
Brother Love

A Shades of LA Story by *Sophia R. Mulvey* and *K. Rae Travers*

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That old saying is true, the one about not appreciating what you've got until you lose it. There were days, when I was plagued by a difficult shade, when I would have given anything to be normal again. By normal I mean like all the rest of you who are blissfully unaware of the spirits seeking peace around them. But no, some cosmic force out there decided that I, Michael Burton, should be a kind of private investigator for the dead and resolve their unfinished business for them so that they can go on to their just reward.

All right, all right, maybe I am exaggerating a bit, but at times, that's exactly what it feels like. Not that I haven't gotten a certain satisfaction out of solving unsolved crimes and helping those lost souls find their way out of Limbo, but it's also put a crimp in my social life, and there's more than one co-worker in my department who looks at me funny.

Anyway, after months of being haunted by other people's memories I was unprepared when it all suddenly stopped. My friend, Annie, thinks it has something to do with my solving the Rosignoli case. More specifically the car accident I had while chasing after Mendez which totalled my car as well as giving me a concussion and a broken left leg.

Well, I've been out of the hospital three days now. My head was too hard for the concussion to do any serious damage and the leg, encased in its fiberglass cocoon, is healing nicely, but something was missing in my life. It took me until this morning to realize what it was. For the first time since my near death experience there were no eerie dreams, no supernatural suspicions, no mysterious strangers only I could see and hear. The shades of LA were gone.

Damn it all, I miss them.

"E

xcuse me, mister, but I think you dropped these."

I looked over my shoulder at the squeaky adolescent voice and found a shaggy haired teenage boy holding out a can of green beans. He had several other cans clutched to his chest. He looked to be about fifteen with dark brown hair and deep blue eyes and wore the typical teenage uniform of tattered jeans and tee-shirt.

"Thanks," I mumbled as I tried to balance two bags of groceries, one of which had a hole in it, while trying to unlock my door and not lose my crutches, or my precarious balance.

"Could you use a hand?"

Could I ever! "Yeah, take these." I pushed the bags of groceries at him — I wasn't quite desperate enough to give him my keys — and finally managed to unlock the door.

"Come on in," I offered as I hobbled into my house.

The boy followed me and looked around. "Nice place."

"Thanks. The kitchen's through there," I pointed with my chin. "Just put the stuff on the table."

"Hey! Neat!" the kid exclaimed when he spotted my pinball machine. "Mind if I try it?"

What the hell, I owed the kid, "Sure, go ahead," I said as I finally caught up to him and started to put my groceries, dented vegetable cans and all, away.

The kid wasn't half bad at the pinball. He used a little too much body english but he was racking up the points. As he played I studied him. Even without my psychic connections, my years as a cop told me there was something about this kid that wasn't quite right.

His clothes were worn and relatively clean, but not exactly the latest style and his Reebok pumps were several years old. Of course they could be hand-me-downs from an older brother. With the latest round of layoffs and wage freezes my neighborhood was largely comprised of the working poor.

I grabbed a couple of cold Cokes from the fridge and offered him one.

"Thanks," he said, taking the can as his last ball bit the dust. "Neat game," he took a long swallow of the Coke and sighed in pleasure. "Wow, I forgot how good this stuff tastes."

My cop's curiosity went into overdrive. "I don't think I've ever seen you around here. Are you new in town?"

"I've been away, but my folks live over on Market Street," he said between swallows of soda.

"What's your name?" I finally asked since he didn't seem inclined to offer it.

"Jesse. Jesse Parrish."

"I'm Michael Burton," I said, offering my hand. "Nice to meet you. You saved my butt out there."

"S nothing," he muttered, turning red. "You kinda had your hands full."

"You wouldn't be interested in earning some money, would you?"

"Depends," he answered warily.

"My yard is going to hell in a hurry and it's going to be at least another five weeks before I get this cast off. Would you be interested in doing some yard work for me?"

"Sure, I'm real good at cutting grass."

"The lawnmower is out in the garage ..." I never got to finish my sentence as the door bell rang and Jesse went into a panic.

"I got to go now."

"Hang on a minute. Just let me answer the door and I'll show you where all the stuff is."

"I can't."

I ignored his protest in favor of answering the persistently ringing doorbell. It turned out to be a UPS man in a hurry to get rid of his last delivery for the day. When I returned to the kitchen the back door was open and Jesse was gone.

Strange kid. Well, the grass would just have to wait a few more weeks.

I threw a frozen dinner in the oven, grabbed my can of Coke and settled into my recliner to sort through my mail while I checked out the six o'clock news.

Not quite awake, I brushed a hand over my ear to swat away the persistent fly that kept buzzing in it. It took a couple of passes before I woke up enough to realize that the droning wasn't insect generated and was coming from outside my house.

I cracked open an eye and studied my alarm clock with blurry vision. 8:40 a.m. No one on the street could afford a gardening service these days, so who would be ambitious enough to be running a lawn mower at this ungodly hour?

I swung my legs off the side of the bed, remembering to compensate for the extra weight of the cast at the last minute, and hobbled over to the nearest window. Jesse was enthusiastically pushing my old clunker back and forth across the lawn in neat rows like he'd been born to the job. Funny, I could have sworn I'd locked the garage door the day before. Time for a new lock.

I washed the sleep from my eyes, gave myself a quick shave then headed for the kitchen for an emergency shot of coffee. Outside, the ancient mower coughed and sputtered for half a minute before dying.

I watched Jesse through the kitchen window. The kid pulled off his flannel shirt and underneath it he wore the same tee he'd had on yesterday. Sweat matted it to his body and the tee shirt soon followed the flannel one on the ground. Jesse pulled off his Lakers cap, wiped the sweat off his forehead with his arm then plopped the cap on backwards. After a couple of tries he got the mower running again and went back on his way.

I decided to throw on some clothes and when I got back to the kitchen Jesse was standing there.

"Hope you don't mind my coming in. The door was unlocked."

No it wasn't. I *know* that sucker was locked. "No problem. I didn't expect to see you again."

"I said I'd do the grass," he said with a defiant shrug.

