

# WICKED BREAK

by Jeff Shelby

## CHAPTER

## TWO

I asked Peter a few more questions about the guns he'd seen because I wanted a better idea of what I might be getting myself into. But he clearly knew nothing about guns and the tension on his face told me that finding them had shocked the hell out of him. I knew I'd have to go look for myself. He gave me a wallet-size photo of Linc and I told him I'd be in touch after I checked out the apartment.

I went back to my place, dropping my board on the patio that faced the beach. Carter had apparently anticipated my irritation with him and vacated the premises. Not as dumb as he looked.

I showered and changed into a pair of corduroy board shorts and a t-shirt. I grabbed an apple and a soda out of the fridge and headed out to see where Linc Pluto lived.

I pointed my Jeep east, going past the Bahia and the bay, getting onto Interstate 8 behind the old Sports Arena. The freeway cut through Mission Valley, bisecting the giant canyon that now housed a golf course, several shopping centers and Qualcomm Stadium. I merged south on the 805, the canyon walls closer to the freeway now and took the second exit, College Avenue.

The area around San Diego State was trying to reinvent itself, just like other older parts of the city. The university wanted to sell itself as a destination school rather than a state school and they were hoping to create a college town feel. Abandoned strip malls had been rebuilt with fast food joints and cafes. But the new neon of the signs in the windows hadn't deterred those that had been used to the old ways of the neighborhood. You were safe during the day, but you didn't venture out at night unless you were with your frat pals.

I found Linc's address just past the old Aztec Drive-In. It was an ugly L-shaped, two story building, with an

old asphalt lot in front. The stucco exterior was painted drab brown and the doors were a shade darker. Could've been an old motel.

I parked in the lot and found Linc's door on the ground level. A small window sat just to the right of the door.

I knocked, but got no answer.

I tried the door, but it didn't open.

I looked in the window, but saw no one.

Nowhere fast.

I walked down to the next door. Bob Marley crooned softly behind it.

I knocked.

Footsteps came closer and the door swung open.

A girl about twenty or so stood in front of me. A tight olive tank top hugged the curves of her chest, cut off cargo shorts exposed long tan legs. Her hair was a mess of dirty brown dreadlocks piled on top of her head. The thin silver hoops in her earlobes matched the ones in her eyebrow and nostril. She was attractive in an I'm-in-college-and-rebelling kind of way.

Her emerald eyes flashed and she looked annoyed. "What?"

"I'm looking for your neighbor."

"Did you try his place?"

I smiled. "Yeah. He's not there. Any idea where I could find him?"

She folded her arms across her chest. "Who are you?"

"Noah Braddock. I'm an investigator. Who are you?"

"Dana Madison." She looked at me with new interest. "An investigator. No shit?"

"None whatsoever."

"And you're looking for Linc?"

"I am."

"Well, I don't know where he is," she said. "But Rachel might."

"Rachel?"

"My roommate." She looked me up and down with a confidence she couldn't possibly have been old enough to possess. A slow smile emerged on her face and she stepped to the side. "Right this way, stud."

I felt dirty, but in a good way, and stepped past her into the apartment.

Dana went and turned down the stereo in the corner. The interior was sparsely furnished and the white paint on the walls was cracking. The aroma of freshly smoked marijuana filled the room. A small television sat on a banged up hutch. A worn wooden coffee table stood in the middle of the room just across from a tattered brown sofa. A Donald Duck bong grinned at me from the tabletop.

First Pluto, now Donald.

Disney appeared to be overtaking my life.

"You see where the spout is on him?" Dana said, coming over to the sofa and noticing I was looking at Donald.

"Uh, yeah."

"Makes it look like you're giving him a hummer when you spark up."

"Cool."

"I know," she said, missing my sarcasm.

"So. Rachel?"

Dana nodded, still looking at me. "You have to be in such a hurry?"

"Busy, busy."

A smile curled onto her lips. "I'd like to see you get busy." She turned towards the hallway that extended off the room and yelled "Rachel. Somebody here for you."

A scuffling sound came from down the hallway, followed by footsteps. Rachel emerged.

If Dana was attractive, Rachel was a flat out knockout. A fiery mane of red hair cascaded around her tan, oval face. She wore jean shorts frayed at the ends and a tight black top, exposing a drum tight abdomen and a tiny diamond in her navel. Her arms and legs were as tan as her face, toned like her stomach. The only imperfection I could see was that her large brown eyes were ringed with bright red blood vessels.

She looked at me, confused. "Hi."

"Hi."

"This is Noah," Dana said. "He's a private investigator."

Rachel gave me a blank stare. "Oh."

"I'm looking for Linc," I said. "Next door."

"Oh."

"You know him?"

"Yeah she does," Dana said, then giggled.

Rachel looked at her. "Yeah I do." Then she giggled.

Stoners can be frustrating.

I took a deep breath. "How do you know him?"

Rachel folded her arms across her chest. "From school."

"And you guys are friends?"

"Yeah they are," Dana said and snickered again.

"Shut up," Rachel said to her, then laughed again as well. She composed herself quickly. "We're friends."

"Friends?"

Rachel blinked several times. "He tutored me."

Dana laughed out loud and rolled onto her side on the sofa.

"Tutored?" I asked.

Rachel looked down at her feet. "Sorta."

I took another deep breath and tried to relax. "Look, Linc is missing. I'm trying to find him. He's not in trouble. And I don't care about the pot or anything else you two probably have stashed in here. Just be straight with me."

It was quiet for a moment while they tried to process what I said.

"Just tell him," Dana finally said.

"Shut up," Rachel said, looking at her.

"He's not from the school," Dana said, frowning at her friend. Then she looked at me. "Right? You aren't some kinda school cop?"

"I'm not."

She looked back at Rachel. "See?"

Rachel frowned at her friend, but didn't say anything.

Dana turned back to me. "Linc wrote papers for her."

"Dana! Shut up!" Rachel said, her cheeks flushing slightly.

"And she fucked him in return," Dana said, smiling.

"You bitch," Rachel said, shaking her head.

College had apparently changed since I'd been enrolled.

"It wasn't just like that," Rachel said to me.

"Okay," I said. "I'm not looking for an explanation. I just want to find him."

Rachel's cheeks continued to flush. "I mean, I can't write very good. He offered to help. And it just kinda...happened."

"Just once?"

Dana laughed.

"Well, no," Rachel said. "A couple times. But not recently. The last time was like two months ago. I swear."

"Alright. When did you see him last?"

She thought about it, lines forming above her perfect eyebrows. "Two days ago."

"Any idea where he might be?"

She shook her head slowly. "No. Do you think he's in trouble?"

"No idea," I said, wishing I hadn't knocked on their door. I pulled a card from my pocket and held it out. "If you hear from him or think of anything, call me."

Dana lurched off the sofa. "Can I get one of those?"

I reluctantly withdrew another one and handed it to her.

She smiled at it, then winked at me. "Thanks, stud."

I left before my head exploded.