

## CHAPTER 1

Abbey McDougal's beautiful green eyes were staring at me and Jamal.

Staring but not seeing.

Abbey wasn't seeing anything except the black hole of eternity.

She was a crumpled island in a sea of crimson, her blood having spread wide and deep into the expensive Persian Isfahan silk carpet of her and her husband Stephen's enormous bedroom suite.

Detective First-Grade Tom Gillette of the Paraiso del Mar police force was looking at Jamal.

"And you know nothing about this?" Tom asked.

"No," Jamal said, still looking at this once stunning woman who had been, and there was no other word for it, *slaughtered*.

"Then you mind telling me what your Derek Rose boxers are doing over there?" Tom said.

I looked at the cream-colored sleek boxers that were at the bottom of the entangled silk sheets of the McDougal's custom-made circular bed. Then I looked at Jamal.

Jamal was a suspect?

"But those *are* yours?" Tom said. "The ones with the embroidered JW?"

"They're mine, but I didn't kill her."

"No, but you were fucking her."

Jamal stood up ... and up, a black monolith rising.

Jamal is 6'4", weighs 230 and has about 5% body fat.

"Let's go, Matt," he said.

"Hey," Tom barked at us. "We're not done here!"

"Yeah, we are," I said. "Until we get a lawyer."

I followed Jamal through the double-sized front door, its Brazilian wood panels shiny with wax. As we crossed the enormous emerald-green lawn, six burly cops glared at us even after we'd ducked under the black-and-yellow crime scene tape.

Like *we're* the bad guys.

"There goes fifteen-million-dollars," Jamal snarled and kicked the real estate sign so hard it sailed over one of the cop cars, clanged hard on the street, cart wheeled several times like a metal gymnast and came to rest face up so you could read the name of the company: Singer & Wade Real Estate.

That's us.

Matt Singer, Jamal Wade.

And that's our listing, the \$15-million-dollar McDougal mansion. Total luxe. With a view that goes not just to the shining blue Pacific but to forever.

A mansion that's now a crime scene.

"We going to need our other licenses?" I asked Jamal.

"Never know."

Our other license is our *real* job, our DNA: Singer & Wade, Private Investigation.

"When were you going to tell me?" I asked.

"I's wuz biding mah time, Mastah."

"Uncle Remus? Now?"

Jamal graduated from Emory with honors. He speaks four languages, but he does this corn porn accent when he wants to defuse a situation.

He was about to give me grief, but then he shook his head, his dreads swaying slightly and said, "This is trouble, Matt. Big trouble. And not just because of seventeen-ten."

Seventeen-ten or to be precise, § 1710.2, is the California real estate law

that requires the seller and the listing agent to disclose that someone has recently died on the property.

“It being a crime scene is the last thing we’ve got to worry about,” I said.

“And how do you figure that?”

“Once things quiet down, and that will be just a few days on the media spin cycle, then the sheer notoriety of it –*Wow, this is where she was murdered!* -- is going to send traffic through the roof with all the lookie-loos, curiosity seekers and the plain weird types. And after that, the real buyer will appear.”

“And the real seller hasn’t disappeared.”

He had a point. If Jamal was a suspect or even only a person of interest, Stephen McDougal had every right to go ballistic. And while I knew Jamal was innocent, Stephen would not like the notoriety. He was a tough cookie – even without all his millions.

Stephen and Abigail McDougal were one of the most photographed couples in town. Whether it was the opening of the new wing of the city library to which they’d contributed a hundred grand or dining out at the very latest restaurant, there wasn’t a photo op they’d miss.

Money and the things it buys can be the most opaque screen or a panoramic window into your life. So, when the first tremor that something was wrong in their seven-bedroom mansion in *the* richest section of town, hit, it was like an 8.9 on the Richter scale: disaster, the sky is falling.

Then when Stephen moved into the Marriot hotel and Abbey went to

dinner with a different beef cake young stud every night, the proverbial had hit the fan.

