wilshire Boulevard high-rise. She was striking, on the petite side, with enough cleavage showing to make things interesting. She had purple and gold butterflies tattooed above each breast, and wore her hair blunt cut in back and long on the sides. Her navy blue designer shorts gripped her thighs like eager friends. Her legs were long and brown and seemed to glisten as she led me to the elevator and we rode up together to her 23rd floor condo. I assumed she did her shopping on Rodeo Drive.

We sat across from one another at a glass-topped breakfast table, sipping tea, which she served with heavy cream and sugar. She had clear green eyes, a café con leche complexion and lovely sculpted lips. I had the impression we were alone, or maybe that was wishful thinking. Not wanting to stare, I cut right to the chase.

“I’m sure I’m not here just to keep you company.”

“I wish you were.” A brief smile washed across her features. “You come highly recommended. They say you’re persistent and are the soul of discretion.”

I smiled. “They are correct. Whoever they are.”

She took a sip of tea and shook her head sadly. “It’s my brother, Richard. He’s disappeared.” She paused and I waited. “His cell phone is disconnected and I haven’t heard from him. That’s not like him. He usually calls me every few days. We’re very close.”

“How long’s it been?”

“Three weeks.”

“Did you see it coming?”

She shook her head, her eyes turning inward as if the answer lay somewhere behind her retinas. Her chest heaved slightly and the smooth tops of her breasts seemed almost plaintive. She stood up, crossed to a black lacquered sideboard and took out a photo album. She sat down, and pushed it toward me across the table.

Richard Lamont had brown eyes under his dark curly hair, and looked comfortable in front of a camera. There were pictures of him and Jade, his arms wrapped around her

while she gazed up at him. In one photo he stood on a diving board, hair tousled by the breeze. His youthful physique was powerful, with broad shoulders and a deep chest. In another picture, he wore a top hat and held a knife in either hand like some demented circus impresario.

“Handsome kid.”

“He was,” said Jade. “He’s much thinner now.”

I turned the page and came to a family photo. Father wore a dark pinstriped suit. Well-barbered with swarthy features, he appeared pleased with his family. Mother was maybe five four and wore designer clothes, voluptuous with good features and the same green eyes as her daughter. Jade stood next to her father. Oddly, in this picture, Richard looked worried, lacking the camera-ready confidence that was so pronounced in the other shots.

“Everybody’s gone,” said Jade. “One right after the other.”

“What do you mean, ‘everybody’?”

Her composure cracked slightly, and she looked down at her hands, fingers long and slim like a pianist’s. When she spoke, her voice was barely audible.

“Daddy, Cicero, was killed in a hit-and-run in the Valley, on August 16th. Two months before that he and Mother separated. She moved to San Francisco to be close to her boyfriend. She died twelve days after Daddy.”

“Died? How?”

“It was ruled a suicide.”

“What d’you think?”

“Mother wasn’t the type to kill herself. She was always steady even when things were rough. And she adored Richard. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“How old are you and Richard?”

“I’m 22, he’s 20.”

“How old was your mother?”

“She would have been 39 in two months, on December 12th. Daddy was 10 years older. Her maiden name was Dominique Dominguez, from the Virgin Islands.”

“You’ve been through a lot.”

Sadness reshaped her mouth, and she nodded matter-of-factly. “It hasn’t been easy. Losing Richard would be the final blow. I love my brother.”

“I’m sure you do.”

Although there was a hint of liquid in her eyes, she kept her poise. “He’s a good kid but he’s messed up. He was never that close to Daddy, which makes it even worse.”

I thought it over. “Why do you think he’s disconnected his cell?”

“I dunno. Why do people do that?”

“Lots of reasons. They wanna shake someone, or don’t wanna be found. Drug traffickers change burners, phones, all the time. Sometimes people just want a new number to shake off people they don’t want calling ‘em anymore. That’s probably not the case here. Richard would have let you know.” I thought for a moment. “Anything in particular I should know about your brother?”

“I know he was messing around with drugs but I don’t know the details. It’s hard to know for sure with him. He could be pretty secretive.”

We paused for a moment and looked at one another. “And?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t think he’s an addict or anything. More tea?”

“Sure.”

She rose and glided over to her stainless steel stove. Her body moving made me uneasy. She poured us each another cup and sat back down.

