

Chapter One

It started because I snapped. I was working at a domestic abuse shelter in the northern part of L.A. I'd been there almost eighteen months, which was pretty good for that job. I was technically the secretary for the group. There was a lot of handholding involved as well and not just the hands of the clients. The caseworkers needed their fair share of propping up, although, to be fair, they were always available when I needed to whine and weep.

Martina Rivera was in my office, a miserable puddle. For months, the poor woman had been calling, trying to find a way to get away from her husband, an exceptional son of a bitch, even among the bastards we usually dealt with.

Now, I know how incredibly hard it is for an abused woman to break away from her abuser. The stats say seven tries, on average, before she finally gets out, and that's about right. It's even harder for Latinas, who face tremendous cultural and family pressure to stay with the louts. If the woman is an immigrant and her husband is here legally and she's not, such as was Martina's case, the bastard has even more power over her.

However, Juan Rivera had seriously injured one of the kids. The cops got called in, Children's Services had removed the rest of the children, and the D.A.'s office was talking about prosecuting Martina as an accessory because she didn't stop her husband. Great idea, punishing her when she was just as much a victim.

Only that's exactly what I wanted to do. Cripes, the woman had been calling and calling. We'd given her option after option. She still didn't leave.

That's when I snapped and walked out. The caseworkers took care of Martina. A week later, I went to

lunch.

"I wanted to ask her why the hell didn't she get out?" I told my friend Berto Esparza, who was buying. "Of course, I didn't. I got her caseworker and got out the lawyer list." I shook my head and blinked back tears. "Berto, I just couldn't take it anymore. I was building up a shell just to keep from caving in from all the sadness. Anyway, that's why I quit. Merrilee gave me all the vacation time I've accrued, like they can afford it. She was pretty grateful, actually. I held out longer than most people do there. I just have no idea what I'm going to do now."

Berto opened his mouth and I glared.

"Don't say it," I said.

I knew what Berto was about to suggest. We've been close friends for a lot of years and have had a few of the same conversations more than once.

He's about medium height, with gray flecks shot through his thick, dark hair. His build is stocky and muscular – he's built like a cement block and his face is almost as square. For somebody who's spent as much time as he has dealing with the dregs of humanity, he's pretty cheerful.

"I wasn't going to," he replied with a big, shit-eating grin on his face.

He's a private investigator with fancy offices next to Beverly Hills and a nice house in the Valley. What he was going to do was ask me to formally join his firm, never mind that he'd just said he wasn't.

I met Berto back in the days when he was mostly process serving. In fact, that's how I met him. He tried to serve a subpoena on a partner of mine. Berto tipped me off that the son of a bitch was embezzling the entire budget of a play we were producing. What's really ridiculous is that the show was run on a freaking shoestring even for the cheap house we were in.

Since that time, Berto has periodically asked me to become his associate. You see, as a theatre producer in Los Angeles, I was making a living, but not a great one. I had resisted because I still had some residuals coming in from various acting jobs I'd done. Since I'd turned forty, however,

the acting jobs weren't all that plentiful, and I was pretty much done with The Industry, anyway. Yes, I capitalized that correctly. It's an L.A. thing that says a lot about our local economy.

"Berto, I really don't want to work for you," I groaned, stabbing my salad with more force than necessary.

Berto laughed. He was in full dress uniform that afternoon, as in a custom-tailored dark wool suit and a snowy white Egyptian cotton shirt with French cuffs. His tie was more colorful, but still a subdued mélange of dark greens and grays. He had taken me to one of those hotshot places in Pasadena, a brass rail and wood sort of place with a trendy menu featuring currant emulsions, for crying out loud, and beautifully tender meat.

"Daria, you damned near already do," he said.

"There's a huge-ass difference between serving the occasional summons and being a full-on associate," I said. "You know, like people shooting at you."

"As if they don't shoot when you serve a summons."

