

STOPOVER

NOVEL IN PROGRESS

THE BIG QUESTION

What do you do when you meet the woman of your dreams.. only to discover she's carrying a suitcase of high-grade heroin ... and big trouble awaits.

BRIEF SUMMARY:

Jake Pender is a news-hungry TV producer with a Vancouver news channel Headstrong and ambitious beyond his talents, Jake believes the channel doesn't appreciate his talents. He is continually handed second-string stories

The current one is typical. A story set in Bangkok Thailand about a former Canadian resident presiding over a string of sleazy nightclubs and reputed to be a mastermind in the drug trade. A man who so far has eluded the long arm of the law. It's so long ago, most of Canada has forgotten. And Jake is stuck with an on-camera reporter who is way over the hill and has a drinking problem. Not a good scenario.

But Jake is hardly ready for the long distance call from tough-as nails newsroom boss Hal Symons in Vancouver. Symons informs Jake he's been replaced with hotshot Gayle Landers who will take over the story – even though she wasn't even at the shoot.

Decision time. Jake decides on a stopover in Los Angeles with a filmmaker buddy Randy Calhoun. They can hangout, do some clubs, meet some hot women and Jake can recharge his batteries. Hal Symons can get lost. Jake will return to Vancouver recharged and with new plans.

The crew convene at Bangkok Airport; all of them for a flight to Vancouver, except Jake who's taking a longer route to Los Angeles.

It's on the China Eastern flight that Jake meets Renata Alvarez, a young woman carrying drugs from Bangkok to LA to pay off a gambling debt. Jake becomes entangled in her problems and in so doing plunges into the biggest adventure of his life. He falls in love with Renata Alvarez – and decides to save her. Failure is not an option as he must

evade revengeful drug lords, the LAPD and even an opportunistic DEA agent – and somehow get across the border to Canada

ONE

Bangkok Thailand was a city Jake Pender was never going to love. Particularly on this clinging humid day in charge of a TV shoot that was testing him to the limit. Maybe beyond his limit. He stood there now, a lanky young dude in a CJOB Newsline tee-shirt as he considered the final wrap-up. The subject was the disgraced Canadian expat Claude Boulechard who had fled Canada with millions of investor funds. They were in Boulechard's refuge: a luxury apartment overlooking upmarket Sukhumvit, Bangkok.

He shot a hard glance at Boulechard, petulant and overweight, reposed in an oversize sofa with a petite Thai beauty beside him. Her name was Malai; five feet two inches of exquisite female beauty. How did a gross individual like Boulechard snare such a woman? But Jake knew the answer. Financial riches, however ill-gotten, allowed Boulechard to shower her with everything she desired. He shook his head as he considered his own unfulfilled relationships

'Ready for the final shot, guys,' Jake looked towards Blaine Madison, veteran news reporter, who industry gossip suggested, was over the hill with a drinking problem. 'All set Blaine?'

'When you are.'

'You want a rehearsal?'

'Let's go for it.'

Blaine worked his jawline, readied himself. A female script assistant stood with her clipboard. The sound recordist hovered with a short boom mike.

Jake gestured to Blaine who moved in front of camera. To the cameraman he said: 'Okay, let's roll it.'

Blaine Madison stepped in front of camera. He'd done a hundred shoots like this before.

'So... Carl Boulechard who fled hometown Vancouver after defrauding hundreds of investors, now resides, temporarily at least, here in Bangkok Thailand. How long before the long arm of the Canadian law catches up with him, not to mention the BC Government? Only time will tell. Only time will tell. This is Blaine Madison for Channel Four NewsLine'

'That's a wrap. Thanks crew.' Jake wiped his brow. It was over. He wondered at Boulechard's take on the final comments. He looked towards him now. He seemed disinterested. If the law hadn't called him to account, a TV news segment wouldn't. He was smoking a cigar, a martini by his side with the ever-attentive Malai beside him. The Newsline segment was slated for viewing next week – if the story made the cut.

On that score Jake had his doubts – and with his current career insecurities he didn't need doubts – he needed a home run. He was

talking about it now with Blaine Madison, over-the hill on-camera anchor.

‘How do you think it went?’ Jake said, glancing across the vast room where Boulechard was commanding an audience with the crew. ‘He didn’t give us much.’

‘What he did give us, Vancouver will want to know.’ Blaine said. ‘We’ll skip back to the hotel and review what we’ve got. I pushed him as far as I could.’

That, Jake doubted. The interview had come across like two old buddies exchanging war stories, with Blaine’s attention at times distracted by Boulechard’s sultry girlfriend omnipresent. Jake remembered Boulechard asking whether they wanted his girlfriend in the shot, side by side before Jake set him straight. ‘Sorry, the audience is wanting to hear from you, your story and how you came to be here.’

With that as a starting point, the interview was bound to be a combat zone and with Blaine not digging deep, they hadn’t kicked a goal. Too late now. Maybe judicious editing back in the Vancouver edit suite would save the day.

The crew, cameraman, DOP, lighting guy, sound man and script girl were already packing ready to haul back to the hotel. Tomorrow they’d be back in Air Canada to Vancouver for better or worse.

Ten minutes later they were out the door. ‘I’ll be wanting to see what you’ve got before it goes to air,’ Boulechard announced, all arrogance and pomposity. Some chance of that, Jake thought. The disgraced financier was a show-pony living the high life on absconded funds the long arm of the Canadian law enforcement had yet to reach. But that could change. Jake, in a moment of payback wondered whether to let Vancouver police see the footage and add it to their growing file. But they’d see it on television like everyone else.

Their driver had their Toyota minivan waiting, engine running. The main arterial New Road as at full throttle both directions, an impossible swarm of hooting horns and exhaust gases to add to Bangkok’s already overheated air. The CJOB crew jammed the two camera cases into the back and piled in the vehicle, all five of them. ‘Thank God that’s over’, Blaine said half to himself. Nobody commented. It hadn’t been a great shoot. All would be revealed in the editing studio back in Vancouver.

The 5-star hotel was on the TV channel account, minibar, food and all. Jake and Blaine left the crew at the bar and went directly to Jake’s room on the 15th floor. Jake produced a mini editor and pushed the sd card within footage into the slot. ‘Want a drink’ he asked Blaine.

‘I’d better. You?’

‘Why not?’

‘Vodka and coke or Gin highball?’

‘The highball.’

Jake wanted this done. It was an all or nothing opportunity and quite possibly a career-maker or breaker. ‘You ready?’

‘Roll it.’

They were up close and personal on Claude Boulechard, the reviled Canadian ex-pat who looked neither con-man nor financial tycoon. Blaine

Madison's interrogation was off-camera. 'You're saying, then, you have little control on what happened at Northern Peaks investments?'

'I'm saying I did my honest best for folks chasing a big return... I stand on my record.'

'Even though your record shows you lost five million dollars of investor funds...'

Boulechard shrugged impassive and probably uncaring.

'And meantime, Mr Boulechard, would you say you're living in what most people would call luxury here in Bangkok.' The footage rolled on. Was it good enough, Would it hit the mark? The interview was done and dusted. No retakes, no more access to Boulechard.

Jake glanced at Blaine. 'Think we got it?'

'We got all we were going to get,' Blaine said without enthusiasm. 'Let's join the others at the bar.'

They met the others at the ground floor bar, just off the lobby. The crew were already well into their drinks and nibbles. 'Thought you might wait for us, guys,' Jake said. The DOP – director of photography grinned. No chance of that.

TWO

With the Bangkok evening fading outside the wall of glass and everyone into their third round of drinks, Blaine Madison's mobile emitted a ring tone. 'Vancouver calling. I'd better take this.'

He put the mobile to his ear. Hal Symons, their boss back at CJOB sounded closer than across the Pacific in Vancouver. He moved away from the babble of conversation.

'Hal? This is a surprise.'

'It shouldn't be. How'd it go? What's your take?'

Blaine collected his thoughts. 'Good I'd say. We got the shots. Boulechard came across as what he is, a first-class asshole.'

'How'd the kid go? Jake? You know I stuck my neck out on this one. There's people upstairs who think that he's just a hotshot. I was under pressure to send Wes Walters. But he opted for that Mexico cocaine story.'