I hoped she hadn’t noticed me staring, but women like her don’t usually miss a trick. I cleared my throat. “What kind of work do you do?”

“I work for one of the downtown law firms.”

“Are you an attorney?”

“Hardly. I do paralegal stuff. Daddy got me in. He knew a lot of attorneys.”

“Which firm?”

“Waldrop & Hemsley.”

“What do they think about what happened to your father?”

She shrugged, a smooth up and down motion of her shoulders. “We don’t talk about it. But what is there to think? Unsolved hit-and-run.”

“Unsolved?”

“Aren’t they usually?”

“Actually a lot of them are solved. Were there any witnesses?”

“Sure. They got a description of the vehicle, a silver late model Honda Accord. Someone even got a license plate, but they never found the car. I’ve heard that more Accords are stolen than any other vehicle.”

“That’s true. Is there any reason anybody would want to hurt your father?”

She looked at me quizzically. “Of course. Cicero Lamont was a baller. He called the shots and too bad for anyone who didn’t go along with the program.”

“What was his business?”

“Daddy was in refrigeration. Produce. But he did other things too.”

“Dope?”

She shrugged. “I dunno. Maybe.”

“You said he was a baller. That implies that he was involved in some type of criminal enterprise.”

“Cicero had a way about him. Exactly what he was into, I dunno.”

She was avoiding the issue, so I let it go. “What about his friends? What were they like?”

“Just like you’d imagine. Some were young guys in Hugo Boss suits, Gucci shoes, expensive sunglasses and Beamers. Others were older guys who looked like they ate metal for breakfast.”

“They sound like a fun crew.”

“As far as I know, Cicero sold most of his warehouses in 2005.”

I nodded. “What about Richard? Did he associate with your father’s friends?”

She shook her head. “Not really. My brother usually went his own way. My father was frustrated with him.”

“Why?”

“It’s not that he wanted Richard to learn the business necessarily; my father just wanted to be acknowledged, while Richard just wanted to be acknowledged for being Richard. You know how fathers and sons can be. Competitive. Not unlike mothers and daughters except--” She fell silent and her eyes searched the room.

“Except what?”

“Oh, it’s just something Cicero used to say, ‘the big difference between men and women, is that women don’t have hair on their chests.’ He had a way of summing up the world in a single phrase.”

I laughed and was damn sure this girl didn’t have hair on her chest. “Were you close to your father?”

She nodded. “Daddy doted on me. I was his little could-do-no-wrong princess. When I started to date, he watched me like a hawk.”

“What about your mom? Why did she move out?”

“Mother was very strong-willed. That’s why it’s hard to believe she killed herself. She was just a kid when they met, but over the years she wised up and grew tired of being invisible to Cicero. Money can only go so far when you’ve got no one to share it with.”

“Did your father mess around?”

Jade frowned. “I’m sure he did, although I don’t believe that was his thing. He was a man’s man and women weren’t that important to him.”

“But you were.”

“It’s different with daughters. Fathers and daughters go together like wine and roses.”

I sat back for a moment and chewed this over. “It sounds to me like we’ve got three mysteries; your brother’s disappearance and the deaths under questionable circumstances of your parents.” I met her eyes and she nodded slowly. “Why would anyone wanna kill your mother?”

“Why not? Mother was no dummy. She knew far more than Daddy ever wanted her to.”

“But he was already dead when she died.”

“I know. It doesn’t make a lot of sense, does it?”

I shook my head. “These things usually don’t until you’ve had time to put the pieces together.”

Jade took a sip of her tea. “Find my brother and if you discover anything about my parents’ deaths, so much the better. I just wanna know he’s okay.”

“I understand.”

She extracted a manila envelope from the back of the photo album and pushed it across the table. “I’m counting on you. This should help you get started.”

It's always a heady feeling to start a new case and I felt a peculiar exhilaration. We shook hands at the door; her grip was warm and firm and I felt the electricity roll right up my arm.

"You might start by talking with one of Richard's friends, the actor Ron Cera," she said softly. "His address is in the packet."

"Thanks."

On the way down in the elevator I opened the envelope. It was a cashier's check for \$10,000 made out to Nick Crane.

Outside, the wind was blowing in off the desert. Already the weathermen had warned of fire danger. In 24 hours, the Santa Anas would be shrieking in the canyons.