"Just because it hasn't happened yet," I grumbled.

Berto chuckled again. "I got shot at more often process serving than anything I do now."

He had a point. Berto's specialty is tracking down the stalkers behind various and sundry threatening emails and letters that celebrities get, preferably before the stalker does something that requires police intervention. Thanks to social media and the access it gives fans to their faves, business is booming. Pretty tawdry stuff, by and large, but he's probably saved a life or two and he gets paid very well for it. His other cases are usually runaways or digging up evidence on behalf of the law firm next door. So, while the folks he's chasing can be pretty icky, they aren't usually violent.

That didn't mean I was ready to concede. I waited while the waiter came by to take our salad plates away. Okay, I was trying to find some new way to wriggle out of working for Berto.

"Berto, I really appreciate the offer, but I really don't want to be a charity case."

Berto laughed loudly as the waiter placed a beautifully scented rib-eye in front of me and half a roasted chicken with perfectly golden-brown skin in front of him.

"Like I'm going to risk my business to help you pay your bills." Still chuckling, he dug into his bird. "Come on, Daria. I want you because you're good. You've got great instincts. We work well together. All you need is some training, which I expect you to take. You'll also have to work under my license for a couple years, then you'll get your own."

I winced at that part and Berto nodded.

"I see what's going on," he said.

"See what?" I took a bite of my steak.

It was heavenly, cooked with just the right amount of red in the middle, juicy, with a little bit of spice and some lovely pan juices, and, yes, I was desperately trying to avoid what Berto thought was going on.

"You forget I really know you," Berto went on without mercy. "And I know what you really want."

"Seriously, Berto?" I rolled my eyes. "I don't even know what I want."

"Aha!" Berto gleefully slapped the table. "It is now my turn to call bullshit on you, *hermanita*. You know damn well what you really want to be doing with your life, and I know why it's scaring you. After what happened, I don't blame you. But you know that, more than anything, you want to get back to producing plays."

"Well, duh. Of course, I want to. But I can't. I can't make enough money to survive on."

"But you can working for me." Berto sat back, utterly satisfied with himself. "The whole reason you're pushing back is that you're afraid that working for me means that you're giving up on theatre."

"I am not!" Okay, I was, and I knew damned well I was.

"That's what you're not getting, Daria," Berto chewed on some more chicken, then grinned. "Did I ever say you had to work full-time?"

"Huh?"

"Trust me, Daria. This is how we're going to get you back to the theatre. You work part-time for me, for the

money, then you work theatre the rest of the time. I can't promise there won't be times when I'll need you to put the extra time in. You know that's going to happen."

"And probably at the worst possible time, too." I glared at my almost gone steak.

"Probably." He shrugged. "I need you. I need someone I can trust."

"Great way to put a few extra nails in the coffin." I sighed.

Berto had good reason to worry. When his last associate had left, the asshole had tried to take all Berto's clients with him.

"There's still the potential for getting shot at," I said. "That really does scare me."

"It should," Berto said. "But you have a gun and know how to use it."

I made a face. I hated that gun, but fortunately, I had yet to do more than wave it around.

"Come on. I've got a big case coming in, and I think you'll find it interesting. Come with me to the meeting this afternoon."

I tried to glare at him and couldn't. "I'm not saying I'm going for it. But I'll go to the meeting."

"Good. It'll be fine."

"I don't know, Berto. This is, like, way outside my wheelhouse."

He grinned again. "Good. It's the cocky assholes who get into trouble."

Like that was reassuring. Still, I'd done errands and even served a few summonses for Berto before. He was right. There was no reason I couldn't work with him and do a play at the same time.

We rode back to the Westside in Berto's BMW sedan. It's a fairly discreet car, given that they're everywhere in L.A. Berto loves it because the paint job is such that the car changes color depending on how the sun hits it.