Stephen had called me about listing the house. We met with him and Abbey; and their attorneys, Jerk One and Jerk Two, and after a long session, signed them up. That was two weeks ago. During that time, Abbey seemed on a mission to prove that she was still hot by screwing, supposedly, a different guy in each one of their seven bedrooms. And on the granite counter in the kitchen. And according to a peeking neighbor, on the diving board by the infinity swimming pool.

There's a song by rap artist *Ludacris* that crudely talks about women being so hot for him that, "*...they so wet, they be leakin'.*"

And while it might be a fantasy for Luda, for Wade, it's reality.

Beyond his size, which attracts a certain type of female, his looks pull in the rest. Women of every color love his ebony skin and his face with its sleek cheekbones and the tribal scars he got as a teenager when he and his sister Andriel went back to Africa to trace their ancestral roots.

So, it shouldn't have been a surprise that Abbey found him attractive.

But it was a surprise that he'd succumbed. Beautiful as Abbey was, sex with her was wrong on so many levels.

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## CHAPTER 2

“You want to confess now?” I said. “Clear things up before it gets nasty. You know the old saying, *‘The first one to report has the advantage. After that, everyone else is on the defense.’*”

He opened the door to his tuxedo-black BMW 750iL and looked at me over the roof. “Get in.” He stared past me at the cops who were still giving us attitude. “This is between you and me.”

I buckled up and waited.

“You remember last week when Avery Tillman was supposed to bring his client over?” Jamal said.

“Yeah and he didn’t show.”

“Right. But I was there, while you were out doing something.”

“This was *my* fault?”

“No, I’m just sayin’.”

“Well, say *it*.”

“Abbey says. ‘Let’s have some wine while we’re waiting.’ So, we do and we’re chatting and having a nice time. Then one glass leads to two and Avery’s not returning my calls or text messages, so I tell Abbey, ‘Sorry it’s a no-show.’” He pushed the starter button and the powerful engine roared to life. “And then she showed me everything.”

“Damn it, Jamal, you do realize how this looks?”

“I’m not proud of it. But Abbey was a nice person. Behind all the glitz and money, a *good* person. The divorce and Stephen had really hurt her.”

“Be sure and tell that to Gillette and Ben Black. No doubt they’ll be very sympathetic to you.”

“You don’t seriously think I did it, do you?”

I looked at him. Jamal’s been my partner for over a decade, my friend for almost a decade before that.

I was almost offended at the question. But I realized he was in a bad place. And not just because of the possible loss of the sale and the commission. Or the negative publicity Singer & Wade Real Estate would get from this. He was hurting because I think he genuinely liked Abbey.

“I can’t believe you asked me that. But I understand. This is FUBAR to the tenth level.”

Which made me realize that Singer & Wade Private Investigation had just picked up its biggest and most important client ever: Us.

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### CHAPTER 3

"How we going to handle this?" Jamal asked.

"First we call Duncan."

"You really think we're going to need him?"

Duncan Fitzgerald is easily the smartest attorney we've ever met. I'm sure that he's lost a case, but not in the fourteen years we've worked with him.

"These cases can get funny in a hurry. Having Duncan in the on-deck circle is just being ready for whatever they throw at us."

"You going to be able to concentrate on this?" he said.

"What're you talking about?"

"You know, as you get older, harder to stay focused."

"I'm still not following."

"Proves my point. You've got a birthday coming up, remember? You're metamorphosing into a *Mattasaurus*? A really old beast. Estimated to be about forty-three years old."

"Forty-two, asshole. And you know it."

*Heh-heh.*

That, for Wade, was a big laugh.

We drove down the block and then Jamal turned for the ocean.

"It was a mistake, Matt. No ifs ands or butts. I called her the next day," he said.

"And?"

“And I apologized. And she was insulted.”

“Insulted? You didn’t ...?”

Suddenly it seemed vulgar to be talking about a dead woman’s sexual history.

“Insulted that I had the audacity to think she didn’t know what we were doing.”

He looked at me again and shook his head. “This gonna be gale force shit storm.”