Before going home, I stopped in at Philippe's to have a beer with Tony Bott. He works narcotics for LAPD. We've been pals for 20 years, maybe because we're both originally from the Midwest and both like guns and basketball. Tony has a magnificent weapon collection: swords from medieval France, scimitars from the days of the sultans, blow guns from South America, and, of course, the obligatory Kalashnikov AK-47. In the dark world of law enforcement, he may be a little crazier than most.

"Hey, bro," grinned Tony, hugging me as he gripped my hand.

"What's new? Still beating up on the homeless?"

"Only if they force my hand."

We laughed and grabbed beer and coleslaw, planting ourselves in a booth on the lower level. Philippe's is a L.A. landmark, just down the street from the Federal Detention Center and a few blocks from the downtown courthouses. D.A.'s, lawyers and cops come here for French Dip sandwiches and beer.

Tony grinned. "Dude, I'm getting ready to arrest 10,000 meth dealers."

"Better be careful. You don't want to work your way right out of a job."

We have this running gag. The basic notion is drug dealers are interchangeable; you take out three or four and five or six new ones spring up like weeds.

"Nick, I'm confident that there will always be plenty of dealers. The lure of easy money never goes away."

"I wish some of that easy money would come my way."

“That’s what my new girlfriend says.”

“When did you meet her?”

“At this sushi bar. She’s Japanese.”

“I love sushi.”

He grinned. “Yeah, me too.”

“Where’s she work?”

“At this aerospace firm. She’s some kind of manager. Gets her very stressed, so we fuck like bunnies to relieve it.”

“Sounds like a match made in heaven.”

“She wants kids, though. Not sure that’s for me.”

“Why not? You’d be a great dad.”

“I know, but I’ve made it this far without any serious entanglements. Why ruin a perfect record?”

“The time comes for all men.”

“Not all.”

We ordered a second brew and I asked, “Ever heard of a guy named Cicero Lamont?”

He took a long pull on his beer. “Let me just take a second to flash through the memory bank.” He placed both hands on his temples, his usual mannerism when thinking. Then he swallowed more beer. “That’s a name you don’t forget. You don’t run into many Cicero Lamont’s. Why would I have heard of him?”

“He might’ve been dealing weight, and he got clipped in a hit-and-run last August.”

“Dealing what?”

“Dunno. Skag, probably. I don’t think it was meth.”

“I’ll check on it.”

The next morning the Santa Anas were blowing at near gale force and the fire danger was off the charts. When I got to the office, I jotted down a few notes concerning my meeting with Jade. Cicero Lamont getting popped was a hazard of the drug trade. I knew Tony would jump on it and might be able to steer me in the right direction as to whom, and why. What was much harder to figure was the death of Mrs. Lamont. Why off her with Cicero already worm food? Jade had given me the check for ten large as casually as

if she was loaning me a Jackson. Was there a fortune in the picture? And with Cicero and her mom out of the way, Richard and Jade could be next in line. I decided to send one of my investigators, Audrey, to talk to Jade to get a handle on the cash situation. She mostly takes care of our adultery cases, and she was glad to get into something new.

“Nick, sounds like this chick may not be leveling with us.”

“Maybe you two can bond and get her into therapy while you’re at it.”

“Just because I think *you* need therapy, doesn’t mean everybody does.”

“Wouldn’t you, if your parents died in the space of two weeks?”

“I’d need it even if they didn’t.”

“You’ll like Jade,” I said finally. “She’s a righteous babe, among other things.”

“Yeah? Maybe we can get it on.”

“Maybe, though I don’t recommend it. Anyway, find out everything you can. She’s pretty friendly, so ask her about credit cards. See if we can trace Richard that way.”

“I’m on it, Boss.”

I put the phone down and stared out the window. I tried to envision a web of interlocking relationships, marked by greed and violence with Richard and Jade at the center. For all I knew, they could both be living on borrowed time.

Richard’s friend, Ron Cera, lived in the Valley just north of Studio City. I slid into my silver Camry XLE, and drove north on Alameda. Just after Union Station, I pulled onto the 101. Traffic was heavy as I drove north through Echo Park and Silver Lake, then up into Hollywood. The freeway threads through the Hollywood Hills and just past Universal City, I turned off onto Laurel Canyon. Valley Village consists of mostly two story apartment buildings and duplexes, sandstone colored dwellings that have a clipped and manicured Midwestern feel.

