

On Behalf of the Family

By

Mar Preston

Chapter One

It was so little to ask of him. And Dave Mason knew it.

He and Ginger had been arguing about the dancing lessons ever since he got to her place. She didn't want to do extremist hikes, hockey games, or dirt bike riding. They were both so busy, the little bit of time they spent together went to grocery shopping, car washing, or the kid stuff they did with his daughter Haley who visited weekends. Ginger insisted they had to plan some *fun*. Fun for her was yoga or the dancing classes.

Pacing around her small, rent-controlled apartment, in desperation Dave suggested they do LA walking tours or wine tastings. No. Ginger continued unloading the dishwasher, smashing mugs and plates up on the shelves, her back to him.

She turned to face him. He saw her mind made up. She squared her shoulders, and pushed her fists deeper into the pockets of the black skinny jeans she wore with a red camisole top. He saw ultimatum in her indigo blue eyes. Gone were the after effects of fear that had dogged her after being attacked and nearly killed. She was back to herself now and she knew who she was and that she had a lot to offer.

His phone rang and he leaped to answer it. *Ah, reprieve.* He stood a moment listening and then faced her.

Her arms crossed, Ginger blocked the doorway as he threw on his suit jacket, grabbed his cellphone, and prepared to leave. “Dammit, Dave.”

“I have to go,” he said, thundering down the stairs. He caught sight of himself in the mirrored lobby as he fled out onto the street, a tall guy in his thirties with a guilty look on his face.

He crossed the street and got into his Jeep, glancing into the back seat to make sure he had his murder kit. He looked up to see her standing in the window, the honey-blond do-gooder he loved helplessly. She saw him watching her and gave him a shrug.

His excuse this time was a homicide at Santa Monica College.

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Blowflies descend on a corpse to lay eggs within ten minutes of death, the same way it seemed to Detective Dave Mason that curious onlookers appear as soon as crime scene tape went up. Burroughs and Fredericks, two of his team members, were already there. It was late on a warm June evening, the whine of low-flying planes descending to a landing at LAX ten miles to the south. There must be stars up there somewhere shining over Greater Los Angeles. Mason got out his notebook and started making notes of the scene, giving it his thousand-eyed stare, details shifting from foreground to background. A jogger whipped by on the street and came to a halt, watching the action. Mason waved him on past the black and whites already on the scene. The guy wheeled off and gave him the finger.

Smoke poured out of the second story of one of the parking structures at Santa Monica College. The college campus was located in the lowest income neighborhood of a city where

even low-end was high-end anywhere else. Mason had grown up in Santa Monica when it was a pleasant seaside town and had taken some classes at the college. Nowadays the city was all about flash and money. He looked around for SMPD's first on scene, a female patrol officer who sat sideways in the seat, the door of the black and white open, her head between spread knees. The unit blocked the entrance to the four-story parking structure.

The rookie caught sight of him out of the corner of her eye, pasted on a smile, and stood up, reaching for her notebook. He didn't have to be a hard ass and pretend he'd seen that many blackened corpses himself.

"You okay?" he said.

Her smile went crooked. "Sure. I'm fine, sir."

"No big deal, huh? Who called it in?" Mason said, looking around.

Officer Meyerthaler pointed to a young guy in a black leather jacket with a big nose and full-blown acne. "Name's Anastasios Stavros, sir."

The guy was talking into a cellphone, rimless glasses held in his right hand, clamping down hard on them, and chewing on the earpiece.

Mason walked over to the witness who stopped talking on his cellphone as he approached. "I'm Detective Dave Mason," he said, holding out his badge. "Santa Monica Police Department. Stick around. I need to talk to you."

The guy shook his head, gulped, his Adam's apple moving up and down visibly in a long neck. He was tall and dark, with less meat on him than a butcher's pencil. He nodded agreement and blurted in a high nervous voice, "I told her everything."

"I still need you to stick around. I need to talk to you."