I spent most of the ride bracing myself. It was one of those wet, drizzly February days, varying between mists, dry spots, and downpours, with an occasional break of sun

just to throw things off. Like most Angelenos, Berto doesn't slow down just because the freeways are wet. We skidded a little as he got off the 134 freeway onto Forest Lawn Drive.

We wriggled around on surface streets and a quick patch on the Hollywood Freeway, then Franklin until we got to Sunset. Past the Chateau Marmont, where John Belushi took his last trip. We were waiting for the light at Doheny when I looked up.

All along the side of this tall, narrow building, a mural-type ad had been painted. The building was at least ten stories tall. On a dark, navy-blue background was the figure of a man surrounded by a halo of white light. It was a three-quarter back view, from about his hips up. His shirt was dark blue with white stripes, and it was one of those cowboy styles - you could see the curved edge of the yoke. He wore a white cowboy hat and held a microphone to his face. His free hand was raised over his head, either in blessing or to greet the unseen fans he faced.

"Luke Winston, Live in the U.S., in stores now!" read the banner underneath.

I tried to think of something sufficiently sardonic to say that would note that a country western star was as big as Springsteen. Of course, Luke Winston had been that for some time and had one huge crossover following.

"Aren't you curious about your first case?" Berto teased, as he made the turn into the building's garage.

"Assuming it is my first case. Isn't it the usual celebrity getting threatening letters?"

"Somehow, I think this one's going to be a little bit different. Hal Watkins is bringing the client over himself, and he didn't say anything about letters."

Hal Watkins is one of the partners next door at the law firm. He refers a lot of Berto's clients.

Like all the offices on his floor, Berto's outer office wall is glass, letting you see into the antechamber as you walk up from the elevator. Berto's wife, Marisol, decorated the office because, frankly, Berto would have put up Super Bowl posters and his kids' latest school projects. Instead, Marisol chose a couple Frieda Kahlo prints for the outer office.

The rest is done in a soothing blue and soft gold palette, to accent Franny's cherry wood desk, which faces out onto the corridor. There's an overstuffed leather couch facing her desk, with its back up against the glass, and another on the wall furthest from the door, which has the filing and copy room on the other side.

Hanging around Berto as long as I have, I know most of the players around him by name, though not by sight. As we walked up to the office, I could see Franny, Berto's administrative assistant, smiling and shaking hands with five strangers. Franny's an African American woman, with rich, dark skin who is... Well, she's not fat by any means, but hardly thin, either. She's tall and carries her weight well. She generally wears her hair straightened and in a more conservative turned under do, although, at that moment, she was in one of her periods when she experiments with braids. She always dresses in nice suits. Nobody in their right mind messes with Franny, least of all Berto, who is completely dependent on her.

Of the five strangers, Hal Watkins was easy to peg - he was the White guy in light gray Armani and no topcoat. Okay, the other strangers were White, too. Two other men and the one woman were all wearing Burberry raincoats of varying shades of tan. The last man was wearing a discreet black and white twill woolen topcoat buttoned all the way up. He had dusty straw-colored hair that was decidedly thinning on top, a straw-colored mustache that wasn't anywhere near thinning, and he wore wire-rimmed glasses that he constantly pushed up his nose with a black-leather-gloved hand.

He did look vaguely familiar. That wouldn't have made any difference, except that it suddenly hit me what Berto had been talking about when he'd asked me if I was curious about the new client. Berto's new client was the guy on the side of the building, country star Luke Winston.

I hitched my beat-up navy pea coat around my shoulders. I'd dressed up for lunch, well, for me anyway. I was wearing a white oxford shirt over a dark green turtleneck, and my best jeans and cross trainers. I was a

little under-dressed for this crowd.

I ran a hand over the curly dark blond mass I call hair. I wear it down to my shoulders because if it gets too short, I look like a poodle. Too long, and it becomes a real pain in the ass to deal with. I have the kind of hair most women I know covet and then some. Except on rainy days, when it all goes psycho, like that day.