I parked down on the end of Ron Cera’s block and walked slowly toward his building. I had my set of lock picks and my Colt Commander .45 holstered in the small of my back. As I walked up the driveway, I noticed an elderly lady with gardening shears watching me closely. I waved and she snapped her head away. Chuckling, I climbed the stairs to Ron’s second story apartment.

I knocked hard three times and waited. I was about to pound again, when I heard grunting, some movement and the door swung open. Ron was about 6'2" and a dead ringer for a young Nick Nolte. Same strong jaw, same singular intensity.

"What the hell, Buddy?"

I smiled. "Sorry. I know it's kind'a early."

"Fuckin' A. I'm on Hollywood time." He wore sweats and an Ozzy Osborne tee-shirt with a bat hanging upside down below his name. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm a private investigator." I flipped open my wallet and showed him my license.

"You working for Arnold Clipper?"

"Never heard of him."

"You're lucky." He stepped back from the door and motioned me inside.

The living room was small with hardwood floors, off-white walls that could stand a coat of paint, and brown trim. The famous poster of Humphrey Bogart holding the shot glass was framed above his couch. Some boxes were stacked in the corner and I wondered if he was in the process of moving.

Ron noted my interest in the Bogart poster. "Bogie was the man."

"You got that right."

I sat on the couch, and the faint but unmistakable odor of marijuana drifted down the hall.

"Hang on," said Ron, "I'll be right back."

He disappeared, probably to slam down another lungful from his bong. As I waited, I glanced at the magazines on the solid oak coffee table that filled most of the space between the door and me. The room lacked windows and the stuffy, weed-tainted air was probably giving me a contact high. Ron returned carrying a bong filled with dirty water, a zippo lighter, and an ashtray. He set everything down on the coffee table, went into the kitchen and came back out with a straight-backed chair.

"I was just about to get high when you knocked on the door. I assume you don't mind?"

"You could be smoking seaweed with a turpentine chaser, and I wouldn't care."

He grunted, sat down, lit up and sucked a huge hit of designer weed into his lungs. Exhaling, he repeated the performance and looked at me with satisfaction. "Wanna hit?"

“Thanks but spliff gets me way wrecked.”

“More for me,” he grinned. “Sorry I acted like a jerk just now. I get like that in the morning. I work late and need my beauty rest.”

“Me too.”

He chuckled. “You sure you’re an investigator, or is this some kind’a screen test?”

“Do you know Jade Lamont?”

“Yeah, I know Jade Lamont,” he confirmed bitterly. “Butterfly girl. That little cooze used to jump my bones like it was Christmas and she was Mrs. Claus.”

I laughed. This guy was pretty funny.

“I was just about to fall in love with her, or at least fall in love with her money when she dumped me like a fresh laid turd. I still haven’t gotten over it. Makes you realize how women feel when they get used.” A flash of sadness darkened his eyes. He shrugged it away and took another hit.

“She’s a beauty.”

The THC was having its desired effect, as he exhaled smoke propelled words. “You know those butterflies above her breasts?”

I nodded, recalling the tattoos emblazoned into her caramel skin.

“Dude, that’s nothing. She’s got a red cobra tattooed on one of her hot little ass cheeks and a green mongoose on the other. Never seen anything like it.”

“Wow. I’ve missed out. She was very sedate when I met her.”

“That’s ‘cause she wanted something other than your dick. That girl’s gonna be a star one day, if she lives long enough. She may be the best actor I’ve ever met.”

“She retained me to find her brother.”

He raised his eyebrows and suddenly looked concerned. “Yeah? Huh. If I know Jade, she’s freaking out. They were very close.”

“Were?”

“Things change. You’re aware, of course, that he has certain proclivities?”

“I thought there was a possibility.”

“She didn’t tell you, did she? Ms. Lamont is very selective when it comes to releasing classified information. She could be a spook if she didn’t come from a crime family.”

“I did get the impression that her father may have been running a little weight on the side.”