“Okay. I’ll go get a coke then.” He drew out some change from his pants pocket and counted it.

Mason thanked him absently and walked into the parking structure and up the ramp seeing floodlights blazing on the second floor and smelling the rank odor of scorched paint on metal. Underneath it he caught the faint odor of burning meat. The *June Gloom* marine layer fog mixed with the smoke made it hard to see and started his eyes stinging. He moved slowly through the murky air toward the fire and stood watching.

Three Santa Monica Fire Department trucks were there along with an engine truck. Any homicide within city limits became the Police Department’s case and Mason was there to determine whether the body represented a homicide or suicide. Or a natural death. The guy had a heart attack starting the car? What? There was nothing he could do until the Evidence Eradicators knocked down the fire. He walked back to the patrol unit at the entrance, beckoning to Officer Meyerthaler.

“Okay, send somebody over with a map of the campus. You work the sign-in sheet at the entrance. None of our guys come in for a look-see, okay? Everybody signs in. Chief wants to come in, tell him we’re doing DNA on everybody. Ask him to sign in for an appointment so you can do his pubic hair combings and swabs.”

Officer Meyerthaler looked at Mason, not sure if he was kidding or not. He tapped her shoulder and grinned. “Who’s in charge with the Campus Police?” he said, closing his notebook.

“Chief Baker’s here with a couple of her people.” Meyerthaler pointed to a woman in her fifties with a dramatic streak of white hair sweeping back from a wide forehead. She stood talking with three uniformed campus police officers.

Mason's cellphone rang with a call from the Fire Department's arson investigator. Milosevich was somewhere just past the city limits of eight-square mile Santa Monica and doubtless would be driving under the speed limit. The slow-talking investigator who did each task, even making a cup of tea with a tea bag, an act of deliberation. He tested everybody's patience, but the guy was good.

Mason squared his shoulders and walked over to Chief Baker, whom he knew slightly, clicking through the checklist in his head. She was by-the-book old school military and ran a good department, though she probably had little experience in homicide investigation. She introduced him around.

"Who was first on scene?" Mason said, addressing the Chief. She pointed to one of the officers.

"I was, sir, Officer Sanchez." He stood arms behind his back in a wide-legged stance.

"You see anybody around?"

He shook his head. Dammit. Mason made notes, thanked him, and turned to Chief Baker who introduced him to a couple of high-ranking college administrators who looked worried. He was peppered by questions from a middle-aged fat guy in a SMC T-shirt who introduced himself as the Vice-President of the College.

"Who is it? Do you have a suspect yet? I'm in charge until President Marx gets here. We need to know when the parking lot will be opened. We'll have staff and students arriving in," he checked a Rolex, "six hours. It will be complete chaos if we can't use this structure."

Mason didn't catch his name but the guy and his air of bureaucratic fussiness already irritated him. The Chief gave the administrator a look and put a hand on his arm.

“We’ll work as quickly as we can, sir,” Mason said over his shoulder, turning to duck under the yellow tape and walk slowly up the ramp along the side opposite the blazing car. He progressed one careful yard at a time, his Maglite shining on the pavement ahead. The Fire Department was there anyway tramping around in their big boots, dragging hoses, shooting hundreds of gallons of water over everything, but he did it anyway. You never knew.

He proceeded up and around as a car would drive, turned left, and walked back the length of the structure to make another left turn before he approached the burning car.

The fire was beaten down enough at that point for the FD to work in close to the car, which was still ticking. They jumped back as the fire blazed up into life again. Explosions of the gas tank were rare but they did happen, just not as frequently as they did on TV. On some makes of cars shock absorbers could explode as well. Tires exploded too. Mason slowly pivoted to examine the scene on all sides of him, shining his powerful flashlight into all the dark corners, looking for a gas can.

Laura Frederick's booming voice cut through the whoosh of water under high pressure and the shouts of the firefighters. One the few female detectives, Fredericks bustled up to greet him and yelled into his ear what Mason had been thinking, “Arson, probably.”

