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## **DOWN FOR WHATEVER**

By  
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### **Chapter 1 Keith**

If you blink, you'd miss finding Tempo.

Tucked away in a strip mall with inexpensive family eateries, hair salons, currency exchanges, and pre-paid cell phone stores, the allure of blending in is why Tempo attracts such an eclectic mix of men. It's low key and wouldn't attract attention from an unsuspecting girlfriend or passerby on the street. Especially those who think men who like men only hang out further west on Santa Monica Boulevard.

Something about Wrangler jeans, Tony Lama boots, Stetson *tejanas* (cowboy hats), and Panhandle Slim fitted shirts make men look extra macho while they're standing out front smoking cigarettes, catching up on the latest *chisme* with each other. The occasional *cholo* and *veterano*, Salvadoreño and black, and out-of-place West Hollywood boy speckle the line, which has grown past the *El Pollo Loco* restaurant and onto the

sidewalk. They're all beautiful – in a blue collar sort of way. Definitely not a fetish. Just something attractive. You know?

What you don't know is I'm breaking my annual New Year's resolution, renewed just six weeks ago: No more late nights out, no more hangovers, and definitely no more looking for love in all the wrong places. I even made the pinky-finger swear with Marco Antonio at our combined birthday and New Year's dinner.

But here I am once again at the Sunday *tardeada*, an afternoon party, at Club Tempo, in Hollywood, which hosts a who's who of L.A.'s closeted, married and butch Latino men and their fans. I'm with my on again/off again, much younger, and much better-built friend, Rafael. That was another one of my New Year's resolutions – be nice to Rafael. That's another story, you'll find out soon enough.

Another thing you don't know is I don't do the waiting-in-line thing. So I give the valet a healthy tip to let Rafael and me breeze through security and to the ticket window. I pay both our cover charges—I can't believe Rafael only brought twenty dollars with him—and get our numbered tickets, which serve as our passport to the different floors in the club.

The accordions and male singers are singing in the popular off-key *norteña* style in the *vaquero* room on my right, the reggaeton and hip hop music is blasting to my left, and I get excited about the night. I feel at home. Weird, I know. I'm black. And standing in a room full of hardcore, full-blooded Mexican men. It's a packed house and the energy feels positive, even on a chilly, sixty-degree evening in February. So far I'm in a good mood, not feeling guilty about breaking my New Year's resolution, and just want to find

our favorite Tempo waiter so I can set up a drink tab, and get a pitcher of beer for Rafael and me – not my normal choice of drink, but when in Rome...

Well, there *was* a Rafael and me like five minutes ago, but Rafael has gone off to the bathroom and disappeared. This is Rafael's little game. He gets "lost." Says he can't find you. You end up partying alone. Some party and friend, huh?

So I down one beer very quickly and pour another one right away. I have to look occupied. *Keep your head up, smile, watch all of the happy couples pass you by. Like you're part of the furniture here. Like you're invisible.* I thought the days of being invisible were over when I stopped trying to fit in with white boys at white bars. *It's okay. Pretend you're a pageant contestant and smile at everyone, whether you know them or not.*

I told myself I was through hanging out with Rafael after his hook up with the boy I wanted last night – the black personal trainer from our gym. Yeah, I broke the New Year's resolution last night too. Kinda went like this: Arena is a huge warehouse club. Where Tempo is laid back and leisurely, Arena is fast and frenetic. Shell out fifty dollars in less than five minutes for cover charge, coat check, a shot of Cazadores tequila, and a weak cocktail. Walk through the dance floor crowd like you're Toni Braxton in the video for *He Wasn't Man Enough For Me*, and you and your boys sip on your drinks, smile, and, in tandem, casually rotate and dance your circle of friends around so you can get a 360-degree view of the crowd dancing around your circle. No sweating allowed, so after ten minutes of dancing decide to go upstairs. Take the side ramp, so that the three thousand club guests who didn't see you on the dance floor can see you and your boys work the forty-five degree angled runway. Pray you don't slip on your slick-bottomed

shoes or that you don't miss a beat of the synchronized steps you and your boys have perfected like you're cast members of the male, brown and black version of *Sex and the City* or the Spanish-language soap *Soñadoras*. While smoking a Dunhill, not a run-of-the-mill domestic, eye some guys across the patio, see a few closet cases from the gym, and pick out one you'd like to hook up with. You've seen out and about for three years since moving to L.A., made eye contact and smiled before, but never actually talked to each other. It's so third grade, but you hope this one likes you back for a change. He doesn't. He likes your friend Rafael instead. As usual, I'm the odd man out. Rafael gets the man he wants. Marco Antonio, my best friend, has his actor boyfriend, Alex. Tommie, my condo mate has his college basketball player, Tyrell. Love, or at least a cheap one-night-stand, is for everyone else. Not for me.