“A little?” he smirked. “I believe it’s called Persian brown. You mix it up with lemon juice before you slam it. The high’s supposed to be amazing, but I stay away from that shit.” He shivered, took another hit off his bong and shook his head as he held in the smoke. 20 seconds crawled by. “I almost feel guilty having told you that. Almost. Anyway, I like Richie. He’s a good kid. I was flattered when he hit on me, except I don’t swing that way, but he was cool. When I asked him why, he couldn’t answer. Made me think that what he really wanted was a father who gave a damn. I felt bad for him. Then a few weeks later, Cicero gets splattered into road pizza. Small wonder the boy’s a mess.”

“That’s good character analysis.”

“Thanks.”

“So how’s the career going?”

Ron sighed. “Terrible. You see, these days it gets down to Nick Nolte and Johnny Depp. Do they want the sensitive yet swashbuckling type, or do they want the masculine, hard-bitten Nolte type? I’m more Nolte than Depp and it’s just not happening for me right now.”

“You’re in the wrong era. Go back 50 years. Who did you have then? Glenn Ford, Spencer Tracy. Kirk Douglas. Hell, John Wayne, Robert Mitchum. Even William Holden before he got fat. And of course Bogie. Those guys were men. They weren’t pretty boys. They didn’t need to be.”

“You’re a genius. I think I’ll kill myself.”

“Don’t be in any rush. Not until you help me find Richard.”

“He can be very elusive. My guess, he’s in trouble.”

“I get the impression Jade agrees with you.”

“She doesn’t know the half of it.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah, and I’ll tell you why and then I’ve got to get ready for work.”

“I’m all ears.”

“I met Richie and Jade about a year ago, in a club on Melrose. Later that night, we drove out to Malibu and partied on somebody’s private beach. I had some bud with me,

Jade was drinking wine and he was wired on meth. He'd just discovered it and was completely amped. I mean, dude, he couldn't shut up. I learned a lot about the Lamont family that night. Probably too much. After she got hammered, Jade started talking too. This was almost a year before their parents died. I saw her off and on for about 11 months, or rather, she saw me when she felt like it. The last time was about a month after Dominique walked out on Cicero, which was maybe three weeks before he met up with an unforgiving bumper. Or at least that's the way the story goes."

"And you don't believe it?"

"I don't know what to believe. Jade did give me the impression that the separation was only temporary. Just a little vacation to sort things out. Anyway, Cicero had no time for his wife. He had his business enterprises and, according to Richie, his Vietnamese massage girls in Westminster. He didn't care if mamma had a fling or two. Boy, Jade hated those call girls. She could be very high-handed considering her own *laissez-faire* morals."

He paused for breath and absently poked at the weed in its container. I waited patiently for him to continue as I considered this new info.

"In case you haven't figured it out, Jade has expensive taste. And she can afford it. That's what I learned that night in Malibu, and I'm not sure either of them remembers telling me. I learned something else, though. Something peculiar. It was about four in the morning. I don't know if you know what happens when you're up on crystal meth and it starts wearing off, but you get quiet and depressed. Your body's all fucked up and you wanna kill yourself. Anyway, we're all huddled together 'cause it's cold. Jade has her arm around me and I'm kissing her neck, when Richie gives me a funny look, comes around on the other side of her and puts his head on her chest. Next thing I know, the damned guy is licking her butterflies. I'm weirded out but hell, you know, it's Hollyweird. Jade and I barely know each other and her brother is licking her butterflies. I mean, shit, man."

"Yeah, that's kind'a freaky."

He looked at his cell phone. "Sorry, gotta hit the shower and split for work."

"No worries."

"Wish I was rich, but I don't wish I was Richie."

“When did you last see him?”

“Little less than a month ago and man was that weird. It got me freaked.”

“Why?”

“Tell you what, meet me at Milford’s on Vine in the parking lot at 2:00 a.m. That’s where I work and I’ll fill you in on the rest of the story. After that, no offense, but I don’t ever wanna see you again. Jade and Richie are bad news. I need to disconnect.”

“Where do you think I can find him?”

“Oh, he’s around. Try the gay bars, or the clubs on Sunset. He swings both ways. The women love him. How could they not? He’s a dead ringer for John Garfield.”

Ron opened the front door and we shook hands. “Thanks, Ron.”

“You seem like a cool guy. I just don’t want to end up dead when I’m not even 25.”