I'm pretty much average height, and while I've added some padding over the years, I can still legitimately zip up a pair of size eight jeans without lying down.

The group in the office had seen us coming because they all turned as one toward us. Berto grinned as he ushered me in.

"Hal, good to see you again," Berto said, quickly shaking Hal's hand and sliding out of his own Burberry.

"Good to see you," Hal replied quickly, then turned to the man in the black and white topcoat. "Mr. Winston, this Mr. Berto Esparza."

"It's a real pleasure to meet you, sir." Mr. Luke Winston's voice was firmly planted in the deep South, and for all the ritual was professional, I got the sense that Winston was utterly sincere at the same time.

"Same here, Mr. Winston." Berto smiled warmly as he shook Winston's hand.

I saw a flicker of surprise in Berto as Winston melted back and Hal introduced the entourage. As Berto later explained, most celebrities introduce their helpers in passing, and they certainly don't step aside.

There was Leo McKesson, Winston's manager, a thinnish, serious man with a perfectly tanned face and broad shoulders. His voice pegged him as also coming from the South. Jenny Richards' voice had no distinguishable accent. She was in her early thirties, pleasant and professional, and head of Winston's mail department. Jay Swanson looked like he was fresh out of college. Tall and broad-shouldered, he had that kind of jovial, eager to please puppy look.

Then Berto pushed me forward.

"I'd like to present my new associate, Daria Barnes," he announced as I smiled reluctantly. "Let's get your coats, and we'll talk in my office."

"I've got them," Franny said, and indeed, she already had McKesson's raincoat in her arms.

Winston had slid off his gloves and pocketed them and his long, pale fingers quickly unbuttoned his coat. He noticed that I was watching him and grinned.

"Expecting something different?" he asked softly as I took his coat.

He was dressed in an exquisitely tailored dark gray suit of the prettiest worsted wool I had ever seen. The cut was more English, although it emphasized his slim form nicely without the showiness of an Italian cut. His shirt was sky blue silk broadcloth with a matching tie. His shoes were Italian, though, and black business pumps that laced.

"Not quite your concert image," I replied.

"Well, it's a more discreet way of getting around. I don't get recognized as much." His soft brown eyes twinkled impishly. "I got my cowboy shorts on underneath."

He was a lot shorter than I'd expected, building murals notwithstanding. Up next to him, I could see that he was almost six feet tall, but he didn't seem tall, if you know what I mean.

Franny relieved me of Winston's coat and my own and I found myself swept into Berto's office.

It's a large room, with the same cherry and soft gold accents played this time against a deep, rich green. Berto's huge desk, which is always a mess, is flanked by rows of filled bookshelves behind him on the walls. Two tan leather wingback chairs face the desk, and to the side is a corner group of two black overstuffed couches with a glass coffee table.

Hal had excused himself, so while the client settled himself on a couch, I dragged over the wing backs. Winston had landed next to the corner. Berto, who was getting his notepad from the desk and some other papers, said that he'd sit next to Winston on the other couch. McKesson sat next to where Berto was going, and I was waved into the

place on Winston's other side. Richards and Swanson took the wing backs.

Winston leaned over and picked up a framed photograph.

"Mr. Esparza, is this your family?" he asked.

"Yes, it is." Berto rooted around the desk some more, then picked up his phone. "Franny, the contract, please."

I pointed out the children as I named them. "That's Sarah, she's ten, then Jesse, five and Ruben, three, and that's Marisol, his wife." All had cowboy hats and western wear on.

Winston nodded at the photo. "They wouldn't happen to be country western fans?"

I rolled my eyes. "And how?"

"Let me guess, you're not." Winston's eyes were teasing, as opposed to peevd.

"With all due respect, Mr. Winston, I'm afraid not."

"Who is your favorite group?"

"The Chicago Symphony." I smiled, slightly uncomfortable with where I stood.