'Jake was okay, Hal. We just ran through the interview.'

'Yeah well it's gone beyond that. Pressure from upstairs. Keep it under your hat, but I'm going to have to let him go.'

'What here, right now in goddamned Bangkok?' Blaine glanced towards Jake, chatting with crew. 'You're kidding. Hal, he did okay, really.'

'Decision's been made. Better put him on.'

Blaine gestured towards Jake. 'Hal's on the line. Wants a word.'

Jake ambled over, took the cell phone. Hal. How's it going? What time is it there?'

'Near midnight. Shoot went okay, Blaine says...'

'I think so. Hey, you remember I'm coming back via LA. I'll be back in Vancouver Tuesday. Story conference's Thursday, right?'

'Yeah I remember about LA. But things have been happening here.'

Jake went on sudden alert. 'Oh?'

'Look I won't sugarcoat it, but I'm going to have to let you go.'

'What?'

'I'm sorry. This is a tough business. I'm bringing in Gayle Landers from CTV. She'll be at the story conference instead of you. We'll cover your flight home via LAX.'

Jake drew a deep breath, thinking hard, trying to digest the news. 'So it's my story but you handing it to Landers. She wasn't even here at the shoot.'

'Gayle can handle it, she's a pro.'

Blaine in on this?

'I just told him. Call in the office when you get back. They'll work out your final cheque.'

Jake savagely clicked off the cellular, handed it back to Blaine who looked uncomfortable

'You in on this?'

'You kidding? He just sprung it on me. I'm sorry. The industry sucks. Take it from someone who knows. What are you going to do?'

'For starters I've quit. Gayle Landers is taking over the story.'

'Gayle Landers? You're kidding. She wasn't even here.'

'That's what I told Symons. Seems it didn't matter.'

Gayle Landers was the go-to CJOB gal, some said who'd go to where she was by cultivating the right people, even sleeping with them.

'So that's it. I'm out.'

'You're good, Jake. You'll find something.'

Jake smiled wryly, shook his head and punched Blaine lightly on the shoulder. 'Guess I need a farewell drink.'

THREE

Dawn drifted through the hotel window. A new day and unemployment awaited. Jake hadn't expected it but he should have. He'd been pushing his luck, all the bluster and confidence of youth surrounded by hard-bitten TV pros who'd had more jobs than he'd had hot dinners.

Jake forced inspection in the hotel bathroom mirror. He presented well from a guy who'd sunk several rounds of drinks in the hotel bar with the crew. But wasn't that the trouble? He was all smoke and mirrors. Confidence and bluster oozing out of him, betrayed by a lack of hard-won experience. And he'd been found out. He'd be crawling back to Vancouver with his tail between his legs.

Life was a con game. Claude Boulecharde was proof of that. He with his million dollar Bangkok apartment and ravishing Thai girlfriend twenty years his junior. And where was he, Jake Pender, up and coming television producer? No big credits, no current girlfriend and now no job. But at least he'd unwind in Los Angeles for a couple of days to review his future. He'd gotten Randy Calhoun on his cell last night.

‘Yo, dude, what’s up. When you gonna finally roll into tinsel town and leme show you the sights.’

‘That’s what I’m calling about. I’ve been on a shoot in Bangkok and I’m making a stopover in LA on the way back to Vancouver. Can we meet up?’

‘For sure buddy. Give me a bell and we’ll hit the town. I’ll be around. How’d the shoot go?’

‘Not so well. I’ll tell you about it.’

‘You fixed up with a hotel or you wanna crash on my sofa?’

‘No I’m fixed. I’ll give you a call once I’m settled.’

‘Looking forward to it good buddy. Talk soon.’ They ended the call.

Randy Calhoun, he’d met on a shoot in Australia. They’d hit it off immediately. Randy was built like a linebacker and a persona to match. He was a freelance filmmaker with a reel good enough to attract the attention of Fox and Paramount who saw him for what he was; unbridled confidence and an ability to see beyond the camera lens. They’d traded histories over drinks in Sydney, exchanged contact details and promised to catch up in LA one day.

Opportunity knocked but not in a way Jake would have anticipated. Time to shower, pack and have a quick breakfast before heading for the airport with the crew, but this time bound for different directions

FOUR

Unknown by Jake was an occurrence that happened every day in Bangkok. It took place two days before in a highrise Bangkok office as DEA operatives Ben Cummings and Andrew Snyder reviewed surveillance footage on a TV screen. They both had the anonymous clean-cut American appearances typical of their type. They could pass unremarkably anywhere they chose. The footage was grainy but revealing enough. It showed an attractive young Latino female arriving at Suvarnabhumi International Airport that day.

‘Renata Alvarez, 27 years old of 2245 Florence Avenue Los Angeles,’ Cummings said. First ever US passport, no previous drug offences. She flew in on Asiana from LAX Tuesday night. Leaving tomorrow.’

Snyder nodded. It was a common enough story in the heroin smuggling transit capital of the world.

‘She’s staying in Room 405 at the Bhudkarma Hotel off New Road,’ Cummings said ‘We expect she’ll be receiving 1.5 Kilograms grams of high-grade heroin during the next few hours.’

‘How’s it arriving?’

‘We’re not sure. This particular LA drug ring is just starting out. Had a couple of successes and it’s gone to their head. Been hard to track down. This time we’re confident. Hotel’s under watch.’

‘Local Thai authorities. They’re okay with this? Letting it slip through?’

Cummings nodded. ‘Took some doing at a higher level than us. But it’s a win-win. They get to nail the source, we get the arrest the other end.’

'So she's flying out tomorrow tonight?'

Cummings pulled a file across the table and consulted one of the pages.

'She's taking China Eastern 567 to LAX, scheduled departure 1430 hours from Suvarnabhumi'

'So her bag'll go right through to LAX. And hopefully TSA'll do their job. Stop these guys before they get a real rush of blood.'

'And the girl?'

'She's in trouble. Pity, a first timer. Who knows why she's doing it? But it'll be the first and the last.' Cummings snapped the file shut. As usual it was just one more file amongst a caseload that mounted everyday.

The throbbing vehicle lifeline of Bangkok was alive and well. Crawling, honking traffic both directions under a heat haze that lay low over this sprawling capital home to seven million people. A young Thai male on a motorcycle weaved expertly through the traffic. He steered into a side road and came to a brisk stop outside the Bhudkarma hotel, a white 17-storey tower with taxis out front. The courier ignored the help of the doorman and carried in a small red suitcase himself. He made directly for the elevators. A hotel security man noted the arrival and picked up his phone. 'The goods have just arrived I'd say.'

On the eight floor the elevator door opened and the courier stepped out with the suitcase. He walked down the corridor, noting door numbers. He tapped on the door of Room 405.

Renata Alvarez opened it. She was beautiful but with fear and anxiety written all over her. She had olive complexion, dark eyes and black hair tied back. She was dressed casually as if a tourist. And right now she was scared out of her mind. For Renata, 27-years old, was about to undertake the riskiest mission of her life.

The courier, not much more than a teenager, carried in a small red suitcase. He placed it on the bed, alongside Renata's own gray bag and indicated for Renata to transfer her clothes and belongings. Renata took a fearful look at the bag.

'Where are they?..'

The courier unopened the bag.

'Nothing to see, hey?'

Renata poked and poked. She could detect nothing.

'You're flying out early this afternoon?'

Renata nodded. 'Thai Airways TG634. 12.30pm.'

'Leave plenty time for the airport. It's ten o'clock now. Check out at 11am and order a taxi.' With that he left.

FIVE

Renata was a nervous wreck. She wondered whether to go through with it. Get another cheap suitcase, repack her clothes and somehow dodge the awaiting Afonso and Jermaybe at Los Angeles Airport. But what then? They knew where she lived and would swiftly reach her. The

only way out of the debt was to get the suitcase back to LA, free her debt and become a free woman and start again somewhere else.

There wasn't enough time to think. Mechanically she rechecked for clothes and toiletries, the daypack for her passport, purse and essentials. At 10.50 am she was stepping into a Toyota Camry taxi in the forecourt; her day pack and the offending red suitcase on the back seat beside her.