"I'll get the money," I said, reaching into my back pocket.

"Could you maybe just send it to my mom instead?" Jesse asked shyly.

"Your mother?"

"My mom's been kinda pressed lately. Things have been tough since I left."

"Are you a runaway?"

"Not exactly, but I can't go there just now."

"Why not? If you've run away from home your folks must be frantic. I'm sure your mom would rather have you home again."

"Can't," Jesse shrugged as if it was no big deal, but his tone of voice and the fierce look in his eyes told me that his decision was final, at least for now.

"You've quit school too, haven't you?" I wanted to punch myself, I sounded so full of righteous adult indignation, but Jesse just gave another shrug.

"I go to school, sometimes."

"Where are you staying?"

"Around, you know."

Unless I missed my guess, Jesse was too good a kid to lose to the runaway lifestyle. Since I couldn't do anything about apprehending lawbreakers in my present condition I felt the least I could do was keep Jesse from becoming another statistic until I could convince him to go home.

"There's an apartment above the garage. It's nothing fancy but it has a lavette and a bed and you're welcome to use it for a while."

"Naw, I couldn't," Jesse said, but the look on his face said he wanted to. "I don't have money for rent."

Proud kid. I became more determined to help him. "I'll take it out in trade. I could really use the help until my leg is healed. What do you say? It's got to be better than sleeping on the street."

Jesse nodded and caught the key ring I tossed him. "That's for the lock on the garage door and the door to the loft. I don't want you forcing the locks anymore."

"But I didn't ..."

I held my hand up to stop his protest. "Look I know you did it this morning with good intentions but from now on use the keys, okay?"

"Okay," was the muttered reply.

"Okay," I repeated. "How about some breakfast? I'm not the world's greatest cook, but you look hungry enough not to care."

"Sure, I haven't eaten in a ... a while."

Jesse had obviously changed what he was going to say but I figured I'd challenged him enough for one morning and let it ride.

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Almost there. I advanced the wire coat hanger just a bit farther. Good, now ever so slowly I inched it to the right and tried jiggling it. Damn, no good. I got a better grip and tried again, down, just a bit, now over. Careful, careful. "Ah-hah!" I cried out in success.

"You're not supposed to do that," Annie whispered in my ear.

I freaked. The hanger went flying out of my hand and my cast fell off the coffee table to land with a bone jarring thud on the floor. "Jeez! don't do that to me," I yelled.

Annie, use to my tantrums, smiled as she came around and plopped herself down beside me on the couch.

"How did you get in?" First Jesse, now Annie, having people walk in on me through locked doors was almost as bad as having the *shades* back.

Annie dangled a zodiac key ring in front of my face. "You gave me a set of your keys when you went on vacation last month, remember? When you never asked for them back I figured you wanted me to keep them."

"Oh," I said, chagrined.

"I thought I'd use them rather than make you get up to answer the door. I'm surprised you didn't hear me. Must be 'cause you were concentrating so hard on doing something you weren't supposed to do, like sticking things down your cast." Annie had the sweetest way of delivering a lecture.

"The itch is driving me crazy," I complained.

"Poor baby," Annie said without much sympathy. "Anything from the spirit world?"

Annie was the only one I'd told about my ability to see the shades. Into New Age mysticism, Annie was the only one I trusted to believe me and not think I was nuts. "Nothing," I said, disgusted.

"Well at least you're not having nightmares anymore. Here is something to distract you." Annie reached into the shopping bag and pulled out a hot fudge sundae from D.J.'s Creamery. "I brought one for your friend, too. Is he around? I want to meet him."

"Jesse, yeah," I tore myself away from the ice cream to look over my shoulder. "That's weird, he was just playing pinball." Come to think of it I hadn't heard the machine's gongs and bells going off since Annie'd snuck in. "He must have gone outside."

Annie went to check the yard and came back a few minutes later. "Nobody outside and the loft was empty too. I'll put his sundae in the freezer and he can have it when he shows up later."

"Good idea," I mumbled between mouthfuls of ice cream and hot fudge.

I jumped at the sound of Annie's muffled squeak. Twisting around on the couch, I could see her over by the pinball machine. Her hands were on the controls, but she wasn't playing, just staring at the machine.

"Annie? What's the matter?" When I didn't get a response I put my sundae down and hobbled over to her. This was strange behavior, even for Annie. I reached out and shook her gently by the shoulder. "Hey, Annie, you're scaring me."

Whatever it was that had hold of her, let go, and she shivered. "There's something weird here, Michael."

"What? What's weird? It's just my good old pinball machine."

"I don't know, but something isn't right. I touched the controls and suddenly I felt like ... I don't know, like someone was walking on my grave."

I gave her the time out signal. "Hold on a minute, are you saying the shades are contacting you now?"

"No, nothing like that. I just got a real creepy feeling. Don't take me wrong, Michael, but what do you know about Jesse?"

"Jesse?" I thought about him as we made our way back to the couch. What did I know about him? He'd been living over my garage for two weeks. Great, that told me a lot. He was shy, polite, he seemed responsible. "He's a good kid."

"That's your gut reaction, but what do you really know about him except that he's a runaway?"

Have you tried finding his family?"

"No, but I've kinda been a little handicapped," I said, rapping on my cast.

"That's an excuse, Michael."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right." I could tell Annie wasn't about to let me off that easily. "Could you give me a lift down to Louie's?"

For all his bluster and conniving, my Uncle Louie was my personal guardian angel. I grew up one step away from a sentence to Juvie Hall. It wasn't that I was a bad kid, but my folks were having problems handling each other, there wasn't much time or energy left over for me. Consequently, I tended to get in trouble to force them to wake up and take notice. Uncle Louie, bless him, saw what was happening and stepped in.

I thought my old man was going to have a heart attack the day Judge Calvin made Louie my legal guardian. And I remember feeling about the same. I didn't want another father, I wanted the father I already had.

Our first few weeks together were kind of tense, but after a while Louie's good humor and natural gruffness won me over. I hate to think of where I'd be today without him. Maybe that's why I felt so strongly about helping Jesse.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in," Louie called out from under the shade of his trailer awning.