He laughed, loud and hard. "That's the best answer I've heard yet."

"Chicago Symphony?" snorted Berto from his desk. "Everybody's heard of them."

I rolled my eyes. "I was on the spot." I smiled weakly at Winston. "I'm sorry, Mr. Winston. I really don't have a favorite group. Classical music is as close as I get to a favorite genre, but I listen to almost everything that isn't on a major label."

"The more obscure the better," teased Berto. "If you've heard of them, Daria's not listening to them."

"Well, nobody's heard of me." Winston winked at me. "Don't worry about it. Got fans enough. Now, Mr. Esparza, about my case."

Berto was finally sitting down. "Yes. How can I help you?"

Winston shifted. "It's about Larry Ochoa."

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I remembered a report from the eleven o'clock news that Winston's drummer had died in an accident at a rehearsal.

Winston's face had suddenly become unreadable.

Richards and Swanson both fidgeted uncomfortably while McKesson glared. He was obviously pissed off at something, what, I had no clue.

Berto nodded.

"I don't know how much you know about the case," Winston continued. "It was a week ago today. The police have decided it was an accident. It was the fall from the catwalk that actually killed Larry, they told me."

"You see," said McKesson, "the autopsy turned up Vicodin in his system. You know, the pain killer?"

"He'd been injured recently?" Berto asked.

Winston sighed. "Well, yes. I, uh, don't think we need to go into that."

"They need to know," McKesson told him softly, then turned to us. "The problem is, Larry used to be hooked on heroin and probably other stuff, years back. He's been clean for six years and playing for us for a little over four years now. The police figured he got strung out on the Vicodin, climbed up the catwalk and fell off."

"I know he hasn't gone back to using," Luke said emphatically.

"If he wasn't using, how did the Vicodin get in his system?" Berto asked.

"We don't know," said McKesson quickly. "He may have been taking it for some back pain he was having."

Winston groaned. "Leo, he wasn't using. I couldn't even talk him into taking an aspirin." He looked at Berto. "We've been friends for a lot of years, you know. Since he got clean, Larry was real careful about taking anything. I know the cops meant well, but they got it wrong about Larry taking the Vicodin because he was using again. I let it go until Jenny here came to me the other day."

Richards recognized her cue and opened a leather padded folder. "Obviously, Mr. Winston gets so much mail, he couldn't possibly look at it all. Ninety-nine percent of it is fan mail, and my staff handles it. Of the remaining one percent, half are gifts, which are also handled by my staff. The other half is the nasty stuff. We get an occasional death threat, but most of it's just hate mail. I keep an eye on that

and track it. So far, there hasn't been anything to be terribly worried about. The day after Mr. Ochoa died, this came through."

She handed Berto a postcard. He read it and passed it on to me.

"MAKE SURE YOU GET THE RIGHT DRUMMER THIS TIME," the message read. It had been done on a computer, in a basic block letter font which filled most of the one side. The other side had the address and no return address. It also had been printed on a computer, in a smaller version of the same font, only with upper and lower case. It had been date stamped on the address side, presumably by a Winston staffer.

"The timing just seemed really bad," Richards continued. "Then I heard Mr. Winston talking about his suspicions about Mr. Ochoa's death. I don't normally show Mr. Winston the hate mail, but this, I kind of had to." She paused and looked at Winston and McKesson. "That's when I strongly suggested we hire a private investigator and, fortunately, Mr. Winston agreed."

Berto took the postcard back from me and slid it into his notebook. "It could be just a coincidence."

"I s'pose," Winston said with a slight sigh. "Mr. Esparza, I just don't think so. When you spend as much time working with a band as I have, you get to know your guys, and Larry and I were already tight. I'd know if he was using, and he wasn't. I just can't figure out why someone would dump him off a catwalk."

"How high up did the catwalk go?" Berto asked.