A hazy sunlight teeming with humidity enveloped the Thai capital as the taxi joined the stream of vehicles. Renata stared unseeing at the passing streets teeming with congested humanity. How did people live here? She was on tightrope of pounding nerves.

They reached the airport and Renata, daypack over her shoulder, wheeled the small red suitcase through the busiest airport in South East Asia. A smiling Thai airport staff member nodded at her. Renata gave a tight smile back. If only the girl knew... and why are they so smiling and helpful at this airport?

Other passengers streamed this way and that around her. Renata finally detected DEPARTURES. INT. THAI AIRWAYS.

She joined a lineup of shuffling passengers, most of them vacationers. If only that was all she was. She finally reached the check-in and passed over her itinerary and passport.

But an American in loose casual clothes identified her and spoke into a walkie-talkie. 'She's checking in.'

At the desk the Thai clerk indicated for the bag to go on the conveyer belt. Renata did so. The clerk handed Renata her boarding pass. You go to Gate 37. Boarding in 45 minutes.'

The red suitcase rolls ahead on the conveyer.

Renata joined the line-up for security. She looked this way and that, finally placed her daypack on the conveyer. She stepped through the security gate and collected her daypack. So far, so good. She saw a fast food restaurant ahead. Maybe a sandwich a coffee would settle her.

In the baggage handling area luggage of all shapes and sizes passed through complicated conveyer system. The red suitcase reached the scanner and passed the scanning screen with no cause for alarm. But a baggage supervisor took it off the conveyer anyway, indicated to a Thai policeman alongside.

'This one?

The Thai policeman nodded. He placed a small dayglo sticker on the red suitcase and indicated for it to be placed back on board the conveyer.

In coffee lounge of the the international departures area Renata sat with a sandwich and a coffee. She looked relieved. For now.

SIX

The CJOB crew piled into the coaster bus for the airport and the 12-hour flight home. They had varying anticipations. For the cameraman, soundman, grip, lighting guy and the script girl it was home to Vancouver, check schedules and get their invoices in. They were all

freelancers. For Blaine Madison it was back to protect his ever-threatened position as a news anchor. For Jake it was massive uncertainty. He played the risky game and in a cutthroat industry and paid the price.

At the airport the driver helped the crew haul the film gear from the rear. It was heavy and cumbersome. The driver retrieved a nearby trolley. By comparison the passengers had only backpacks or small wheelers.

‘Same flight as the rest of you,’ Jake said to Blaine. At least to Taipei. ‘I won’t be talking about it, okay?’

‘Up to you Jake. We’ve all been through it. The industry sucks and I know.’

‘Whatever,’ Jake said. He just wanted the following three-hour flight to go quickly – then on to the long haul to Los Angeles. They had coffee and pastries in the coffee shop with carry-on bags beside them. The heavy trunks with the filming gear had gone in the hold. Jake wondered was there ever a time when a film crew travelled light.

They were in business class, front of the plane. A long procession of economy passengers came after them. An attractive Latino caught Jake’s eye. She looked flustered and anxious; a nervous flyer Jake wondered. Then came the safety procedures and the pullback from the gate. A fifteen hour flight awaited.

At Taiwan Taoyuan International they farewelled each other. The crew to Gate 12 for the flight to Vancouver, Jake to Gate 23 for Los Angeles. Another airport, another teeming procession of passengers catching flights.

Jake joined the passengers boarding the Los Angeles flight, economy this time towards the back of the plane. He scanned seat numbers, reached his row and placed his backpack in to the overhead locker. He had a window seat. Another passenger paused, a female. Jake looked up and saw it was the same Latino he’d noticed at Bangkok airport. She was hot, real hot. Good luck at last. She was consulting seat numbers. ‘Seat 56B?’ she said.

‘Right here. Need help with your pack.’

‘No. I’ll place it under the seat.’

Well, at least he had an attractive female seat companion, Jake thought, not an obese male taking up more than his share of the seat. But this female was flighty and nervous. She fiddled with her daypack before placing it under the forward seat. She finally seated herself on the seat next to Jake.

SEVEN

Conversation beckoned. But Jake found himself as nervous as a teenager on a first date. What to say? Not the usual glib lines. But that’s what came out of his mouth anyway. ‘A long flight ahead,’ he said. ‘If you’d rather the window I don’t mind switching.’

'No, it's okay. The flight looks full.' She stared straight ahead. Jake left her alone with her thoughts. He had plenty of his own.

But the flight wasn't full. There were spares here and there including the aisle on row 56. The female moved herself to the vacant aisle seat. 'More room,' she said.

'For sure.' That precluded conversation and Jake didn't mind. He needed a vacant mind for what lay ahead. A hotel in Los Angeles and a meet-up with Randy Calhoun. Probably drinks, dinner and who knew – girls. Randy knew his way around the sprawling city.

Then came to safety procedures and the message from the cockpit and as the Boeing 777 pushed away from the slot. The female gave a sigh and closed her eyes. Just what he needed, Jake thought. A woman with problems. Well, join the club. Soon they were climbing into the evening sky. She looked his way.

'You're going home to Los Angeles?' Jake said.

She looked nervous. 'Yes.' Then, 'You?'

'No, just a stopover for a couple of days. I'm from Vancouver, Canada. You ever been there?'

'No.'

'You've been on vacation?'

'Yes. A short time in Bangkok.'

'Friends there?'

'No just a visit.'

Jake sensed something was wrong. She was wound uptight. But she fascinated him all the same. Classic Latino features, but a female with problems. Short, halting words, forced conversation. But then she said: 'You. You've been in Taipei?'

'No. Bangkok like you. I've been on a film shoot. I work in television news. We were doing a shoot there.'

'That sounds exciting.' She was warming up, slightly.

'Not when you've been on hundreds of them. I'm Jake by the way.'

'Renata.'

'Nice name.'

'It's just the one my parents gave me.'

'You have family in LA.'

'Not any more.' She reached for the airline magazine and began flicking through it. Jake gazed out the window at the darkening sky. A long night awaited but because they'd be crossing the International Dateline they'd arrive in LAX before they started.

Six hours into the flight, the cabin staff began serving a meal. Jake peeled back the covering from his economy class meal. He glanced towards Renata as she took a deep sip of a heavy alcohol drink.

'Hey, easy,' Jake said lightly

She didn't answer. Jake got back to his meal. He glanced again at Renata who was finishing a Bacardi and coke.

Her meal had been only lightly picked. This gal's got problems he thought 'You weren't hungry?'

'Not airline food.'

Jake indicated the finished drink. 'You'd like another of those?'

She gave a glimpse of a smile. 'Only if you'll join me.'

A stewardess hovered. 'Could I get a rum and coke, and a beer for me - anything'll do.' She smiled and drifted back through the aisle

But Renata again looked anxious. Jake noticed the constant mood shifts; it had been that way ever since leaving Taipei.

'Hey, you okay?'

'It's nothing. I don't enjoy flying.'

'When you fly as much I do, you get used to it.'

'Like where?'

Jake scratched the back of his head, thinking. 'Thailand obviously. All over the US and Canada. Africa. London, Paris and Rome. The Bangkok piece we filmed was about a Canadian investor who fled Vancouver with investor funds. He fleeced ordinary Canadians to the tune of five million dollars and there he is living the high life in a luxury Bangkok apartment.'

She stiffened. He noticed it. Had he touched an unwanted nerve?

Without looking at him, she said: 'Did he get away with it?'

'So far or at least it seems that way. But eventually they will. We figured he's now turned to the drug business but we couldn't pin him down. Thailand, you know, is the golden triangle. A lot of high-grade heroin comes into Thailand, though. Americans pay a high price for it... and if they're caught...'

Renata stiffened as if hit by a bolt. Had he touched a nerve? Drugs, her? Surely not. She looked too vulnerable. Jake left the rest unsaid. The drinks arrived, just in time. Renata took a quick sip to calm her everly-jangling nerves.