Louie was sitting in an old wooden rocker he'd salvaged from some junk pile with a can of soda in one hand and a Japanese lady's fan in the other. He slowly fanned himself as he rocked, surrounded by his junk. A sportscaster's voice blared from the tinny speaker of an old black and white TV set, lending a ballpark atmosphere to the junkyard that was Louie's stock and trade.

I hated seeing him live in that old rusting rat trap of his, but I'd given up trying to get Uncle Louie to move in with me. The really weird part was that I was living in his house — he'd taken it in trade for a gambling debt — but I learned over the years that Uncle Louie was as stubborn as my mother when it came to some things, and one of those things was living in his trailer.

"How's it going?" I asked as I eased my butt down on an old park bench Louie kept handy for company, or customers.

"Not bad. Yourself?"

"Okay, except for a case of cabin fever."

"Who dropped you off? Annie?"

"Yep," I answered, trying not to smile. Louie was captivated by Annie's sometimes scatterbrained antics the moment he met her and was ever hopeful of a romance blooming between us. Sorry, Uncle Louie, Annie and I are just friends.

"You're wasting a beautiful opportunity with that girl, Michael. Someday you are going to realize it and I'm gonna say I told you so. Oh, for Pete's sake. What a bum!" Louie exclaimed, his attention momentarily caught by the game on the TV. "That's the second time that bum's struck out this game. They ought to send him back to the farm team! Say, how's that kid working out?"

"Jesse? He's sort of the reason why I'm here. You haven't seen him around, have you?"

"There's lots of kids hanging around these days, Michael." Louie's junkyard was an unofficial clearing house for all sorts of information and he was more reliable than most paid informers. He was also well known for providing a hot meal and a safe place to sleep, no questions asked, no strings attached, which made him real popular with runaways. "Too damn many of them, if you ask me." Louie's attention strayed back to the TV for a moment then he reached out and shut it off with an angry twist of his wrist. "Damn waste of time. There have been a couple of boys hanging around lately that fit your friend's description, but none of them answer to 'Jesse.' Soon as you told me about him I started asking around, but nobody will admit to knowing him, either. Have you tried contacting his folks?"

"I sent some money to his mom from him a few weeks ago. I put in a note saying he was okay and not in any trouble. I've thought about calling her or going over there but I didn't want Jesse to think I was betraying him," I explained, but the excuse sounded feeble to my own ears. "I thought I'd see what kind of missing persons report was filed on him. At least it would tell me the things he won't, like who cared enough to file the report and how long he's been on the street." We sat talking about this and that for another hour then I made an awkward attempt to stand on my good leg.

"I don't suppose Annie is coming back for you?" Uncle Louie put down the fan and stood beside me.

"No, I was planning to walk home." Well, it sounded like a good idea at the time.

"Why don't I give you a ride home instead. Business is slow today and I need to stop at the market for some stuff, anyway."

"Thanks, Uncle Louie," I said enthusiastically as I hobbled over to his truck.

"And on the way we can swing by the kid's house and talk to his folks."

Good old Uncle Louie, still not letting me wiggle out of the hard jobs.

Market Street reflected the poor economy even more than my neighborhood. Most of the houses were run down, teetering on the verge of falling apart. Jesse's house, 508 Market, had definitely seen better days. About six years over-due for a coat of paint, broken front stairs, cracked windows, one with a piece of cardboard taped up in place of a pane. What a dump. My loft apartment must have seemed like the Hilton to Jesse, compared to this.

Uncle Louie was leaning against the side of the truck, arms folded over his chest, with that 'go on, Michael' look on his face. Easy for him. He didn't have to negotiate those decrepit stairs with a cast and crutches. With I sigh, I gave it my best shot and managed to make it to the door without breaking my other leg. The door bell was cracked in half with its wiring exposed. I opted for knocking instead.

After a few minutes I heard a timid voice coming from the other side of the door. "Who is it?" the lightly Mexican-accented female voice asked.

"My name is Michael Burton, I'm with the LA Police Department, ma'am. I'd like to speak to you about your son."

"*Madre di Dios.*" Her voice was a cry of anguish.

"I didn't do nothing, Mama, I swear," I heard a young male voice in the background.

"Please, ma'am, there's no trouble. I just want to talk to you."

The heavy door opened about six inches, as far as the safety chain would allow, to reveal an anxious middle aged woman. She looked me over and must have decided that a man on crutches wasn't much of a threat because the door closed, then opened again, minus the chain. But she still wasn't going to invite me in.

"What is this about my son? Joey is a good boy. He doesn't get in no trouble."

The boy, probably Joey, nodded. "That's right, Mama, you tell him."

"It's not Joey I wanted to talk to you about, Mrs. Parrish, it's Jesse."

I've often heard of women going into a dead faint from shock, but I never expected Jesse's mom to fall on the floor in front of me.

"Oh shit!" Joey exclaimed, trying to break his mother's fall but not completely succeeding.

Uncle Louie pushed his way past me and helped Joey get his mother to the couch. Mrs. Parrish was just coming around when there was a burst of curses from the kitchen and she started sobbing hysterically.

"Goddammit, woman, what does a man have to do to eat his supper in peace?"

The owner of the voice came lumbering into the front room and shot a look of menace at the woman that would have intimidated me. "What the hell is this? I told you to get rid of whoever was at the door and fix my supper, not invite him in for a chat."

"Your wife passed out, Mr. Parrish," I tried to explain, but he wasn't having any of it.

"Yeah, so what? Who the hell are you?"

"I'm Detective Michael Burton of the LAPD."

"A cop? Shit. And who are you? Another cop?" he asked Louie.

"A friend, sir," Louie's voice was distant and oozing disapproval.

"So whaddya want?" Parrish asked as he scratched beneath the wasteband of his grungy Dickies. Five p.m. and he already reeked like a barroom floor. "The cops must be in tough shape if they're sending out cripples an' old men. Is this little bastard in some kind of trouble? Shuddup, woman, you're givin' me a headache!" the last directed to his wife, still sobbing on the couch.

"No, sir, I'm here about your other son, Jesse."

