

Bakersfield Boys Club

CHAPTER ONE

January 1978

In the yard, the neighborhood cat cries. Suzanne leans against the kitchen sink and squeezes her eyes shut. She'd swallowed a Valium last night to sleep, and now the animal's yowling feels like a needle in her brain.

She calls up the back stairs. "Danny, have you been feeding that cat?" There's no answer. Maybe he's jogging with his friend Kristen.

The wailing begins again, this time right up against the back door. When she opens it, cold air surges in, damp and stinking of vapor expelled from the oil refineries. The cat trots inside, pale gray hair standing on end. It's Narcissus, her neighbor Reggie's Siamese.

"Out. Shoo." Electricity from the animal's fur tickles her ankle. She uses her bare foot to nudge it toward the open door. That's when she notices the prints on the linoleum. Four toes and a broad, fleshy pad.

Dark red.

Her stomach lurches, imagining a dead rat or gutted squirrel lying on the porch. She creeps outside, slipping on the fog-wet concrete. There's no body. Instead, a trail extends, paw by paw, down the porch steps and across the patio to a hole in the fence.

Narcissus rubs a flank against Suzanne's robe as if urging her on, but she can't move.

Cold penetrates the soles of her feet and chills the tip of her nose. She hitches up her robe and climbs onto the porch's retaining wall. Over the fence in Reggie's backyard, the kidney-shaped swimming pool is covered in gray plastic. The terrace is bare of furniture.

It's easy to see the paw prints. They trail across the flagstones to the landing at the top of his steps. Fed by a trickle from the house, a bloody pool has formed by the door. It glistens in the fog.

Please, not again.

Her involuntary step backward dangles in midair. She tumbles off the wall, lands on her ankle. Putting weight on it sends pain flashing up her leg. "Danny, please come help me!"

He doesn't respond. Her eyes fill with tears, and she scrubs at them with her sleeve.

Maybe Reggie cut himself or has a scalp wound. Those bleed a lot. He might not be . . .

She limps through the house and out the front door, taking halting steps across the coarse, oily grass. Reggie's Mercedes is missing from the driveway. She uses the wrought iron railing to haul herself up his steps.

He doesn't answer the bell. The door is firmly shut, but the latch yields when she presses it.

"Reggie? It's Suzanne."

Her foot hovers at the threshold. If she steps inside, it will be impossible to ignore the truth of Reggie's alternative life. She shivers at the possibility of repercussions for her. For Danny.

Still, Reggie saved them financially after Carlo died. Without him, she would have lost the house. Straightening her spine, she moves into the entry.

"Reggie?" There are no voices. No television, no dripping faucets, or creaking floorboards. She edges down the hall, the cat trotting beside her. The house smells of soft cheese, oozing because it's too warm. A shiver of revulsion sweeps over her, and she feels her heartbeat.

In the dining room the black-enameled table is crowded with a platter of dried-out ham, turkey, and the brie. Meatballs sit in a chafing dish surrounded by congealed sauce.

The kitchen is littered with empty bottles. A bucket of melted ice sweats on the tile counter. Beside it is a key ring, cold and a little greasy to the touch.

Sweat dampens her pajamas, worse than during the blazing summers in Taft. Her legs wobble. She ducks her head and braces herself against the shelf.

When she looks up, she sees Reggie, lying on the service porch floor. He's naked, half-sitting against a storage cabinet, his hairless stomach drooping over his cock. His body is covered with stab wounds, and the side of his skull sunken with blunt-force blows.

A fat, black fly darts around his head.

She screams and swats at the dirty, vile thing that's infesting Reggie, who was always fastidiously dressed and smelling of expensive cologne, Reggie, who was her friend after Carlo died, Reggie reduced to bloody, broken flesh. Broken like Carlo had been in the accident.

Like her father.

Her pulse pounds again—not in her chest but her injured ankle—hammering as though it would split the skin. Blood has trickled down Reggie's right arm, across the floor, and through the half-open back door.

Oh, Reggie. She's not sure if she's said it aloud or the words have ballooned in her head. She snatches the key ring from the shelf, shoves it into her bathrobe pocket and limps to the phone in his home office.

CHAPTER TWO

“I’m Detective Alex Barton.” He hands her his card. *Sergeant, Bakersfield Police Department*. “You were a good friend of Mr. Roman?”