"About two stories-worth," Winston replied. "It's a sound stage near Culver City that I rent. That way we can get all the set pieces inside for a concert and check lighting and all that. The catwalk is up pretty near the ceiling, at the far end of the stage, which we don't use. In fact, there's a black cyc hanging between where my stage ends and where Larry fell."

Cyc is short for cyclorama, which is one of those huge backdrop things used on stages as background.

"If Mr. Ochoa didn't just go up to the catwalk and fall,

then how did he get there?" Berto asked. "Was he dragged or walked up? And how would you get the drugs into him in the first place?"

"Well, that's what I hope you'll find out," Winston said.

I had a thought. "Do you have coffee on the stage?"

"Sure," Swanson said. "We've got the whole craft services table, with hot water, regular and decaf. Even got a soda machine."

"What kind of coffee cups do you use?" I asked. "Paper, regular mugs?"

"Oh, everybody has their own mug," Swanson said. "If we didn't have the same crew all the time, it'd make more sense to use paper or something like that. But since it's the same guys, why add to the whole trash problem? It's cheaper, too."

"So, each person's mug is distinctive?" I asked, ignoring Berto, who had the biggest, ugliest I-told-you-so smirk on his face I'd ever seen.

"We all have our names on them," Winston replied, frowning. I think he had an idea where I was going with this.

I nodded. "I'd be willing to bet that the day of Mr. Ochoa's death, he was complaining that the coffee tasted burnt or bad."

Mr. Swanson bounced excitedly. "Mr. Winston, Larry did! He was pouring a whole bunch of sugar into his cup and joking about how bad the coffee was."

"Jay, everybody complains about the coffee," Mr. McKesson said. He turned to me and chuckled. "I can get the best beans in the state, keep it fresh, and they still complain."

"I think Jay's onto something," Winston said, shaking his head, as if he didn't want to agree, but had to. "I saw Larry adding cream and he doesn't usually do that unless the coffee's really bad." Winston turned to me. "What does bad coffee have to do with Mr. Ochoa's passing?"

"A lot," I said. "Vicodin, like most drugs, has a very bitter taste, which makes it pretty hard to spike something with it because the bitterness will tip off whoever tastes it. Coffee, on the other hand, is naturally bitter, especially if it's been sitting in the pot too long. If your coffee tasted unusually

harsh, you wouldn't assume it was spiked. You'd assume it had burnt and toss it or doctor it up."

McKesson nodded. "That would explain how the Vicodin got into Larry's system."

"It does not explain why or how somebody got him up to a catwalk two stories up," Berto said. "Unless they walked him up after he was doped up. I think I also have to point out, Mr. Winston, that if Mr. Ochoa did get the Vicodin this way, it points to someone on your staff. Who else would know what to do and who else would have access to the craft services table?"

Swanson snorted. "Lots of people would. It's so easy to get on that sound stage. I'm surprised we don't get more fans bugging us. There's always tons of people hanging around."

"What you do for Mr. Winston, Mr. Swanson?" Berto asked with that direct way that sounds like an accusation.

Swanson gulped. "I— I'm Mr. Winston's personal assistant."

"He's a glorified gofer," Winston chuckled. "Fresh out of college and just starting out. I always make my new hires do assistant duty before moving them up in the organization. I get a better sense of what all they can do that way."

And a sense of a few other things, I decided. For all that Winston was sweet and gentlemanly, I began to realize he was one savvy bastard. I also suspected security on his sound stage was a lot tighter than it looked. Still, it was within the realm of possibility that someone who knew Ochoa could have gotten in and observed, then found the right opportunity.

Berto apparently had decided the same thing.

"Well, Mr. Winston," he said. "I'm not sure about the catwalk scenario, but there are a few interesting possibilities. Tell me about Mr. Ochoa. What kind of enemies did he have?"

"That's a good question because as far as I know, he didn't have any," Winston replied. "Assuming he was murdered, there must have been somebody. Maybe it was somebody from his past. I really can't tell you."