Parrish's reaction was nearly as strong as his wife's. "What the hell you talking about? I don't got no other son."

"Please, Peter, my baby, my Jesse, I got to know," Mrs. Parrish grabbed at my pants, nearly knocking me off balance. "You found him. Please, God, he's not dead. My baby."

"No, he's fine, Mrs. Parrish. In fact I've been trying to talk him into coming home." My attempt at reassurance created another round of hysterics and a look of suspicion from Parrish.

Parrish stepped up close and took the front of my shirt in his fist. "That's bullshit! I don't know who you are, or what you're after, but if I ever see your face around here again, I'll ... you'll be

sorry." Talk about intimidation. He released me with a shove. "Now get out of here before I forget you're a cripple." He followed us out of the house and stood glaring at us from the porch as we got into Louie's truck.

"What about Jesse?" I asked.

Parrish looked frightened for a moment, then his anger took over again. "That little bastard don't live here no more, and he ain't wanted." Parrish went back into his house and slammed the door behind him.

"So much for why Jesse ran away from home," I said glumly to Louie.

"Some people don't deserve to have kids!" Louie started the truck and ground the gears pulling away from the curb.

"Burton, my office, now." Lieutenant Wesley's voice rang out across the squad room.

It was nice to know that some things never change. The station looked exactly the same way it did the last time I saw it. Phones were ringing, everybody was rushing around except for Sepe, who didn't know the meaning of the word. Well almost everything was the same. My desk had been a lot neater before my accident. I had just finished sorting through and completing a two month backlog of reports. Now my desk looked like I was right back where I started.

"Now, Burton!"

Oh yeah, and one other thing hadn't changed: Lieutenant Wesley was still screaming for me to get in his office. I hadn't even been around for the better part of the last month, how could I be in trouble again?

"Hi, Wes, what's up?"

"You, apparently," was his typically gruff reply. "The hearing on the Rosignoli case is next Friday. Will you be able to testify or should I set you up with the D.A.'s office to make a deposition?"

"No, I should be able to get there, just let me know what time."

"Good, I knew we could count on you. So how 's your *vacation* going?"

"Some vacation," I muttered. "I get more rest on a stakeout."

"Well you look better, less antsy."

Translation, 'You're not talking to yourself or constantly looking over your shoulder anymore.' Right, Wes. That's because my link to the spirit world is broken. Of course I couldn't tell him that. He'd have me back talking to the police department shrink, faster than you could blink.

Wesley studied me for another minute then shook his head. "We'll see you next week at the court house. I'll have someone give you a call and let you know what time." Wesley looked at me thoughtfully then said, "If you start getting bored let me know. I could arrange for you to come back on light duty."

What a pal. Endless hours of sorting through and filing someone else's paper work, talk about boredom! "Ah, thanks, Wes. I'll let you know."

I'd just grabbed a few things I wanted from my desk and was about to make good my escape

from the squad room when Liz Carmeli found me. Actually Liz was the one person I wanted to talk to.

"You owe me, big time, for this one, Burton," she said, handing me a manila file. "Dinner at Santori's and a movie, my pick."

Liz was a sweetie. She was a natural whiz with computers and the one person I always turned to for information retrieval. And since we shared the same taste in food, paying her off was always a pleasure. Santori's was one of our favorites, if a bit pricey. Jesse had better be worth this.

I opened the file and read through the standard milk carton info. Jesse Parrish, age: sixteen, hair: dark brown, eyes: blue, height: 5'7". Nothing unusual there. The picture in the file looked pretty current, Jesse was even wearing the same tee-shirt he'd been wearing when I first met him. My disappointment must have shown on my face. There was nothing here to warrant dinner at Santori's.

"Thanks, Liz."

"Sorry there isn't more there, Michael. Parrish seemed to be a good kid with a parental problem. Who knows what he could be into after five years on the streets."

It took a minute for what Liz said to click into place. "Five years? Years?" I took another look at the fact sheet. "Disappeared after family quarrel, June 16, 1987. Last seen wearing torn jeans, Harley-Davidson tee-shirt and high-top sneakers."

It was a good thing I was standing in front of my chair because it was a lot less painful falling into the chair than onto the floor.

"Michael, are you all right?"

"Are you sure this isn't a typo?"

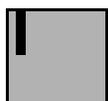
"Why do you think I had to work so hard to get the file? A file that old, you're lucky it hadn't already been put on microfilm."

"But it can't be right. He looks just like this now, right down to the clothes."

"Some people are slow to show their age," Liz said, patting my shoulder.

Yeah, and some people never age at all; like dead people. And the shades always appeared to me the way they looked at the time of their death. Jesse, a shade? But he didn't act like a shade. He never popped in on me at inconvenient moments. He never faded out the way shades did when they expended too much energy. He ate meals with me, played pinball, drank Coke like it was going out of style. He was so alive, he couldn't be a shade.

Then again, there had been little things all along that struck me as funny, like his total ignorance of current music, little slips of the tongue, and most importantly the way he always disappeared when I had other company. For that matter I hadn't seen him for three days, since the day I'd gone over to see Uncle Louie.



hitched a ride home from Rudy, who was going off duty. I half expected Jesse to pop in on me while I was making small talk with Rudy, shades like to do that, but not Jesse. Then I thought he'd be waiting for me when I got home but he was a no-show there as well.

"All right, Jesse, play time is over. Come out, come out, where ever you are!" Nothing, the kid was, as they say, conspicuous by his absence. "Come on, Jesse. Cat's out of the bag, I know

you're a shade. Let's talk." Still nothing. Damn.

I was suddenly hit with a wave of inspiration. There was one thing I knew was sure to get Jesse's attention and bring him out of hiding. I hobbled over to the fridge, I was getting real good at this hobbling stuff, and took out two cans of Coke.

I popped the tops, still no reaction, but the old buzz was back. *So, you want to play hard to get.* I gave it a few more seconds then I picked up a can and took a long swig. "Ahh! It's cold, it's refreshing, it's the *'real thing'* but you can't drink it if you don't pop in and talk to me." Nothing!