EIGHT

In the darkened cabin of the Boeing 777, Jake dozed fitfully, his head resting on a pillow against the window shade. Renata sat fully awake. Crossing the international dateline, the short night hours gradually transitioned into late afternoon sunshine. Renata felt better about it. The short hours of darkness had accentuated her anxiety. Not long after the Boeing 777 reached the California coast and began hovering over Los Angeles warehouses and rooftops - flaps extended and wings glinting in the hazy sunlight.

'We'll be landing shortly' came the cabin announcement. Chinese-accented English as all flight crews and flight towers used English as an international language. 'Please raise your seats to them upright position and have your seat belts fastened. The local time in Los Angeles is 1700 hours, 5 pm. The local temperate is 65 degrees'

Jake and Renata joined the line of passengers scrambling for belongings in the overhead lockers and inched their way towards the

front exit. Jake felt anticipation and uncertainty. He didn't know what Renata was thinking and didn't care to ask.

They walked the long drab corridor which is the international air passenger's first welcome to Los Angeles. They were still together but in a way that suggested they would soon farewell each other. The US Immigration Hall awaited.

In a hall the size of a football stadium. Renata nodded at Jake as she pointed to the 'US CITIZENS' sign. 'It's been good meeting you.'

'Likewise. Have a great day.'

Jake followed her departing figure then headed towards his line for Non US Citizens. He followed directions for fingerprinting and photography. Passport Control lay ahead. An Immigration Officer beckoned him forward. Jake handed his blue Canadian passport. The officer flicked it open and scanned it for the Visa Waiver.

'How long will you be in the US?'

'Three days only. Then home to Vancouver. It's on the itinerary.'

The agent nodded. Expressionless. He did this thousands of times a day. 'This is the hotel where you're staying? The Stamford, Hollywood Boulevard?'

'Yes.'

The agent stamped his passport and handed it back. He indicated to the next in line.

In the teeming Arrivals Hall, would-be drug lords Alfonso and Jermayne lingered. They were about to achieve paydirt. Their eyes darted this way and that at the confusion of passengers. An overhead display board showed Arrivals.

'EVA 6244,' Alfonso said. 'It's landed. Might be a while before she shows. So keep lookin'.

'What if she gets sprung?'

Alfonso looked at Jermayne caustically. 'Why you gotta have doubts?'

'Haven't you?'

'Sure, but I don't have to voice 'em. Our lady's capable of anything. But I think she'll pull it off. For her sake she'll have to.'

Meantime Jake passed by the carousels, his backpack slung over his shoulder. He was scanning for the exits. Except now he saw Renata by the Baggage Carousel 5. Something made him watch her for a moment. She was a looker after all.

At the baggage carousel Renata watched as bags from the incoming flight slid by. And watched. Her offending red bag slid by. She watched it disappear for the next go-around. It was now Jake wandered up to her.

'Hi again. Watching out for your bag?'

Renata nodded but looked scared out of her mind.

'Something wrong?'

'My bag. I can't pick it up. I'm in big trouble.'

'What do you mean? You have to pick it up?'

Renata looked distraught 'It's carrying heroin specially packed in Bangkok.' Her voice was just a whisper. 'That's why I went there. Oh

God I'm in big trouble.' She fell against him. Jake held her. She was trembling.

'You'd better tell me, okay?

'Not here. I've got to get away from here. They'll be waiting for me outside. Waiting for me and the suitcase.'

Jake frowned. What the hell had he walked into? 'Look you've got to go through customs first. What are you going to tell them?

'I don't know. That my bag didn't arrive. All I'll have is my backpack carry-on.'

NINE

It was like a B grade Hollywood movie playing. Jake glanced around him. A swarm of passengers, congestion everywhere. What had he stumbled into? He leaned forward to Renata. 'Look you've got to go through customs first. What's in the bag, other than... you know?...

'Just my clothes and personal items. They made me discard my real bag in Bangkok.'

'Nothing that identifies you?'

'No, those are in this backpack.'

Jake shook his head. What a disaster? And he was embroiled in it, like it or not. 'Come on then.' He led her towards the line for returning US citizens. 'You'll have to line up over there. I'll be in the other line for visitors. I'll watch out for you. You'll say your bag wasn't on the flight. Got it?'

Renata nodded. But in desperation mode she pulled out her cell. 'Can we swap cell numbers. You know? So we can find each other?'

Jake thought. Why not? 'Sure,' he said. They inputted each other's numbers. Jake departed for the other line, watching her as he did.

Renata reached the customs booth. The moment of truth. How was she going to get through this? Too late now. The agent looked at her passport and Picked up his phone. 'She's arrived. Booth 15.'

He gave Renata a hard glance. 'Wait here a moment.' She was frozen like a deer in a spotlight. A DEA agent arrived. Renata trembled. She was caught rehandled.

The DEA agent perused her passport. 'Renata Alvarez?'

Renata nodded mutely. 'Where's your luggage?'

'It wasn't on the flight.'

'You sure?'

'I looked and awaited. Couldn't see it.'

'You reported it?'

'I don't know how.'

The agent gave her a hard glance. 'You come with me.' She had no choice but to follow him

TEN

Jake cleared customs distracted by Renata, the beautiful but troubled Latino. In the confusion of the LAX turmoil he'd lost sight of her and maybe that was better. He had issues enough of his own.

Some distance away Renata had been taken to an interrogation booth. She'd feared such an occurrence and now it had happened. She'd crack under pressure – she knew it – and probable court appearance and jail time awaited. The DEA agent and a customs agent confronted. She sat before them, frightened out of her wits.

'Look, let's get straight to it,' the DEA agent said. He was all interrogation, not an ounce of compassion in him. Here before him was a foolish young woman who had taken her chances with Class A narcotics and was about to pay the price. 'We know you were bringing in high-grade heroin from Bangkok. True?'

Renata nodded fearfully. And now the reinforcement of another airport official arrived carrying the offending red suitcase. He slid it over the desk. 'It was on Carousel 12. Eva Air 6824 incoming flight.'

The DEA agent moved the suitcase immediately before Renata. 'This your bag?'

She nodded. The two agents forced open the bag, Renata's clothes and makeup satchel tumbled out. The customs agent prised open the lining revealing tell-tale white sachels of powder.

'This is the bag you said didn't make the flight?'

She nodded dumbly. She had no words.

The agent gave a thin smile. 'I'll let you into our confidence. We knew what you were doing the moment you landed in Bangkok. We had people watching when you booked into the hotel and the courier made the delivery.'

We had the bag specially marked when it went through the handling area at Bangkok. We're not amateurs like you. He gave a long sigh as if unpleasant business was about to ensure.

'So come clean. Okay, so what was the plan?'

'I was forced into it when I got heavily into debt. They told me the only way out was to bring in a delivery from Bangkok.'

'And you knew the kind of delivery?'

She nodded. 'My debt would be over and I could get on with my life.'

I was to hand over whatever was hidden in the bag in the arrivals hall. To the men who sent me to Bangkok.'

'The men have names?'

'Alfonso and Jermayne.'

'Last names?'

'I don't know them.'

'Why did you do it?'

'Like I said I owed them money. Lots of it. It was the only way for me to repay.'

The DEA agent looked grim. 'I take it you've watched movies of this happening? You knew the score.'

'I don't understand.'

'Nobody ever gets away with it. You're legal here? The customs agent prised a passport from her daypack. US passport says so. Is it legal?' He handed it to a girl who passed it through a scanner, She nodded.

'You can hand that over. In case you've got travel plans. You can keep your phone and other items.' He took the passport from the customs agent placed it in an official envelope. 'Okay let's meet your friends in Arrivals.'

The DEA agent indicated for Renata to pick up the red suitcase. Stricken, Renata slipped her daypack over her shoulder and walked with alongside them.

Some distance away Jake spotted Renata in hand with an airport agent. She was carrying her suitcase. Obviously game over. He shook his head. Not his problem anymore. Sad though. He had unrequited feelings for this beautiful and troubled latino.

In the Arrivals Hall the DEA agent motioned to Renata. 'Find your guys. We'll be watching. It's now Renata sees another agent has joined the party. No escape. She wheeled the red suitcase, looking this way and that.

Some distance away. Alfonso pointed to Renata wheeling the red suitcase. 'There's our girl. You see?' Jermayne nodded. They pressed forward, stepping around other passengers. They reached Renata. She put the red suitcase down.