Maybe things will be different tonight at Tempo. Maybe not.

Tonight, I'm more like Rafael's taxi driver and errand boy. I have his cigarettes, keys, and funky little twenty-dollar bill. He waltzes over with some cute Mexican cowboy in cinnamon-colored leather chaps, drops off their drinks by me, and they head out to the dance floor. I swear I overheard Rafael say I'm like his old-maid chaperone. My Spanish is a lot better than he thinks. Screw him. Let him have his fun. I don't want him around anyway. My good mood is gone. I'm ready to go.

I never should have broken my New Year's resolution to come out. Sundays are always too crowded at Tempo anyway, with *chicos* looking for cheap *cerveza* and *carne asada*. And even as I complain about my broken resolution, I'm in awe of the blue-collar boys here and this mini-culture of the gay world most people don't realize exist. I never imagined I, the preacher's son and church boy from Detroit, would hang out in a place

filled with cowboy hats, boots and *vaqueros*. Latino men who work with their hands. Who work the earth, and in factories and restaurants, for hourly wages and no benefits. Who marry women, but have sex with men. Who look like they could be someone's father, *primo*, *tio*, or the next-door neighbor who played soccer and baseball with your older brother. Latinos who like the sounds of their old countries, like *quebraditas*, *rancheras* and *bandas*, but enjoy life in the new country. But I am here now and taking in the scene. I know they must look at me and wonder what the hell I'm doing here. I can only imagine their thoughts: *Why isn't he over at Catch One or one of the Ivan Daniel First Fridayz L.A. events? I wish I could make an announcement: I'm a fan. I appreciate the culture. I'm not just here to exoticize. I'm not looking for a mail-order partner or a Latino houseboy. And I do like black men, by the way, thank you.*

So I'm sitting on a wooden bar stool on the side of the dance floor. The pitcher of beer I was sharing with Rafael is warm now and losing its bite. I don't want any more, but I don't want to just sit here by myself and look bored. I pour a little from the pitcher and it foams up to the top of my plastic cup. Great. Warm fuzz. I feel like Charlie Brown minus the bag of rocks.

I feel a tap on my shoulder. To my relief, it's my friend, Chris Aquino, linked arm in arm with two young *muchachos* and without his partner, Jake.

"*Què pasa*, Keith?" Chris asks and air kisses around the side of my face. "Are you here alone or with Marc and Tommie?"

"Rafael's out there dancing. Marco's with the actor boyfriend. Tommie's at home."

"Cool. Cool. Good to hear it. Guys, this is my good friend from Stanford, Keith."

We do the customary handshakes and cocktail toast. We're an odd bunch. A thirty-something Filipino who's botoxed himself back to twenty. An almost thirty black. And two post-pubescent Latinos. They're obviously models on Chris' partner's X-rated website, based on how much crème brulee-colored abs and biceps they're showing in the middle of winter in L.A. The two pretty-boys look brainless, like they couldn't care less about me being in their mix, so I ask if they want refills on their Cosmopolitans. They decline. They have to meet with some other friends on the second floor. So urgent, I'm sure. Air kisses. Goodbye.

But I look around the club anyway, and through the crowd I see Rafael dancing chest-to-chest with yet another new boy—this one we saw waiting in line when we pulled in the parking lot. Two boys in ten minutes. What a slut. I turn away quickly so Rafael can't see me watching him, and I'm staring into the chest, and then eyes and face of a really, really handsome man standing to my right. He's like a taller version of that Mexican American singer I like, Rogelio Martínez, complete with goatee, beautiful dark brown eyes with long lashes surrounding them, and golden bronze skin. He smiles, nods, and leans closer to me, the brim of his *tejana* bumping the top of my head,

*“Hola guapo. ¿Como estas?”* he asks and smiles.

*“Bien, gracias. Pero, no hablo mucho español.”*

“Well, I speak English too,” he flashes his beautiful white teeth again. Nice lips, too. *“¿Como te llamas? What's your name?”*

“Keith. What's yours?” I shout above the music, but then the band stops and I'm shouting in the semi-quiet room. I'm embarrassed.

“Cesar.”

*“Con mucho gusto, Cesar.”*

“Good to meet you, too, Keith.”

I don’t know what to say next, because Cesar’s so good looking and I can’t get past it. He’s really talking to me?

“I like your shirt, Keith. Red’s a good color for your skin tone. A gift from your Valentine?”

“I’m single, but thanks for the compliment. You look nice, too.”

“Thanks,” he says and smiles. The DJ has started a new song, and Cesar leans down against my ear again so I can hear. “I’m not with anyone either. It’s always the finest boys who’re single. And don’t worry, I won’t ask you why you don’t have a boyfriend.”

“You’re funny, Cesar.”