He was there, I knew it, so why wouldn't he show? I thought about drinking the second Coke, but there's only so much a grown man can take, and I draw the line at belting down two cans of Coke (must be Annie's health food influence). Not knowing what else to do I picked up the second can and turned to pour it down the sink.

"Don't! Please? I'm here."

I looked back over my shoulder. "So, you do want this?" I asked, holding up the Coke.

"Yeah." Jesse stared at me defiantly then he looked down at his sneakers. "Please?"

He grabbed the can I held out to him and took a long drink. When he finished the can he gave me a sheepish grin. "They don't have Coke in Limbo." Jesse tossed the empty can into the recycle bin and his expression was that of a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "I guess you want to know why ... you know ...?"

"Why the fun and games? Yeah, but let's go sit on the couch, my leg is really aching today." Once I was resettled I folded my arms across my chest and waited for Jesse to begin, but all he did was pace the floor in front of me. "Why, Jesse?"

"Everybody in Limbo says you're 'the man' to see if you want to get out. Limbo's not all that bad, I mean compared to someplaces ..." Jesse gave an eloquent shrug.

I hear you, kid. "But if you don't want out of Limbo then why did you come to me?"

"Something came up ... something real bad ... and so I thought, like, I'd try to talk to you." There was a an expression of confusion and desperation on Jesse's young face.

"All right, but why this act? Why try to make me think you were alive?"

"Because the first time I tried to contact you ..." his voice trailed off as if he wasn't sure he should finish.

"Go on, let's hear it."

"You were having dinner with your friend, Annie, and you told her you were tired of shades popping in and ruining your life."

My brain went into replay and I could see myself and Annie in a back booth at The Food Factory. My love life was at a complete stand-still, thanks to my latest shade case, and Annie was patiently letting me vent my anger while she munched on her salad. And like it was yesterday, I could see this kid standing a few feet away. At first I thought he was part of the help, then I got pissed when I realized he was listening to every word I said. I excused myself to Annie and got up to have a few choice words with the kid, but he was gone, vanished. Jesse! Back in the present again, I nodded for him to continue.

"So I went back to Limbo and told them it was over, you didn't want to help us anymore. One of the old-timers said that was a load of bull and that you were probably having a bad day. So I tried again."

I had a bad feeling about this. "Yeah, so."

"I almost got you killed."

The kid in the street! I was in the middle of a high speed chase after that slime bucket, Mendez, when all of a sudden there was this kid standing in the middle of the road. I swerved to avoid hitting him, thought I hit him anyway, drove my car through "Tony's Wide World of Pets" shop window — fortunately empty of any pets at the time — and woke up eighteen hours later with a concussion and a broken leg. And nobody else had seen the kid! 'Confusion from the concussion,' they all told me.

"Michael, are you okay? Michael?" Jesse stood over me, shaking me by the shoulder until I thought my teeth would rattle.

"I'm all right. I'm okay," I stuttered and he finally stopped shaking me. "I thought I'd hit you."

"Yeah, talk about bad timing, huh?" Jesse sat on the arm of the chair across from me and gave the sort of sigh of desperation which could only come from a teenager. "After that I was kinda afraid, you know? Except I had to get your help, I just had to."

"All right. So now you are here, I know you're a shade, so why don't you tell me what the problem is." Yeah, I know, I could have been nicer about it, but I'd really been through the ringer on this one.

"It's Joey, my little brother. He's in big trouble, Michael. You gotta help him."

"Your brother? You came back from Limbo, almost get me killed, not because you want get out of Limbo, but so I could help your brother?" Boy, was I steamed! "So what is it? Drugs? Booze? Street gangs? All three?"

"No, it's nothing like that." Jesse tried to explain but I was on a roll and not about to listen. "I knew it. My old man always said 'never trust cops'."

I thought my years on the force had prepared me for just about anything, but the look of disillusionment on Jesse's face as he faded out hit me right between the eyes.

"Jesse, wait! Don't go! I'll help!" I lunged off the couch to try to grab his fading image but it was too late.

Jesse was gone.



off!" I doubled over in pain as the man punched me in the gut. *He* grabbed me by my hair and yanked my head back. I almost got a glimpse of my attacker but a brutal backhand across my face lacerated my forehead and my vision, already impeded by the swelling around both eyes became non-existent.

"You good for nothing little bastard. My life's been a misery since the day you were born." Every third word was accentuated with another blow. "It's all your fault!"

"Please, stop," I said, but the words were slurred around chipped teeth and lacerated lips. I doubt my tormenter understood, or would have stopped if he had. Another driving punch to my abdomen and I lost control of my bladder. I also lost whatever had been in my stomach.

"Why you little son of a bitch!" Blammo! He hit me again, an uppercut to the jaw, and I saw stars. I felt like I was falling, then something very hard hit the back of my head. Or maybe it was that my head hit something very hard. Everything went black.

I sat bolt upright gasping for breath. Disoriented, it took a few seconds for me to remember where I was. My bed, in my house. Okay, Michael, slow your breathing down. It was only a dream. "Yeah, right, a dream." Tell it to my heart that was still beating about 500 beats per minute. This was the third time this week I'd had this dream. "I need a drink!"

Any course of action was better than sitting in bed, gasping for breath. The walking cast Dr. James had put on my leg the day before made the crutches unnecessary. It was easier to get around, but now I felt like Long John Silver; step, thump, step, thump.

I was mostly a beer man, but last Christmas I'd won the liquor basket the F.O.P. raffled off. I dug through the junk in my front hall closet — so that's where I put that mitt — finally putting my hand around the neck of a whiskey bottle, scotch, it turned out, with a screw on cap. Classy stuff.

I was still too shaken from my dream to worry about offending, or destroying my palate. I poured a couple of fingers worth in the first glass I found and tossed it down. I never even got to feel the burn as suddenly, whack, something hard hit my head again and everything went black.

I was back in the dream.

I knew I was dying, and yet it was like another part of me was hanging in the air, watching what went on.

"Shit! You miserable, no good ..." Crunch, crunch! My beefy murderer kicked me twice in the ribs. The bleeding lump that had been my body took a last shuddering breath and I felt myself die. I watched the rest of the dream like a voyeur.