'Well done little lady,' Alfonso grunted. 'Your problems are over.' Just as the two DEA agents stepped in with handcuffs. There was a scuffle as the two men resisted arrest.

Renata now saw her opportunity. As if in a desperate haze she slipped through the crowd of onlookers and hurried away. The red bag was left standing. Just her backpack over her shoulder.

Renata hurried through the confusion of passengers. She didn't look back, didn't dare. She feared she'd be arrested any minute. She found refuge behind a pillar, pulled out her cell phone and frantically hit Jake's number.

Jake's cell phone vibrated. He answered it. No guesses as to the caller. 'Renata? Where are you?'

Renata glanced around her. 'By the rental car desks. You?'

'By the exits to your right. Keep walking.'

Renata fled through the crowds. Saw him. Or was it him? She wasn't but she had to get out of here.

It was now they saw each other. They met and embraced. 'What happened? You're shaking...'

But Renata was in tears. She couldn't talk. Jake held her shaking body. 'It's okay. It's okay.'

But Renata knew it wasn't. 'Can we get out of here real quick?'

'For sure.' He led her through the exits. On the airport concourse, cars were arriving and departing. A throng of shuttle buses were stopping and departing. Passengers stood with luggage. And beyond were the blue skies of Los Angeles.

Jake now saw a taxi had just discharged passengers and luggage. He intercepted the driver. 'The Stamford Hotel, Hollywood Boulevard. Okay?'

They jumped in the back seat of the cab and were away. But what the hell had he done?

ELEVEN

In a bare room with a high window, Alfonso and Jermayne faced a DEA agent and LAPD detective across table. This was a DEA regional office close to LAX, where arraignment from incoming drugs took place everyday.

There came a knock at the door and a smartly-dressed Latino lawyer entered. He was well-known in enforcement circles for pushing law to the limits. Alfonso and Jermayne look up with relief.

'Okay, your brief's here. Let's get started. Exhibit A. 1.5 Kilos high-grade heroin. LA Street value 1.2 million.'

The agent placed the red suitcase on the table and opened it. 'You recognise it?' Both men shook their heads.

The DEA agent smiled, not a pleasant smile. 'But you took possession of it from a certain Renata Alvarez at LAX sixteen hundred hours.' He remote-controlled an LCD screen on the wall. 'Surveillance camera. See?'

The lawyer was first to react. 'Run it again.'

The screen showed the two men and Renata Alvarez meeting with the agents in the Arrivals Hall. The video showed Renata placing a red suitcase down.

The lawyer smiled. 'My clients didn't actually take possession.'

'Don't give me that. They had every intention.'

'Except you handcuffed them first. They didn't actually take possession.'

The DEA agent showed creeping doubt. He tapped his fist on the desk. 'C'mon. That won't stand up in a court.'

'You sure? And where's the woman?'

'She skipped before we could cuff her as well. But we know her address.' The two agents looked at each other. A stuff-up.

'I want my clients bailed.,' the lawyer said.

'You've got no hope.'

Ten minutes later it appeared they do. Alfonso, Jermayne and the lawyer walk out of the DEA office. 'You're bailed until the court appearance. But what were you guys thinking?'

Not much, apparently, from their expressions.

'You can't leave town, you know that? Is your place clean? They'll check it.'

Alfonso and Jermayne looked at each other. 'It'll be clean.'

'What about the woman. You know where she lives?'

'For sure. We'll take it out of her skinny ass. Hey, drop us there first hey?' Better get there before DEA does.'

‘You think she’ll be there?’

‘Where else she gonna go? Alfonso said, his cockiness back

‘Where’s your car by the way?’ the lawyer said.

‘We took an Uber. You’ll need to drive us. Add it to our bill.’

‘I already have.’

‘It’s 2245 West Florence Avenue,’ Alfonso said. Hit the gas,’

Thirty minutes later they stopped at the front of a nondescript villa on a road teeming with traffic. Jermayne and Alfonso jumped out of the lawyer’s car.

‘You wait, eh?’ Alfonso said to the lawyer. He strode to the front door and knocked loudly. ‘Renata. Open up!’

They waited. No reaction. They looked at each other. Jermayne kicked the door in. The two men hustled through the villa. They kicked at items on the way through, upturned furniture, smashed a dish or two. But there was no Renata.

Jermayne looked at Alfonso. ‘What you wanta do? Wait for her?’

‘She’ll keep.’

They exited the villa and hopped into the waiting car. The lawyer folded his arms. ‘Where to now?’

‘Home,’ Jermayne said.

Alfonso grabbed his elbow. ‘Not so fast. Just had a thought. I’ll try our woman again...’ He held the cell phone to his ear. ‘It’s ringing out.’

‘If she’s left it on, you should have her location,’ the lawyer said.

‘How do I do that?’

‘You got a tracking app?’

‘Nuh.’

‘Well I have. Give us the number. I’ll pull over.’ The Lexus pulled off Florence Avenue into a Costco parking lot. ‘405 342 786,’ Alfonso recited.

The lawyer tapped the number into his phone. ‘It’s showing 2598 Hollywood Boulevard. Hotel Stamford.’

‘Can you take us there?’

The lawyer looked at the darkening sky and the traffic. ‘You for real? It’s past 7pm and that’s an hour’s drive away. Then what? You gonna find her in the hotel room? Most likely she’s out in the bright lights of Hollywood.’

‘She’s gonna have to go back to the hotel room to sleep. Take us there, Gil. Add it on the bill.’

‘I already have. Okay. Hollywood Boulevard it is.’

SEVEN

It hadn’t been the DEA LAX division’s finest hour. Through lassitude in the airport arrivals hall and a resulting technicality, the offending would-be drug lords had been bailed to live another day. But their day in court would come, with or without a smart lawyer.

In one of the cavernous spaces of Los Angeles airport where packages and goods of all kinds landed from incoming international and domestic flights, two DEA staff took the suspect red suitcase to a table and handed it over to security staff. First the suitcase was passed through an X-ray scanner which clearly showed the packages of white powder secreted in the lining top and bottom in such a way that at casual handling wouldn't reveal its contents.

Brett Billings had seen it all before, in fact everyday as luggage and packages of all kinds passed through the scanner. Some were cleverly disguised - in canned goods, electronic items, even baseball bats. This one was routine. The suitcase was dismantled and 2.5kg of class A cocaine removed which wouldn't hit the Los Angeles streets.

He turned to his associate, Oscar Fernandez watching carefully. Fernandez was a newbie, learning the ropes. Time would tell whether he was good enough. 'A find for sure,' Billings said. Fernandez nodded, disguising he hoped his special interest in the suitcase and its contents, He'd known about it ever since its origin and he knew the recipients here in Los Angeles. Fernandez watched as the few items of clothing and cosmetics from the suitcase were placed into a large plastic bag and tagged with the recipient's name - Renata Alvarez of 2215 Florence Avenue West Los Angeles. Fernandez gave a grim smile. He had a personal interest in her, too. In due course the items would be available for pickup by Renata Alvarez the owner. The cocaine would be carefully tagged into evidence bags for the DEA and LAPD.

Billings handed the offending cocaine to Alvarez and directed him to lodge it with their supervisor some distance away. 'Sure thing,' Alvarez said. His tension was palpable. A potential vast payday awaited - or alternatively a long jail sentence. The hour had come. Alvarez whistled tunelessly as he walked the thirty metres towards the supervisor's glass-walled office. Except Alvarez now right-turned and headed instead for the employee change rooms.

The cocaine was about to have an unintended bonus value. Alvarez knew as did many that Los Angeles airport was a coarse sieve for the thousands of illicit items that passed through every day.

EIGHT

Jake was feeling the effects of a 14-hour overnight flight and jetlag as the cab took them away from LAX on World Way and towards La Cieniega Boulevard. Renata stared fixedly out the window at a city she knew well and now threatened a court appearance and jail time. They exchanged glances in the way of two people who hardly knew each other but had been thrust together by circumstance. What was Renata thinking? Now wasn't the time to ask nor to contemplate his own motives. The actions he'd taken placed him squarely as an accomplice. Did he have any choice? Or was it just she was an attractive and vulnerable female. He leaned towards her. 'So what happened in there?'