"He used to use drugs," Berto mused. "Was there an ex-wife, family members that he may have hurt?"

Winston frowned. "He didn't talk much about his family. They weren't close. I believe he has an ex somewhere. He didn't talk much about his past, and his family wasn't too big on talking about him. Jay's got his family's phone numbers and addresses."

Jay pulled two sheets of papers stapled together from his padded leather folder and handed them to Berto.

"It's someplace to start," Berto said. "Do you know the name of the detective who worked this case? Even if it was an accident, somebody wrote the case up."

"That was, uh, Detective Isabel Lancaster. Jay, you got a copy of her card for Mr. Esparza?"

I bit my tongue as Berto covered. It was a beautiful thing. If I hadn't known, it would have gone right past me, and I know Berto like the back of my hand. You see, Isabel Lancaster is not exactly on Berto's list of favorite people. They have nothing but respect for each other. They just don't get along very well. If Isabel was saying Ochoa's death was an accident, it probably was. That wouldn't stop Berto from trying to show her up.

Berto was busy explaining his terms and getting the contract signed. Swanson produced a check, which Winston filled out and handed over. Then we all trooped out to the outer office, coats were collected, and everyone said goodbye.

As soon as everyone was safely off down the hallway, Berto started laughing as Franny tried to push a message slip into his hand.

"You nosy bitch!" Berto thumped my back as Franny glared. She does not like foul language. "Sorry, Franny. Seriously, Daria, where, in heaven's name, did you come up with that Vicodin and the coffee sh—, uh, stuff?"

I shrugged. "I worked with Jeffrey Bates for all those years."

Bates was a playwright who specialized in murder mysteries and psychological thrillers. Not terribly deep, still, they pulled in the audience. For about eight years, he

was the in-house playwright at the little company I was running, and during that time, I had him revise more than a couple improbable scenarios.

"And you say snooping is not your style," Berto continued. "Daria, you're a natural."

I shook my head. "I don't know. I've done enough time with the dregs of humanity."

"Yes, but with me, you get to do something about them." Berto threw his hands up in the air. "At least think it over tonight, will you?" He sighed. "I could really use you, Daria. You've got good instincts and you're one tough cookie."

"I'll think about it, *hermano*. I'll see you tomorrow, I guess."

I grabbed my pea coat as Berto turned to Franny.

"So, what does Reisner want?" he asked Franny.

"To interview you. She's doing some report on celebrity stalkers."

I turned. "Reisner? Wasn't she that anchorwoman who got all teed off at you because you investigated her last summer?"

Berto shrugged. "We made up."

That didn't surprise me.

"Okay. *Hasta manana*," I said and zipped out to the floor foyer.

There was an elevator right there, which Winston and company had just boarded. Winston held the door for me.

"The elevators are so slow in this building," I remarked as I got on.

"They're not so bad," Winston replied, reaching for the buttons. "Which level did you park on?"

I groaned. The doors had already closed, and we were moving down. "I didn't. Berto drove me here. I'll have to get off on the next floor and see if he can set me up with a Lyft."

"Where are you headed?" Winston asked.

"I live over in Eagle Rock," I said, then for some reason, kept babbling. "We had lunch in Pasadena. Berto was meeting with a client in South Pas and the Parkway Grill isn't that far from my place."

"I'm headed in that direction myself," Winston said.

I caught the slight frown on Swanson's face and figured Winston was fibbing. "Why don't I drop you off? It'll save you an Uber or Lyft."

"It's too much trouble."

"It's no trouble at all. I've got an appointment in Pasadena. Eagle Rock's on the way."

Swanson was just uncomfortable enough. I didn't know if I could get anything out of him, but a ride in a car with him might yield something. Besides, even Uber or Lyft fare to Eagle Rock was no small chunk of change.

"If you're sure it's no trouble," I said, "then thank you very much."