I couldn't see the man's face, or mine for that matter, but I watched as he, alternately cursing and crying, dragged my body over to his car and threw me into the trunk. A shovel was thrown in on top of me.

"I didn't want to do it." Sob. "Damn kid! It's all his fault." Curse. "How many times did I have to tell him to keep his snotty nose outta my business!" Curse. Sob. "What am I gonna tell Maria?" More sobbing. "Nothing! I ain't gonna tell her nothing. The kid ran away, that's all. Yeah! Kids are always runnin' away, the ungrateful bastards." Laughter.

Boy, this guy was a real piece of work. The car stopped and I watched as my old man — for whatever reason I suddenly knew the man was my father — dug my grave.

I tried desperately to see his face, but the dream wouldn't cooperate. The voice, I knew that voice, but without a look at the face I couldn't remember who it belonged to.

I watched, numb, as he threw me in the shallow grave and began shoveling in the dirt. Everything became gray tunnel vision and then, *crash*, I was back in my kitchen staring at the broken glass at my feet.

'Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it.' I'd wanted the 'shades' back and back they were, with a vengeance. Whoever was trying to get through to me had died horribly and as I stared down at the broken glass and puddle of booze I had a sinking suspicion I knew who it was.

I gave the glass shards a wide berth as I peg-legged my way over to the phone. A shaking finger punched in the number of the one person I could count on to understand.

"Who is this?" Annie's half asleep voice asked.

"Annie, it's Michael. I know it's real late but I need to talk."



f the Shades were my curse, then Annie was my blessing. She came through the door at 3 a.m. like it was the middle of the afternoon.

"What's wrong, Michael?" she asked, handing me a cup of Dunkin' Donuts coffee.

"I keep having this horrible dream. I think it's a shade trying to contact me."

"What's the dream about?" Annie asked, sipping at her own coffee.

"Murder."

Annie looked at me over the rim of her cup. "As in being murdered or murdering someone else?"

"I keep dreaming that I am being beaten to death. Tonight I saw a little more than usual. I think the person beating me is my father."

"Your father?" Annie's eyes grew wide.

"No, I mean the shade's father."

"Oh, Michael, that's awful."

"It gets worse. I think ..." I fumbled, afraid saying the words might make it so, "Annie, I think it's Jesse."

"You think he is trying to get at you?"

"Maybe," I said and instantly regretted it. I sighed and slumped back into the couch. "No, Jesse wasn't that kind of kid. In the dream, the whole time this guy is pulverizing me, I mean the shade, there's no anger towards him, no bitterness. Fear, yes, but for somebody else. I can't explain it, I just get little glimpses, little bits of emotions."

Annie put her empty cup down, a pensive expression on her face. "If it is Jesse, why doesn't he just appear to you like he use to?"

I shook my head. "I hurt him and frightened him away. He was so desperate for help and I shut him out. Maybe this is all he has left."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." But I did. If the only way Jesse felt safe contacting me was through my dreams, then that's what I had to let him do. As much as I hated the painful intimacy of the dream visions, I owed it to the kid. "I think I'll sleep on it."

"Are you sure? Do you want me to stay?"

No, I'll be all right now. Annie, thanks for coming over."

She bent over and gave me an affectionate peck on the forehead. "Any time, Michael. How about if I come by tomorrow morning and take you out for a picnic?"

"That would be wonderful."

"Good, I'll be by about 10 a.m."

"Sounds great."

"Get some sleep," Annie ordered on her way out the door.

The rest of my night, what little of it I was able to sleep through, was dream and vision free. It hadn't improved my disposition any, and when Annie came by to pick me up the next morning I wasn't exactly pleasant to be with. Annie didn't care. She pushed me and my bad mood out the door and into her car.

"Now," she announced as she fastened her seat belt, "We are going to have a good time. That is an order, Detective Burton."

Annie popped a Danny Wright tape into the player and by the second song the soft piano music had eased some of the kinks in my system. I put my head back, closed my eyes, and started to relax. I should have known better.

Wham! From out of nowhere I had this terrible feeling of suffocation. My hands clawed at the loose neckline of my sport shirt. "Stop the car!" I croaked out the words.

Annie slammed on the brakes and tried to pull my hands away from my throat. "Michael, what's wrong?"

I took a gasping breath as the air finally rushed into my desperate lungs. "I don't know. I just couldn't breathe." I looked around to try to get my bearings, but none of the landmarks seemed to connect. "Where are we?"

"Down by the river," Annie said, her face set in a worried expression. "I think we should take you to the hospital, you don't look so good."

"I'm all right. I just need a few minutes." Air. What I needed was fresh air. Lots of it. No one will ever accuse the air around LA of being fresh but the smog quotient was low today and beggars can't be choosy. I got out of the car and took a deep breath of what was available.

I looked around and recognized where I was, the old abandoned lots off Wyeth Avenue, just about eight blocks from my house. The city had been promising to turn the area into a playground for years but never quite got around to it. Hey, why build a playground so kids could have a decent place to play when it was so much more important to redecorate a new suite of city offices downtown?

I moved away from Annie's car toward the center of the lots in my lurching gait. This place was a disaster waiting to happen. The whole area was littered with rusted out cars, junk appliances, and broken glass. I kicked an as yet unbroken beer bottle out of my way. That's when the skin on the back of my neck started to crawl. Market Street was two streets over. Just a short trunk ride away.

I quickly turned back to Annie and froze. Jesse was standing two feet away from her, his hands clenched in fists at his sides and a look of desperation on his young face. "You've got to help me, Michael."

"Michael? What is it?" Annie asked.

"Jesse."

Annie looked around, her eyes searching, even knowing there was nothing for her to see.

"Jesse is here? Now?"

"She knows about me?"

The two separate questions came on top of each other. A soft "Yes," answered them both.

"Where?" Annie asked.

"Right beside you, to your left," I directed her.

Annie's hand reached out, the motion slicing through Jesse's spectral chest. She shivered and pulled her hand back. "Oh, wow!"

"Hey, tell her to cut it out," Jesse complained, as he moved out of Annie's reach.