She took time to answer. 'The whole thing came undone. Customs got my bag anyway. Made me take it to arrivals...'

'And then...?'

'Alfonso and Jermayne were there. They got arrested. I fled through the crowds. I don't know why – I just had to get away. But they'll catch me anyway won't they?'

'LA is a big city. I'm figuring you have an address here?'

'I do. A rented villa on Florence Avenue.'

'You'd better think about changing address?'

'You think?'

'I know. I'm in television news. This sort of thing happens every day even in hometown Canada. They have your passport, I take it?'

'Yes. But I have my purse and other ID in my backpack. Do I really have to find a new life?'

'Hey, not yet. I was just pointing out we're in a certain amount of trouble.'

'You too?'

'Well I'm aiding and abetting you if you get my drift.'

'You didn't need to.'

'That's what I keep telling myself.' But he was smiling. She took comfort in that. She reached over and squeezed his hand.

Jake smiled with admiration he definitely didn't feel. The cab proceeded northwards on a cab fare that promised to be expensive. Eventually they reached Hollywood Boulevard and proceeded west to the Stamford Hotel. Jake and Renata got out. Jake paid the driver.

They avoided the concierge and bellhop. Jake drew Renata aside. 'I have to check in. Best you make for the coffee shop just there off the lobby. We'll meet and head for the elevators. She didn't ask why. All she knew was this attractive young Canadian TV guy had taken her under his wing and she'd do his bidding, At the moment Jake Pender was all she had. But for how long?'

Hotel room 1040 was standard 4-star Hollywood fare. Queen bed, lush carpets, long desk space with LCD TV screen and art on the walls. Renata paced about in a room she hadn't booked but had become her uncertain refuge with a male she hardly knew – yet.

Jake drew the curtains aside. The lights of Hollywood shone. 'Relax. They can't find you here,' Jake said with a confidence he didn't feel. Why was he involved?'

'You sure?'

'You said yourself the DEA took them away.'

But Renata paced the room nervous as a kitten, as if Alfonso and Jermayne might bang on the door at any minute, doubtful. 'Well we can't stay here all night'

Jake pointed to the door. 'We don't have to. Hollywood Boulevard's at the door. Let's go out and eat...'

'Then what?'

'We'll work that out.'

'Well maybe.'

Jake went to her, hugged her lightly. She didn't resist and the scary

thing was she felt so right in his arms, her soft body and light perfume. He pulled back although he didn't want to. 'We'll find somewhere close.'

Renata produced her cell phone and began playing with it. An anxious thought crossed Jake's face. 'You've had that on?'

'Of course. Since I got off the plane.'

'Better switch it off. Now. And pull the SIM out.'

'Why would I do that?'

'An iPhone, right? Like mine. You can get tracked on it. If not by the bad guys, the cops and the DEA. You did a runner, remember?'

Renata showed momentary concern. She switched off her iPhone, pulled out the SIM card and placed it carefully in a sleeve of her daypack.

'Shove the daypack under the bed where it won't be seen.'

'Why would I do that? You said we're safe here.'

'Pays to be careful. Plan B. We'd better get outa here in case they've tracked. We'll go for a meal like I said. Come back when it's safe.'

'You sure?'

Jake touched her lightly on her arm. 'Look, the chances are they're being arraigned at the LAPD as we speak. A kilo of heroin. Probably go into custody. But even then with a smart lawyer they could get bailed.'

Jake paused. 'If that happens They'll come looking for you. No other reason than payback. Look, it's probably not going to happen that way. All I'm saying we'll need to be aware of it.' As he said it Jake was aware he'd crossed the line as if he'd taken charge and was pulling the strings. He was committed whether he liked it or not. And she was a stunning woman, although a very vulnerable one.

'I'm sorry Jake I'm causing you all trouble.'

'Not at all.'

'Look, even if they get bailed and come looking and know the address. They won't know the room number.'

'What if the front desk gives it anyway? They probably remembered us, a young guy and a woman without luggage?'

She had a point. Jake rubbed his chin. 'Maybe. In that case we'll use the fire escape. But right now, it's best we're out of here.'

'You think so?'

'Definitely. Stow your backpack out of sight under the bed just in case I've got the cash and cards in case we need them.'

NINE

It had been one thing to commandeer 1kg of high-grade heroin. It was another to get it out of Los Angeles airport. After carefully stowing the plastic-wrapped package with its DEA labelling into the depths of his locker, Oscar Fernandez pondered his next move. The package had been officially logged and stowed under high security. Street value of this package was 1.3 million dollars in the right sources. It had been blind luck that Fernandez had ferreted the package out of the high-security

holding area and into his possession. As a bonded employee not for him the passenger exits and customs interview; instead he was able to exit via multiple exits where 2,500 LAX employees entered and exited every working day 24 hours a day.

But even that was no guarantee of success. It was like trying to leave the South African gold mines with a gold nugget – even though it had been known to occur. Instead Fernandez' plan dreamed up in his Venice Beach apartment and shared with no-one relied on a simple fact few if any employees or even security officers were aware of.

TEN

Hollywood Boulevard wasn't the best place to find a quiet restaurant. Evening at 7pm it was crawling with tourists, stopping to take pictures of each other or assembling at Graumans Chinese theatre and the famous handprints. Jake was a tourist like everybody else. That was probably what had caused him to book a hotel on the Hollywood strip rather than say, a Holiday Inn close to the airport. He was only here for three nights.

They found the Best Western Plaza not far up the strip and it had a dining room and it was quiet. The Maitre D led them to table by the windows and handed the menus. 'I'll be back for drinks.'

For the first time since landing in Los Angeles Jake felt more relaxed. He and Renata had met on the plane and shared an escapade that was right out of a Hollywood movie. Ironically they were right where movies were made.

His conversations with Renata so far had been interrogations. Why had she one it? Didn't she know the risks? Nobody ever got away with it and so on. He'd been in cop mode, now was the time to pull back and get to know this attractive woman who'd landed in his lap. At the moment she was a stranger. If their lives were going to be entwined, at least temporarily, he had to get to know her.

They ordered drinks and chose burgers from the menu. 'So,' Jake said smiling at the tempestuous woman opposite him. 'Tell me about yourself?

'What? About being a drug runner? We've covered that.' She smiled with nervous humour – she was enjoying this handsome young Canadian's company – for at least as long as it lasted.

'No. The real Renata. Where you were born, your parents, your upbringing – boyfriends – even the current man in your life?

'I don't have one,' Renata said. 'A man in my life. I've been hurt with the recent ones – a big part of my problem, why I've become what I've become. But okay, my parents came here from Mexico, the usual reason – to escape poverty. Both found jobs. They had me. I was born here in LA – a genuine American with a US Citizen passport.'

'Go on,' Jake said as he sipped his Coors. Renata was beginning to fascinate him. Here she was, a beautiful woman in the prime of her life

and she had landed in his lap. He knew already he had to extend the time they might have together.

'Your parents still here?'

'No. They went back to Mexico City a few years ago. I didn't want to. America is my country and Los Angeles my city.'

'No brothers or sisters?'

'No – just me' She had flawless olive skin, dark eyes and lustrous black hair How had such a woman fallen into such a situation? He didn't want to ruin the moment by asking about it. Perhaps she'd tell him?

She looked reflective. 'I work as a waitress near where I live, way south of here. She smiled. 'This is my first time in the famous Hollywood. Thank you for bringing me.'

'You're welcome. Wish we had time to see the sights. Right now I've got to keep you safe.'

The burgers came and they munched into them. 'God, I didn't realise I was so hungry,' she said. 'We share the check, okay?'

'No way. You're my guest.'

'And in your hotel she said. 'You're going to have to have me overnight.'

The thought suddenly thrilled him even if it had danger written all over it. And she was vulnerable. She would have slipped into the arms of any man in her present situation.

'So, Jake. Tell me about you with your film star looks. Where are you from, what do you do? Why have you taken me on with my troubles? Oh, and what about the girlfriends hanging off you.'