His voice raps like a hammer. She huddles in the corner of Reggie’s couch and props her throbbing foot on the coffee table. They’re in the garden room, windows overlooking the pool. That’s what Reggie had called it, *garden room*, with a rich-bitch purse of his lips.

Rec room, she shot back, and he’d laughed.

She hunches her shoulders, shielding herself from grief like she did when she was a kid after her father died. Her eyes sting like hell.

“We live next door.” Her voice cracks.

“We?”

She slides her hand into her bathrobe pocket, touching the key ring with a forefinger. “My son and I.”

He frowns. “No husband?”

“Widow.”

His eyes do a slow scan from her wild, uncombed hair to her dirty feet. “You often visit Mr. Roman early in the morning?”

Barton’s bulk compresses the cushion of Reggie’s favorite chair. One of his size fourteen lace-up shoes looks as though it could crush her bare foot. The last time she saw Reggie, he was

lounging in that same silk-upholstered chair, legs crossed, sandal dangling elegantly from one toe.

“It was Narcissus.”

Barton raises his eyebrows.

“Reggie’s cat. She came over, her footprints . . . she’d walked through his blood.”

The crime scene techs have finished with the room, and now the police photographer kneels on the rug beside the coffee table.

“Your foot.” The photog frowns at Suzanne who repositions her ankle on a couch pillow. The clicking shutter seems to be counting the five stubbed-out marijuana roaches in an ashtray, the razor blade and mirror, pack of Virginia Slims, four wine goblets, and two highball glasses.

Suzanne’s heart beats against her ribs. Are Danny’s fingerprints on the blade? The mirror?

“You saw bloody cat prints and blood coming from Mr. Roman’s house, but you didn’t call police?” Barton leans forward, hands clasped between his widespread knees. The acidic smell of coffee taints his breath.

“I thought I should hurry.”

“You had a key to the house?” He gaze is sharp, probing for a weak spot in her story.

“The door was unlocked.”

“What did you do when you first entered?”

“I walked through the house to the kitchen.”

“Did you notice anything unusual? Hear anything?”

She hears the investigators' voices from the kitchen, calm enough that they could be ordering breakfast. Thoughts of the photographer's flash illuminating Reggie's nakedness make her cringe.

"There was a fly buzzing around his head." She twists her bathrobe sash around her wrist and winds it tight.

Barton utters a small cough. "Did you touch anything?"

"No."

"Move anything?"

"The front door latch and the telephone in his office. . ." Reggie's left arm had crossed his chest, twisted like a broken toy. She'd reached out to straighten his poor, fucking arm but pulled back.

"Did Mr. Roman have any enemies?"

"None that I know of."

"What about his social life? Any girlfriends?"

She shrugs.

"Boyfriends?" His cheeks flatten when he says this, as if tasting something sour.

He knows. Suzanne has heard it, the deep-throated male laughter through the open window during parties at Reggie's after the Bakersfield bars close.

"He was a good neighbor, kind to Danny and me after my husband died, but we weren't party buddies." Her pulse throbs against the bathrobe cord.

"How about last night? Did you see anything? Anyone arriving or departing?"

"I went to bed early. About nine."

"And your son?"

“He stayed up, reading.” A shaft of sun from the window catches the razor blade on the coffee table.

“I’ll need to question him.”

“He’s only fourteen. He doesn’t know anything.”

“We’re interviewing everyone in the neighborhood, Mrs. Ricci, your son included.”

“Sergeant?” A motorcycle cop in knee-high leather boots appears in the doorway, his face ruddy from the cold. His helmet dangles from his fingers. He’d been first to arrive, a few minutes after she’d called 911.

Barton hefts his bulk from Reggie’s easy chair and crosses the room. With his back to her, he tips his head to listen.

Her lips tremble.

“No,” Barton says to the officer. “Until I give the word, keep Filbert and Vallejo closed to all vehicles except residents’ personal cars.”

Inside her bathrobe pocket, her fist clenches the key ring. She doesn’t need to look at it to know it’s fake gold, with a small lacquered replica of a Mercedes logo dangling from the chain. The metal is sweaty from her hot palm. A year ago Christmas, she’d given it to Danny in his stocking as a joke. He’d teased her that when he turned sixteen, he expected a Mercedes, which was ludicrous because she could barely keep her VW van in tires.

Now, though, the ring she gave Danny has a Mercedes ignition key attached.

(Bakersfield Boys Club is available in paperback and e-book from Amazon, or in paperback on order from your local bookseller.)