"Michael, I think I felt him. It was the same strange feeling I had back at your house, with the pinball machine. I can't believe it. I actually made contact," Annie said, her excitement and enthusiasm gushing over.

"Yeah, well tell her not to do that again." Jesse shuddered. "That was weird."

"Jesse said the feeling was mutual." I couldn't help the little smirk that came over my face. "It's good to see you again, Jesse. I believe we have some unfinished business."

"You're not, you know, mad? About the dreams and stuff?"

What could I say? I'm angry as hell. Why didn't you just come back and tell me what was wrong? I didn't want to blow this again. "No, I'm not angry. Tell me how I can help you, Jesse."

"It's my brother. I'm real worried about him, Michael. You've got to stop him."

"Stop your brother?"

"No, my dad. He's starting again. For a long time after ... after I left he was better. He got sober and stayed that way, and I thought, like maybe it had all been for the best."

"Your father beat you to death in a drunken rage and you thought that was for the best?"

Jesse shrugged. "It wasn't like he meant to do it. He was sick, you know? He had to take it out on somebody. It wasn't his fault if I screwed up so much."

I shook my head in disbelief. "That's crazy. It didn't solve anything."

"Yeah, I kinda realize that now because it's starting all over again. I thought it would be okay, and for a while it was, but ever since Dad got laid off ... He's been drinking again."

"And now he's beating up your brother Joey," I said, finally realizing just what kind of trouble Joey was in. "That's why you've been in Limbo, to keep what happened to you from happening to Joey."

Jesse's face went red and he kicked at the ground in embarrassed silence. "He's my baby brother. I had to make sure he turned out right, you know? But like this," Jesse gestured angrily at his illusionary body, "I can't do anything. You are the only person I am 'real' around. I need your help, Michael."

"Anything I do is going to end up with your father going to prison."

Jesse nodded sadly. "Will he get help in there? They won't just put him in a cell and throw away the key, will they?"

I shook my head. "I'll see what I can do."

Convincing Lieutenant Wesley that I'd stumbled my way into a murder investigation while out on sick leave was no easy task. Fortunately enough of my 'wild, crazy hunches' had panned out in the past that he finally agreed to put a stakeout on the abandoned lots off Wyeth Avenue for Friday night. Now all I had to do was get Peter Parrish frightened enough to check and prove to himself that Jesse's body was still where he'd buried it. I had two days to set it up.

Piece of cake.

I started out by having Uncle Louie drop me off in front of the Parrish house Thursday morning. I parked myself on the front steps of the empty house across the street. Periodically I would catch a glimpse of Parrish peeking out at me. Joey came home from school about 2 p.m., a fairly fresh black eye adorning his face. Mrs. Parrish came home from her job about 5 p.m. and the yelling and swearing started about an hour later. I was really tempted to go in and break it up but nobody called for help and things quieted just in time for the *Married With Children* hour on channel seven.

Uncle Louie picked me up about 8 p.m. and wordlessly dropped me off again the following morning. If he had any questions about what I was doing, he kept them to himself, as he kept his eyes on me from his truck parked a block away. After a few hours of watching me watching the house, Parrish came out.

"Whaddaya think you're doing?" Parrish demanded.

I looked up from my perch on the stairs of the abandoned house and shaded the sun from my eyes with my hand. "Me? I'm just sitting here, enjoying the day."

"Don't give me that bull. You've been watching my house for two days now. Get out of here or I'm gonna call the cops."

"I am 'the cops,' Mr. Parrish."

"Yeah, right, let me guess, you're here undercover or something."

"Or something," I agreed.

"That's it, buddy, I'm callin' the cops and having your ass hauled outta here."

"What charge?" I inquired politely.

"How's about harassment, wise guy?" Parrish emphasized the threat by grabbing the front of my shirt.

I broke his hold and gave him a push that sent him sprawling on the grass, not too difficult a task considering his advanced state of inebriation. "Then I would just have to inform them that I am here on an official stakeout."

Parrish jumped up and started for me then pulled himself up short. "Stakin' out what?"

"Your house. More specifically, *you*."

"What for?"

God, I hate bullies, especially drunken bullies who beat up their kids.

"I've been talking to Jesse. He's going to press charges against you for assault and murder." So all right, it didn't make sense, but I was betting that Parrish was too far gone to put it together.

"Murder," Parrish swore, then gave a nervous laugh. "That's nuts. The kid ran away. Ask anyone on the street, they'll tell ya he ran away."

"Did he, Mr. Parrish? Or did he really get beaten, by you? Beaten so bad even you thought you killed him."

"No! I ... You're crazy!"

"Am I? I've talked to Jesse. He told me exactly what happened, how you beat him that night like you'd beaten him countless times before, only this time you went a little too far and Jesse ended up dead."

"No." Parrish shook his head vigorously but there was fear in his eyes. "Whoever told you that was lying."

"Jesse told me."

"How could Jesse talk to you? He's ..." Parrish stopped abruptly, a look of horror on his face at what he'd been about to say.

"Dead?" I filled in the blank for him. Who says I'm not a nice guy? "Are you sure, Mr. Parrish? Maybe when you buried him he wasn't really dead. Hey, you see headlines like that all the time in the Star and Enquirer." I framed an imaginary headline with my hands, "Left For Dead, Beaten Boy Crawls From Grave To Help Police Catch His Murderer, see page 6 for rest of story."

"That's bullshit! You ain't got nothing on me!" Parrish gestured an expression of disgust my way and started back toward his house.

"If you say so, Parrish. I just thought I'd give you a break and let you know what was going on."

"Whaddaya talking about?"

"Jesse knows you started beating up on Joey, Mr. Parrish and he's not going to let you get away with it again. He's going to stop you before you kill Joey, too."

Parrish broke out in a cold sweat and he stumbled backwards across the street as if he was afraid to turn his back on me. "You're crazy. I never done none of that. You can't prove nothin'!"

I stayed put for another hour before signalling for Uncle Louie to come pick me up. I'd done the best I could to rattle Parrish. Now I just had to wait and pray that it paid off.