Jake smiled. 'No current girlfriends. My job gets in the way. Although I know I'm going to have eventually meet someone, settle down and have kids. I work in television news in Vancouver BC. I go with a crew where news stories break – and often they're feature programs. Sometimes they're close to home. Sometimes I'm away weeks at a time.'

'So how come you're in LA? Big story for you here?'

'Right now the big story is you. And the truth is the last shoot in Bangkok didn't go so well. I'm a bit of a maverick, tread on too many toes – this time I went too far and got told in a call from Vancouver someone else would be taking the story over. So I quit – and decided on a whim to come to LA for a few days and catch up with a filmmaker buddy of mine.'

'Instead I meet you,' Jake reached across the table and took her hand Expectation was there for the taking. If they had time.

He looked at his watch. Now after 8pm. Long enough probably. 'Better finish up and we'll get back to the hotel. Lock the doors and keep to safe Tomorrow we'll have to sort things out.'

'You don't have to. I caused my own troubles.'

'Hey. We're in this together. Okay?'

'Okay.' Jake paid the check and they left the dining room and out on to the glamour and glitz of Hollywood Boulevard, arm in arm.

ELEVEN

Evening traffic was heavy on La Cieniega Boulevard as the silver Lexus crawled behind a typical LA traffic jam. The lawyer was at the wheel, Alfonso beside him and Jermayne in the back. Already the lawyer was mentally computing the possible invoice at \$150 per hour. He'd warned them earlier his time was fully chargeable and Alfonso had told him he was good for it. Alfonso was the brain behind this foolhardy drug haul and Jermayne just the hapless sidekick. He wondered whether Jermayne was simply with Alfonso as a diversion – or even a fall guy if things went wrong.

The car radio was playing hits on KLAA. Alfonso had told him he'd like Latin American music. The lawyer said to leave the dial where it was. He'd already decided once they reached to destination hotel on Hollywood Boulevard he'd ditch them and they could find their own way back. They'd be off the client list once they vacated the Lexus the lawyer had decided.

Finally they were on Hollywood Boulevard with the Hotel Stamford right ahead 'Coming up now to the hotel. I'm going to drop you off at the front.

'Nah, you need to wait. In case we find the gal?'

The Lawyer pointed at the temporary parking and hotel bellhops pointing towards the underground parking. Alfonso thrust a fifty at the lawyer. 'We'll take care of the parking. Let's go.' The Lexus idled forward.

They parked two levels down near the entrance to the elevators. The last thing they wanted was to have to try and find the car. 'You coming?' Alfonso said to the lawyer.

'No way sunshine. I'm staying put. It's your party. And if you're not back in fifteen I'm outa here.'

'That's not the deal.'

'We don't have a deal. Now move it.' Alfonso and Jermayne exited towards the elevators. The doors opened on the lobby level. The reservations clerk looked up. 'Can I help you?'

'Some friends of ours checked in this evening. Young guy and a Hispanic lady.'

The clerk looked doubtful. 'The names?'

The guy we don't know. The lady's Renata Alvarez. But they're expecting us.

The clerk looked them up and down. They stood out like flash-Harry's in this middle-rank hotel.

'I'll need to check,' the clerk said. Just as Jake and Renata entered from Hollywood Boulevard after their evening meal. Jermayne was first to react, Alfonso right after him. 'Hi there,' he called across the lobby.

Renata saw them instantly. She grabbed Jake. 'It's them! We gotta get out of here...' Just as she stepped in the way of a large oncoming suitcase wheeled by a bellhop. She fell to the floor. Jake rushed to help her but was pushed aside by Alfonso.

'I'm a medic. Give me room.' Alfonso announced.

He helped the terrified Renata to her feet and led her in convoy across the lobby with Jermayne and Jake in tow. The clerk hurried across with the day manager.

'It's okay. We've found our friends,' Alfonso said. Before the clerk and the manager can react an empty elevator opened and Alfonso gently pushed Renata inside. Jake and Jermayne followed. The door slid closed.

'What floor?'

Jake stayed silent. 'I said, what floor?'

'I don't know.' This from Renata.

Alfonso reached in his pocket, pushed a pistol against her and pressed her against the elevator wall.

'It's ten,' Jake said.

Jermayne pressed the button.

The elevator door opened at Level Ten and Jake and Renata were marched out with no pretense of civility. 'What room? Tell us now,' Alfonso said as he once again pressed his pistol against the cowering Renata.

He presses the pistol against a terrified Renata.

'1014,' Jake said. 'Leave her alone.' He cursed the fact he'd been caught napping withn his defences down and placed them both in immediate danger,

He used the passcard to open the door. They were half-pushed on to the Queen bed. Alfonso hovered over them and drilled the trembling Renata. Se could smell his musky scent and see pent-up anger in his eyes.

'So, what the fuck went on at the airport?'

Renata began sobbing. Jake made to protect her.

'Leave her.' Alfonso said. 'Renata. Talk.'

Renata had sheer terror in her eyes but no words come out. 'Tell me you bitch.'

'I had no choice, I swear.'

'Bad move. Especially bringing the DEA right to where we were waiting. Right Jermaybe?'

'Bad move.'

Jake decided to act. Or at least his body did. He drew Renata to him. 'Leave her alone.'

Alfonso gave him the hard cold glare of an Angelino who liverd on tnbe edge and preferred it that way. Outweighing Jake and in top physical shape, he yanked Jake away from Renata, off the bed and slugged him.

Jake dropped to the floor. Out cold.

Blackness.

TWELVE

A loud tapping came at the door. Insistent and with it a shouted command. 'Anyone in there? Open up!'

Jake stirred as if coming out of an unwanted dream. It took a few moment for his senses to return. It would be minutes more before he

recollected Alfonso had knocked him out. So much for the protective hero. And where was Renata? The room was empty.

Still that loud knocking at the door. Jake staggered to his feet and moved himself to the bed. He sat down just as the door burst open to reveal a hotel employee and two uniformed LAPD officers.

'Are you okay, sir?' This from the shirt-sleeved hotel employee. The two LAPD officers looked around the room before one of them addressed Jake. 'What happened in here?'

'I don't know. Guess I got knocked out. I was trying to protect Renata?'

'Renata?'

The hotel man answered. 'She'd be the woman seen leaving the hotel with two men. Looked under duress. That's why I called the police.'

'This how long ago?'

'About half an hour ago. We reported it right away.'

One of the officers had a pad and pencil out. 'You, sir. Your part in this? Your name?' The other officer was on his two-way back to the station with its chatter and static.

'I'm Jake Pender.'

'You're a local?'

'Visitor from Vancouver, Canada. Just here for a few days.'

'Okay, so explain how this female happened to be in your room – and your part in the altercation.'

'I met her on the flight in from Bangkok. Happened to be seated next to each other.'

'So you clicked and you brought her back to your hotel room?'

'It wasn't like that? She told me two men would be waiting for her at arrivals. She was scared out of her wits.'

'Why would that be?'

Jake drew breath. 'She was bringing in drugs from Bangkok. Forced into it to repay a debt. The DEA were on to it. Escorted her to arrivals and apprehended the two men. Renata slipped away. We were in phone contact. She feared for her life. So I brought her back here until I could work out what to do.'

'You'll need to accompany us to the station and make a full statement about your part in all of this. Wasn't a good idea to get involved. Better to stick to being a tourist. Got it?'

Jake nodded.

The LAPD Hollywood division was on Fairfax, ten blocks south of Hollywood Boulevard. Jake was bundled out of the police cruiser and escorted into the station. He was told to wait on the bench along with a dozen or so others. The station was busy. Some waiting Angelenos wanted to report trouble, some were already in trouble.

Jake waited, not exchanging glances with his neighbours, his mind a seething mixture of anxiety and alarm. He glanced at his watch. Just after 9pm LA time. He'd been in the city barely five hours and look where it had landed him?

Fifteen minutes later two detectives summoned him forward and led him through to the inner workings of the busy station. Dozens of desks

with computers, officers and detectives going about their business – which right now involved Jake Pender of Vancouver, Canada.

He was led to a bare room empty but for a table with chairs either side. The room was windowless with harsh fluorescents overhead. An interrogation room if ever here was one.