“Nothing's obvious yet, Fredericks.” Mason held up a hand to stop any further speculation.

“Well, yeah, that's what I mean. Just sayin’. Car belongs to a Robert Peterson, age 23, address downtown LA near USC. LAPD territory,” Fredericks shouted over to him. “I'm running tags on the other vehicles still in the structure.”

She wasn't wearing one of her drab beige suits. Matter of fact, he thought, taking another glance at her, she was dressing better than usual and he hoped it had nothing to do with

Burroughs, the new guy. Working out with her in the gym he knew she had a taut, trim body with the right curves in the right places—a body that had utterly no appeal for him.

Nobody saw anything, she reported. At least not so far. Where were all the late night usuals then when this was happening, Mason wondered, walking off a distance to think his own thoughts for a moment. He meant the transients, the lovers, neighborhood kids, workers getting off shift and taking a short cut through the college to the next street lined with apartment blocks.

He and Fredericks stood talking twenty feet back from the heat barrier of the burning car, just beyond the fire units. The Fire Department's first-in captain barked rapid-fire orders to a crew, the light bar on the top of the trucks strobing red and white. A cloth book bag lay just out of reach of the flames flickering over the burning Camry.

Mason walked up to the first-in captain. They knew each other slightly from the Police vs. Fire Department annual baseball game.

"Hey, George. What have we got?"

"Mason. We've got a body in the passenger seat. Looks like that purse, bag, whatever, might belong to the car. We can probably pull it over so you can take a look at it."

"Go for it."

The Captain brought the red and black patterned bag to Mason in gloved hands. Scorched from the heat of the fire, the bag was still fairly intact. He glimpsed the top of a scorched text book and a notebook. With gloved hands Mason pulled the notebook out, looking for a name on it: *Yasemin Safak* in bold cursive written with a turquoise Sharpie. What kind of a name was that?

Mason looked through the scorched bag for ID and found an iPod unit. In a latex-gloved hand, Mason turned the gizmo end to end, considering it. He punched at the opening screen

hoping to find the Home button to get an address. The iPod was dead. The iPhone was also dead. A lipstick, hairbrush, no wallet, three twenties tucked in a side pocket of the bag. He handed it over to one of the forensics techs who'd appeared beside him, watching.

“When you think you’ll be winding it up here, George?”

“Hour or so. Arson investigator’s on his way.”

Beckoning to Mason from the door at the corner of the structure which led to the internal stairwell was a campus police officer. Carefully Mason made his way around the perimeter to approach him.

“We might have a victim ID, sir.” He pointed over the side of the structure to a fortyish woman with a mane of lavish black hair huddled with four young women with the same inky black hair, olive skin, and snapping dark eyes.

“That’s Maricela Pinkowski. She works in International Student Affairs and says she recognizes the bag. She lives in the next block and saw all the commotion here and came over to see what was going on.”

Good, a possible confirmation; that is, if the bag had any relation to the body in the car. Mason took a step closer to the campus cop who stepped back at the look on Mason’s face.

“How did she get close enough to the scene to take a look?”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that, sir,” the officer said quickly. “Nobody’s getting near the scene. Ms. Pinkowski and the campus police know each other—you know how it is—these guys stand around getting bored. The officer was talking it up, maybe trying to impress her. Like anyways, he saw this shoulder bag or purse, or whatever it is, close enough it probably belongs with the scene. But who knows, eh? Like he can see it from the stairwell here coming up from

the first floor. He sees the bag's made out of some woven stuff. There's pieces of mirror in it and a fringe and a lot of pockets and a woven strap. Real distinctive. You know how the guys talk."

Yeah, he knew. Cops were the biggest bullshitters in the world. Mason continued looking around, seeing the fire personnel closing up the operation, readying themselves for the next call. He had a name now ready for confirmation, and a hollow sense inside.