A

s I sat hidden behind a burnt out abandoned car the sweat trickled down my face to drip on my shirt. To make matters worse, I couldn't stop the lyrics to *Hot August Night* from playing over and over in my head. I hate when that happens. The tape holding the wire I was wearing onto my chest had given up trying to stick to my sweaty skin but was clinging to the hair on my chest with a vengeance.

All things considered, I was in a pretty rotten mood. When Parrish's beat-up old Ford pulled up to the curb a predatory gleam came into my eyes. "Hey, Donnally, I hope you're awake 'cause our man just pulled up," I whispered into the wire.

Parrish sat in his car and smoked a cigarette, real casual-like. When he'd finally convinced himself there was no one around he got out of the car, bringing a flashlight and shovel with him. He looked around nervously, his eyes darting from one piece of junk to another, then moving to the buildings in the background. Finally spotting something he recognized, he walked over to the area where I had been standing the last time I was here. After digging down a couple of feet he swore softly to himself, moved about a yard to his left, and began digging again.

After another twenty minutes Parrish stopped digging and threw down the shovel. He kept looking around the lot, jumping every time the wind whistled through a piece of wreckage.

Parrish grabbed his flashlight and aimed it into the hole. He struggled a few minutes with something in the hole, then pulled out a sneaker. A trickle of sweat ran down my back and I shivered. It was the same kind of sneaker Jesse always wore.

"That's it, Michael. That's where he buried me," Jesse's voice whispered in my ear, making me shiver again.

"I know."

"Well, aren't you going to go arrest him or something?"

"Donnally, move in, now," I said into the wire as I came out of my hiding place. Parrish was rocking back and forth beside the grave, the sneaker held up like some kind of trophy. His coarse drunken voice was filled with satisfaction.

"I knew it! I knew the damn kid was dead. Stupid cop, trying to convince he was alive."

"That's right, Mr. Parrish, I'd have to get up pretty early in the morning to put one over on you."

Parrish jumped away from me, still holding the sneaker. "You! What are you doing here!"

"It was a nice night, I thought I'd come have a talk with Jesse. It was nice of you to show me exactly where he was," I said just as Donnally and his partner joined us. Good timing. If Parrish had bolted I never would have been able to catch him.

Parrish looked at sneaker in his hand, his expression turning to horror. He dropped the incriminating sneaker like it was on fire. "You can't prove nothing. I didn't do nothing!" Parrish screamed out belligerently as Donnally cuffed him and read him his rights before handing the creep over to his partner, Martinez.

"Call for backup. I want this area cordoned off and searched, tonight," I called out. Martinez waved that he heard me as he locked Parrish into the back of the car.

"Do you really think his kid is buried down there?" Donnally asked.

I watched the tear-streaked face of Jesse's shade as a squad car came and took his father away. "I know he is."



ARCH 25, 1994

"Here, Michael, drink this and take a break," Annie said, handing me a can of soda.

I popped the can open and sat on the nearby pile of lumber. It was a warm day for March. "It's really starting to take shape, don't you think?"

"It's going to be great."

As Annie and I surveyed the work in progress Uncle Louie came up to join us. "I am very proud of you, Michael. It took a lot of hard work and dedication to pull this off."

"Thanks, Uncle Louie. And thanks for lending a hand." Uncle Louie had lent more than a hand getting the playground project going. He'd harassed countless businesses in the community into donating money or supplies and then helped organize the kids and their parents into volunteer units to clean up the lots and put the playground together. All I'd really done was enlist help from the Fraternal Order of Police Association and embarrass City Hall into letting us have the land.

I couldn't help the feeling of pride as I watched one of our volunteer groups put the finishing touches on the kid-sized wooden fire engine which was a jungle gym in disguise. A multi-level, wooden pirate ship, complete with rope ladder and gangplank, loomed in the background. On the other side of the fire engine a large multi-sport playing field was taking shape. One of the kids who had been standing around, watching the commotion, started walking toward me. As he got a little closer I realized who he was.

"Hey Uncle Louie, why don't you show Annie those plans for the snackbar? Maybe she'll have some suggestions to offer."

"What?" Uncle Louie looked confused.

Annie, perceptive as ever gave me a wink. "I think Michael wants to be alone for a little while. Come on, Uncle Louie, we can take the hint," Annie said as she hooked Uncle Louie's arm and led him away.

I walked around the swing set I was putting together and met Jesse's shade halfway. "What do you think?"

"It's pretty awesome, Michael. Joey was over there, working on the ball field. I can't believe how big he's gotten. I hardly recognized him."

"He's doing good in school, too."

"Yeah, and my mom really likes her new job. Thanks for putting in a good word for her."

"My pleasure."

We stood there watching everyone start to wrap up their project for the day. Another week or so and the park would be open. The neighborhood kids would finally have a decent place to play.

"I can't believe you got them to name it after me," Jesse said softly as he studied the large wooden sign proclaiming we were in the Jesse Parrish Memorial Park.

"Well I wasn't going to let them name it after some half-assed politician."

Jesse cracked a smile and shook his head in agreement. "Well, I guess I've put this off long enough, but I just wanted to get a last look at Joey and thank you for all you've done."

"You're moving on, then."

Jesse's shade began to get all shimmery and he shrugged shyly. "I guess I've done what I was hanging around for, no reason to stay any longer."

I sniffed and wiped at my suddenly tear-filled eyes. "No reason at all. Good luck, Jesse." As I watched, Jesse began to glow around the edges, and I realized how much I was going to miss the kid. Of all the shades I'd met, Jesse had affected me the most. It was then that I thought of the perfect send-off for him. "Don't go anywhere!" I shouted at him as I ran back to my cooler and pulled out the last three cans of a six-pack of Coke still attached to the plastic holder. I ran back and tossed the cans to Jesse. "For the road."

"Gee, thanks, Michael." The smile lighting Jesse's face vied for brilliance with the shaft of heavenly light which lit his body. Jesse popped open one of the cans and tossed back the contents. The bright stream of light completely encompassed Jesse but I could still make out his features through the glow.

"Remember me, Michael."

"Always," I whispered and even though I knew it would look crazy, I waved goodbye.