

1961

by Brit

Ken Hutchinson tugged at his tie, loosening the offending piece of material. Why his father had insisted his teenage son dress as a miniature version of himself was beyond the fourteen-year-old's comprehension. All the young blond knew was that this trip to Los Angeles had gone from bad to worse within the first two days, and now that his parents' rental car had been stolen, the adventure was headed straight down the toilet.

At first, the idea of Ken and his mother accompanying Richard Hutchinson to California for a symposium—all courtesy of his father's law firm—sounded like the vacation of a lifetime. He had always been intrigued by the ocean and was excited by the prospect of exploring the Angeles National Forest.

Ken sighed and fidgeted on the hard wooden bench, trying to find a more comfortable position. It appeared their trip was going to be cut short, which meant the only memories of California he'd take with him were the long, boring days with his mother in their hotel room while his father attended the convention. The first few days poolside had been novel, but after the cute redhead visiting from South Dakota left, it soon lost its allure.

The trip had started out well enough, though Ken's father became more and more agitated. While he was a "big fish in a small pond" back home in Duluth, swimming with the "big sharks" of LA undermined his ego. The topper was that the Hutchinsons' rental car had been stolen from the convention center the last day of the symposium, only one day from the beginning of their "real" vacation to the coast. Richard Hutchinson was livid with the response of the rental company, which suggested he assume some financial responsibility for the car's disappearance. The elder Hutchinson swore that once he gave his statement at the police station, he and his family would be leaving LA and not looking back.

Ken leaned forward to get a better look through the window across the hallway. He could see his parents through the open blinds, as his father gave the uniformed officer what information he could. From the looks of things, his dad was moving past frustration and on to hostility. The young man's thoughts turned dark with his own frustration and disappointment. He jerked his thumb through his tie to undo the knot, and pulled the silk material from under his collar. With a sigh, he slumped to rest his elbows on his knees and spent the next few moments rolling and unrolling the tie as he observed some of the activity around him with mild interest.

A loud voice and disturbance from down the hall made him sit upright. From the sound of the cursing, he expected his father to come bursting out of the squadroom, but he would have been surprised, given the colorfulness of the verbiage. When his father did

swear—which was a rare occasion—it was never as graphic as the language bouncing down the corridor.

Ken couldn't help stare at the uniformed patrolman huffing down the hall, a youth of about thirteen or fourteen in his meaty grip. The teen had a mop of wild black hair and sported a vivid shiner on his left eye. His clothing suggested that either he didn't care too much about the way he dressed, or he was poor. The boy struggled against the cop's vice-like grip and rattled off another string of obscenities that questioned the officer's parentage.

The teenager was thrust onto the bench seat across from Ken and told in no uncertain terms that he was expected to stay there until "Blaine came for him." The teenager made an unpleasant face, but remained in his seat. The patrolman adjusted his uniform, apparently disheveled from restraining the wild youth, and gave the boy what he hoped was a menacing stare. As soon as he turned to leave, the teen was scrambling to his feet and heading in the opposite direction. He would have easily outdistanced the larger man, if he hadn't plowed into a second officer coming around the corner. The cop didn't appear to be surprised to see the teenager and simply had to point back to the bench to send the curly-headed troublemaker back to his seat.

With obvious disgust, the boy went, throwing himself down on the bench and assuming a martyred attitude. The first officer drew his handcuffs from his utility belt and held them out expectantly. The teen exhaled a long-suffering sigh and rolled his eyes, extending his wrist to be manacled. The patrolman made quick work of cuffing the left wrist, then securing the other cuff to the solid arm of the bench. Without a word, he turned on his heel and disappeared into the squadroom.

The dark-haired boy tugged a few times, predictably testing the cuff, though obviously not expecting it to give way. His dark blue eyes held a mischievous glint when they made contact with Ken's stare. "I don't suppose you got a saw?"

Ken grinned lightly. "Sorry, I must have left it in my suitcase."

The other boy sighed again and nodded, looking down the hallway as if he was expecting someone. "What are you in for?"

Ken was taken aback. "N-nothing. I mean...my parents' rental car was stolen. They're filling out a report."

The other's gaze swung back to him with a sarcastic grin. "Welcome to LA."

Ken nodded, then scrutinized the other teen, whose accent was definitely not West Coast. "You're not from around here either, are you?"

The blue eyes hardened as a note of bitterness crept into his voice. "No. No, I'm not."

Ken stared for a minute, even though he knew he was being rude. The other boy's eyes were fathomless, but it was easy for him to see that beyond the mocking smile lingered anger and perhaps pain. Ken felt an immediate empathy for the youth that he couldn't explain. The connection unnerved him, and he glanced away. "So, how'd you get the shiner?"

"That's a good question. I was about to ask it myself." The rumbling voice came from down the hall as a man in his mid-thirties approached the two teenagers. As he drew a set of handcuff keys from his pocket, Ken could see a detective's badge clipped to the man's belt, as well as a service revolver hidden under his sweater. The cuffs were quickly released and the dark teen unconsciously rubbed his wrist as he jumped to his feet. But instead of running again, the youth squared his shoulders, the fire in his eyes returning.

"John, I swear, it wasn't my fault!"

"Uh-huh. That's what you said *last* time."

"No, really! I was in old man Feng's place, picking up some wontons for Aunt Rosie when these guys came in and were giving Mrs. Feng a hard time..."

"Uh-huh." The man called John sighed and put his hands on his hips. "What am I going to do with you?" As the detective shook his head, he seemed to notice Ken watching them. The cop nodded in his direction. "Who's your friend?"

"He—"

"I—"

The two began speaking at once, but weren't able to finish their statements. Ken's parents bustled out of the squadroom, and Richard Hutchinson barked at his son to accompany them. Ken got up quickly and started down the hall in their wake—obedient, but not rushing, either.

Just before he turned the corner, he paused and looked back. The detective was reading the teen the riot act, but he was obviously only half listening. He seemed to sense Ken's eyes on him, and he looked up, their eyes locking again. The youth nodded once, bidding Ken goodbye.

As his father called out his name again in agitation, Ken returned the nod and retreated, the curly-haired boy's haunted eyes etched in his memory.