"Anyways," Officer Sanchez added, "Maricela thought she recognized the way the guy described the bag as one belonging to a student she knew. You want to talk to her?"

Mason looked at them. He deliberated whether to send Fredericks, who was never at her best with women in situations where she had to show empathy. She talked too loud, too fast and had no patience for dithering explanations. But she was great with children and old people and the usual tax-paying, dog-petting citizens. Jake Burroughs, the new guy on the team, did have a way with the ladies. Rumor around the station was that one smile from him buckled the knees and melted the panties right off a woman. Must be nice. Delgado, Mason's partner, lived out in the San Fernando Valley in the Simi Valley cop enclave. He would be on his way in, traffic easy at this time of night.

Mason looked around for the witness who had called the report in and was nowhere in sight now. Dammit. "Burroughs, get the witness back here."

Amidst a sea of trucks and old beaters in the employee parking lot Mason cast a glance from the second floor down on Burrough's Corvette. The gleaming, yellow sports car stood out among more modest vehicles parked in the street level lot. The suits, the MBA after his name, all this marked Burroughs as a comer. He worked out, paid attention and got along with Fredericks, which was something. A small area of vulnerability was displayed by the toupee Burroughs wore. Running a hand through his own thick, black hair, Mason allowed himself a flash of

vanity. His black hair was salted at the temples with grey and he had a good straight nose in a narrow face, brown eyes, and an eyetooth that overlapped a front tooth. In the shower he saw the scars, traces of twenty years of beer league hockey. He thought he had a nice smile. It worked on some women, especially when he tilted his head in what he figured was a rakish way. Women liked a little law enforcement edge, except his girlfriend Ginger, whose father and brother were LA Sheriff's Department; it didn't always work with her. She had teased him that for all the rakish charm and pretty words he could summon up, one millimeter below the surface, he was still a thug. He kinda liked that. He worked hard to maintain his six- foot four, one hundred eighty pound frame now that his knees wouldn't allow him to play hockey.

He thought for a moment about Ginger and the tango lessons. Fitness through tango? He snorted, and jerked himself back to what was unfolding in front of him.

The Department's two CSI techs bristled, watching the firefighters work on *their* scene. Inseparable friends, they were the subject of much department speculation. Two women, Meyers and Goldschmidt, both of them terse and unsmiling. They did everything together: came to work and left together, ate sandwiches together at lunchtime, hit the gym together after work, and for all anybody knew, lived together. Neither of them had any conversation, nor any other friends in the Department, but they did the job. And did it well. Both were hyper-alert, focused, eyes everywhere.

Working from the edge with orientation photos, they videoed the blackened car, ripples of flame still flaring up and dying down under the carpet of foam the firefighters had laid down. Good luck finding anything under that.

Fredericks' bossy little self pestered the fire guys with questions as they began rolling up the hoses when the fire diminished to an occasional flicker on the scorched hood. If Fredericks

weren't such a tireless investigator, he'd have to do something to tame her down. Management was the only part of being lead that Mason didn't like. She acted as though she'd hurl herself off a cliff to please him, but he expected any day her admiration would wear off.

Burroughs hurtled across the scene to report, "Guy who called it in took off."

"Go after him," Mason snapped. He decided to interview the Pinkowski woman himself.

As he clattered down the stairs, he saw the five women had to be mother and daughters, and had that look of people who enjoyed a good tragedy. They huddled close to one another, arms entwined, big girls with heft on them, handsome, glowing with youth and good health. He identified himself and picked out the mother and asked her to tell him what she'd seen.

"We just live there," Maricela Pinkowski said pointing over her shoulder at the row of two-story apartments that faced the parking lot. "So we saw what was going on and we came over."

She held out her campus ID to him and introduced her daughters: Selena, Lorena, Maria Elena, and the youngest, Rita. Mason gave them his best smile. He detached Pinkowski from her daughters. The little group fluttered, re-grouped, and stood watch over their mother.