The detectives, one young one middle-aged introduced themselves. Detective Larsen was older one, Garcia the younger. A voice recorder was pushed across the table with the dry intonation from Larsen straight out of every crime movie Jake had ever seen. ‘You are not obliged to give evidence but anything you do say may be used in evidence against you. Do you understand?’

Jake said he did. He wasn’t in trouble, was he?

Detective Larsen opened proceedings as the voice recorder was switched on. ‘I’m Detective John Larsen, with me is detective Steve Garcia of LAPD Hollywood station. With us also is Jake Pender, visitor to Los Angeles, from Vancouver Canada. We were called to the Stamford Hotel of 2210 Hollywood Boulevard at 2050 hours following an incident reported by the hotel desk, involving the likely abduction of a female by two males who led her to a waiting vehicle.

‘Okay, Jake. Let’s stick with Christian names. Tell me how you happened to be with a certain female, Renata Alvarez at your hotel, the Stamford on Hollywood Boulevard. And your relationship up to the alleged abduction that took place.’

‘It happened to be next to her on the flight in from Bangkok to Los Angeles. I’m with CJOB TV news in Vancouver. We were shooting a doco in Bangkok. I was on my way home via Los Angeles for a stopover.’

‘Go on.’ The recorder whirred.

‘We exchanged names. She told me she was Renata Alvarez from Los Angeles, returning home. She seemed very nervous. I didn’t like to ask why. It was a long flight. I eventually fell asleep and came awake as we were approaching LAX.’

‘What happened then?’

‘We walked off the plane together, said our goodbyes. Then I spotted her by the luggage carousels. She saw me and I asked whether she was waiting for her bag. She said it had gone by twice and she was afraid to pick it up. It was then she confided she’d been forced to bring in drugs from Bangkok.

‘Why didn’t you walk away?’

‘I don’t know. I should have. But an attractive female in obvious distress. And we’d gotten to know each other a little on the flight.’

‘Even though you knew you shouldn’t be involved?’

‘I thought she was headed for trouble anyway at customs and immigration. I offered what little comfort I could. She asked whether I could look out for her.’

The detective looked unimpressed. ‘So run me through this again. You meet this gal on the plane and she tells you she’s carrying drugs.’

‘Under duress. Yes.’

‘So you arrive LAX. She says she’s not gonna pick up her bag because it’s carrying cocaine. You go along with it?’

‘To a point, yes. But she was in tears.’

'I bet. But you exchange numbers and you meet some time later in the terminal. Meantime the DEA have recovered the goods and the apprehended the two dealers. What happened next?'

'We got a cab. I took her to my hotel. The Stamford on Hollywood Boulevard.'

The detective leaned back in his chair. 'Now we're getting somewhere. Go on.'

'I was just trying to keep her safe until I decided what to do.'

'Ever heard of the police?'

'Of course. I just hadn't considered it given the situation. Point is the two dealers tracked her to the hotel. Knocked me out cold. I come to and she's gone.'

'Quite a story. Even for Los Angeles. So you're a visitor? A tourist?'

'No. I'm actually a Canadian TV producer on my way back to Vancouver when this happened.'

'When are you leaving? A few day's time. Booked out on Air Canada 15th July.'

'Well my friend, you're an accessory. You'll be required to hand in your passport and not leave town until this is cleared up. Probably a day or two Got it? We'll get you back to your hotel.'

THIRTEEN

Somehow or other he slept. Out like a light on the Queen bed, the repercussions of a dramatic day pushed away under the effects of jetlag and exhaustion. Unconnected dreams infiltrated but when he finally came awake to bright sunlight filtering through the window he saw it was 9am and he'd sept for ten hours.

His throat was dry. He checked the bar fridge and found bottled water. On the bench was a jug and a tea and coffee bags. He switched on the kettle, boiled water and dropped in a Nescafe blend 43. Milk and sugar made it bearable. His head hurt like hell. Why was that?

After a steaming hot shower, the Jake Pender of yesterday returned. Although not quite; he was now the Jake Pender of today, in a heap of unexpected trouble. Flashes of yesterday imprinted themselves; the long flight, meeting Renata, the red bag of trouble, him whisking he away to this hotel room and in so doing becoming her partner in crime. At least that's what the LAPD had told him. And what of Renata? Accosted by two Latino thugs in this hotel room while a punch landed him on the carpeted floor and oblivion.

To think he'd come here to nurse his wounds after the unceremonious telephone dismissal from Vancouver, to meet a filmmaker buddy here in LA for a few days of whatever before he went back to Vancouver tail between his legs to find another TV channel that would employ him.

The script had changed and in meeting Renata there was plenty to play out. Last night he'd envisaged her in the Queen bed beside him and thye sex that would have undoubtedly followed.

He hauled out his backpack from the closet. A change of clothes that was all, toiletries, a crime paperback, his iPad. He travelled light. He

looked for his Nikes. He'd kicked them off before falling fully dressed into oblivion on the bed. And now he saw something else: Renata daypack pushed under the bed as he's instructed her.

He sat it on the bed and unzipped it. Emergency clothes, t-shirt, bra and underwear, toiletries. He felt like a voyeur inspecting it and memories of her flooded back. Along with it a profound sense of loss. And there was something else; her iPhone and in the sleeve the simcard he'd instructed her to remove.

His senses tingling he slipped the simcard into the iPhone's slot and switched it on. Her present-day life and contacts in his hands. He scrolled through the contacts. Nothing of relevance he could tell. The apps were what you'd find on any iPhone. Google Chrome, YouTube, music and an image file. He couldn't resist flicking through the images: Renata here there and everywhere – her life revealed. Happy, pensive, with other latino females, some of an older couple – her parents probably, holiday shots in California and Mexico City. None of Bangkok Thailand and that figured.

He put Renata's private life aside. Time for a review. He'd come to LA for a handful of days to catch up with filmmaker buddy Randy. Drinks, lunch, night on the town, maybe girls. A chance to talk things over with a switched-on guy who knew the industry and could be relied on for advice. As well as memorable goodtimes.

Renata drifted into this scenario, unannounced as she had been since their unplanned meeting on the plane from Taipei. Except now he was involved whether he wanted to or not. He'd been her saviour, brought her back to this hotel to escape the bad guys in her life and maybe the drugs deal she was implicated in. And the hard truth was, he'd fallen for her. That upright body, the superb latino features, dark smouldering eyes and the way she tossed back her raven hair. That was on the outside. Inside she was an emotional wreck.

And he'd fallen for her story – straight out of a Hollywood movie. The LA chick fallen on hard times and turning to loan sharks to get her out of her financial troubles.

Had there been a choice? Could she have rejected the deal? Had she weighed up the risks? Or was she in so deep she really had no choice but to go along with the glib assurances that drug deals like this were done everyday? Or that the odds were enough in her favour that she'd get her debt waived plus cash to build a new life.

Jake had another cup of hotel room coffee whilst he pondered his choices. He'd used the last of the skimpy milk. And suddenly he was hungry.

Down the elevator to the Stamford lobby, this time looking this way and that as if the drug lords had returned to the scene of the crime. Hardly likely. He put Renata and her subliminal presence aside whilst he ducked into the first place with a breakfast menu. Eggs over easy, bacon, toast and Columbian coffee filled the breach whilst he considered the day.

His visit to the LAPD police with him now on notice told him to put Renata Alvarez and her drug problem aside. Time to reach out for the reason he'd landed in Los Angeles in the first place. His filmmaker

buddy Randy Calhoun. Randy was expecting him. And male companionship with a who was streetwise and with a load of contacts he could only dream about. Jake needed a diversion and the time was now.

He grabbed his cell phone and scrolled through the contacts. He was on his Canadian cell number but what the hell. CJOB was still paying for it and there was payback in that. The phone was answered on the third ring.

'Yo.'

'Randy? It's Jake. I'm in LA.'

'Hey, welcome to Hollywood good buddy. What's goin' down?'

Did he tell him? Not yet. Better to pave the way before admitting to a problem that was straight out of the movies.'

'Only arrived last night. Can we catch up?'

'Say where and when?'