“Yeah. From Chief Black for sure. He’ll send goddamn Ken Purdy around.

Tempt us ... no, tempt me. “

“True dat. Last time the Chief called you into his office? Didn’t turn out so good as I remember.”

It didn’t turn out so good for anybody.

And even though it was so long ago, when I was still a Paraiso cop, none of us would ever forget it.

Ben had brought me in to tell me he was recommending me for a promotion.

And I told him I was quitting.

It hit him like a right hook.

Although *that* hit him later too – the right hook.

I didn’t give him too many reasons and after a few minutes he said, “You sure I can’t talk you out of it?”

“No sir.”

“What if I put you with Remington?” he said.

“He’s a Lieutenant. He doesn’t have a partner.”



“This would be a new, special assignment. Glenn’s taken on a lot more responsibility; he could use an aide. You.”

I stood up. “No, thank you.”

“You fucker, you tell me no?”

He grabbed me by the throat with both hands.

I just reacted.

I drove both my fists up through his arms and smashed outward.

That broke his grip.

And when he drew back to clobber me, I hit first.

Technically, when my right fist crashed into his face and sent his ass back over his desk and he took his carafe of hot coffee with him so he was a soggy mess, I was still on the force since they hadn’t signed me out.

So, when he busted me back down to patrolman, it was after I was gone and already studying for my real estate license. So, it was a posthumous demotion.

But that was later.

First, they threw my ass in a cell. Ken Purdy, the Chief’s version of Luca Brasi, roughed me up bad. The second time he came to do it, I evened up the score. My dad posted bail and the Chief, I think because he didn’t want all the internal shit to get outside the department, didn’t take it to trial. It never even made the local papers.

My life was shit for a year or so. Got parking and moving violation tickets up the ying-yang. But then Wade and I got the inside scoop on one of the nicest homes in

town, connected our client with the seller, which meant we got both sides of the deal, and the seller introduced me to super attorney Duncan Fitzgerald.

A few months later, I was able to pull a rabbit out of a hat for Duncan to buy a movie producer's house behind the gates in Holmby Hills at what the producer called 'monkey points' money.

A few weeks later Duncan called and said, "Your tickets are dismissed. And there should be no more contrived problems with Chief Black and the *Paraíso del Mar* Police Department. Any real ones, of course, would be your own doing."

I found out through one of the cops who would still talk to me, off the record of course, that Duncan threatened harassment, coercion and fifteen other issues. He also asked some pointed questions about the Chief's lifestyle that made Big Ben apoplectic.

One night somebody shot out both front windows of my little bungalow. They aimed high, just at the top panes, so I'm sure it was *quid pro quo*.

Time heals all wounds they say.

I did what I thought was the right thing at the time.

The police take care of their own. Just like every family.

And I wasn't a member anymore.

I miss being Police. But not if it means being a cop under Ben Black.

"So, what'd you think?" Wade said, bringing me back to the present.

"I don't know I said."

Stephen McDougal could cancel the listing and also file ethical charges with the California Real Estate Commission. And while in time we'd be exonerated, there would

always be that shadow of doubt about us: Could we be trusted? Were we rogues who made their own rules?

Once people found out, we would be pariahs among the town's real estate agents and its citizens.

Then I thought about that: *Once people found out.*

"Anyone else know about it?" I said.

Jamal caught it immediately. Just another reason he's my partner.

"No one. So, for sure, I'm not volunteering to talk to Gillette or Ellie or anybody."

"And Abbey wouldn't have said something to her friends?"

"No, she understood the game. Abbey was counting on a huge settlement from the divorce from the pre-nup."

"Sounds like Stephen."

"No, it was Abbey that insisted on it."

"Abbey?"

"Yeah, it was *her* money. You look up trust fund baby? It'll have her picture beside it. Huge family wealth, all in Manhattan."

Wade turned on to Laurel Street. He pointed out the window.

Two cop cars were parked at angles in front of another house for sale.

"Looks like property values are causing a crime wave."

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