Over Maricela's shoulder Mason caught sight of the College President, Elaine Marx, who looked like Gertrude Stein. She was moving fast, and scurrying to keep up, the annoying bureaucrat who was so concerned about student parking. Marx approached Mason, talking fast, wanting answers.

Everybody was the same. Everybody wanted it nailed down in half an hour, just like television. "I don't have answers for you at this point, but Ms. Pinkowski might be able to confirm a victim ID for us," he said. The President wheeled around to look at her staff member with surprise.

“The way that Officer Sanchez described the bag, I might know whose it is,” Pinkowski said, moving closer, her eyes switching between Mason and her boss. “See, we have an orientation for students before classes start. Yasemin was there and she had this purse, a book bag really, and—you don’t think it’s her, do you? Is she okay? What happened?”

“It’s too soon to know, ma’am. What would be her last name?”

“I’m pretty sure that bag’s Yasemin Safak’s,” Pinkowski said, fussing at the collar of her blouse which revealed a deep cleavage. She spelled out the name for him. Bingo. The same name written in fancy script on the notebook. Foreign name.

“She’s Turkish. Really sweet. A really sweet girl, I’m telling you. Shy. Hardly talks at all. I hope it’s not her, don’t you, Dr. Marx? I hope she’s okay. Whoever it is, it has to be somebody’s daughter though, doesn’t it? I don’t know what I’d do if I lost one of my girls. And you have to think that maybe somebody did this deliberately. I mean, we’re really scared, Detective Mason,” she said, flicking a look down at his business card to catch his name. “If he’s here in the neighborhood, maybe it’s somebody we know. Maybe he’s still here.” Her voice rose. “Nowadays, anything could happen. Could we like get some protection for me and my daughters? We’re scared to go home.”

“We’ll see what we can do, Ms. Pinkowski,” Mason lied. The unlikely threat to their safety was way, way down on his list of priorities. “We don’t know yet it hasn’t been a terrible accident. Show me whatever you’ve got in her records.”

Dr. Marx knew better than to stall Mason and set out toward the administration office, with Maricela Pinkowski and her girls following close behind.

On the way, Marx lectured Mason about the college's policy on confidentiality, but it was the fear of liability that radiated off her in waves. "Do you think it was suicide?" she whispered to him as she flicked on the lights in the main office.

"Too soon to tell," he repeated. "But suicide by arson is very uncommon."

Pinkowski's four daughters parked themselves on chairs in the waiting area of the Administrative offices while Mason stood at Pinkowski's desk, watching her pull up records on Safak. Lights blazed in a corner office off the waiting area where Dr. Marx spoke grimly with Chief Baker, her annoying VP, the college's insurance guy who'd already been called in, and a troupe of administrators.

Mason studied the photo of a dark-eyed girl that Pinkowski handed him. Her hair was hidden by a green and gold headscarf which made his pulse quicken. The department had dealt with one Muslim clusterfuck recently and they had been unprepared. Oh shit. The command staff was still working through new procedures with the City Attorney. Mason made up his mind he wasn't going to be the one to walk into another mess. The girl's eyes were wide and glowed with eagerness, a faint smile lifting the corners of her mouth. It was a sweetly pretty face that someday would have grown into real beauty.

Just then Mason's partner, Art Delgado, came through the outer door and looked around for him. Delgado wore a grey suit, one of three that he owned. Like the other two suits, this one looked slept in, the worst of the spots sponged over. It sported frayed cuffs and a tiny rip at the top of the right sleeve.

Mason called him over and tilted the photo of Yasemin Safak up for him to see. They exchanged looks. Delgado saw the address, the middle-eastern name, and saw she was beautiful. All the ingredients for a media explosion.

Why couldn't this be Mary Smith who lived in a rent control apartment in Santa Monica instead of Yasemin Safak who lived in a mansion in one of the best neighborhoods in the city?

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The End

176 reviews on Amazon as of 9/6/2017

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