“You’re very handsome, Keith. *¿Eres Dominicano? ¿Cubano? ¿Boriqua?*”

“Who? Me?”

“Who am I with?” He smiles, winks and puts his arm around my shoulder. I smile back, thinking about how I love physically looking up at a man for a change. And his gold colored sweater shimmers and matches his skin perfectly. I just pray he doesn’t slide his hand down any further, or else he’ll be feeling a little bit of love handle.

*“Soy de Michoacán.”*

“What?” He looks confused over my comment that I’m from the Mexican state of Michoacán. It doesn’t register.

“Got you!” I say and laugh. “I’m African American. Black. Don’t know much more than that about my background. History.”

“Tell me about it. So much history robbed and erased,” Cesar says.

“Whoa. You’re getting real activist. I like it.”

“I know. Don’t trip, Keith. I’m like that sometimes, usually not in clubs.”

They obviously forgot to turn on the air conditioner, and with all these grown men dancing up a storm – now playing: Ana Bárbara’s *Bandido* – it’s like a downtown L.A. sweatshop. I dab myself with my handkerchief and Cesar does the same with his. And we haven’t even danced yet. We decide to walk outside to the smoking patio. To talk more, without competing with the music.

“You look nice in the natural light, Keith.”

“Thanks. You’re no ‘Monet’ either,” I say referring to boys who look cute in club lighting, but less-than-cute when the lights go up. “So what do you do, Cesar?”

“I teach at Pasadena City College and Santa Monica College. Chicano Studies and History classes mostly.”

“Really? So you are an activist. You look too young to be a professor.” He looks barely twenty-one.

“I’m twenty-nine. What about you?” Cesar asks.

“I’m twenty-nine, too.”

“Let me guess what you do, Keith. Model?”

Boy, Cesar’s trying to flatter me. “Nope.”

“Hairstylist?”

Funny. “Think again.”

“Retail queen?”

“Wrong again, Cesar. One more guess or you’ll have to pay the price.”



“Hmmm. I think I wanna pay the price, Keith.” Cesar pats my butt.

“Come on.”

“Let me see,” Cesar says and breaks away from me. He spins me around. “A professional dancer? *La negra tiene tumbao*. Celia Cruz wrote that for you, huh? I’ve seen your moves before.”

We both laugh. I’m far from a great dancer, and though I’ve got rhythm, sometimes I end up looking like a dancer stuck on repeat—same arm, leg and hip movements over and over on the dance floor.

“No, Cesar. I do consulting. Diversity training.” I hand him my business card.

“So you’re kind of an activist, too. That’s cool. Very needed here in L.A.”

“It’s fun and frustrating at the same time. L.A.’s got issues,” I say.

“Every major city’s got issues,” Cesar says. “You must not be from here, dogging my city like that?”

“Michigan,” I say and put my hand up, as any true Midwesterner would, and point to the bottom right where my hometown is. “Get it now... about being from Michoacán?”

“Keith’s got jokes, I see. I did my grad work in Ann Arbor. I’m A.B.D.”

Hmmm, not bad. A Ph.D in the making, just needs to write the dissertation.

“I did undergrad and grad at Stanford, but I grew up in Detroit.”

“We probably crossed paths in Metro Airport at holiday breaks. Wouldn’t that be funny?” Keith asks.

“Yeah. I think about weird stuff like that all the time.”

“My family’s from Sinaloa in Mexico, but we moved here when I was two.”

“That’s cool. I’ve never been there, but went to Jalisco once to visit Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta for spring break when I was a student. Part community service trip, but mostly fun.”

“It’s nice over there, but you have to come see my town and my family one day,” he says. “See, there’s the kind of guy you take home, and the kind of guy you take home to the family. I can tell you’re the second kind.”

I know I didn’t just hear Cesar making an invitation for the future. To meet the family? Cool.

“So, Cesar, your family knows about you? Hanging with men, that is?”

“In *my* traditional Mexican family? No way.”

“So how do you get around the dating issue, Cesar? They must ask about it?”

“I’d have to tell them you’re a colleague or something,” he says. “What about yours?”

“They know, but not because I told them,” I say. “They found a letter I wrote to the first guy I dated, someone from Stanford, when I was home on a holiday break, and they said I should never bring that part of me home. My dad’s a minister, so it’s total ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ in our house. So we don’t talk about it. It’s cool. I respect their house, you know?”

“That’s deep,” Cesar says. “A sinner on Saturday and an angel on Sunday.”

“I’m a good boy.”

We both laugh and say, “Yeah, right,” at the same time.

“I’m talked out, Keith ¿*Quieres bailar?* Wanna dance?”

“Sure. Why not?”

Besides, I like the song the DJ just put on – Celia Cruz’s *La Negra Tiene Tumbao* – and dancing with Cesar will give me a chance to one-up Rafael. Especially when he sees Cesar is at least six feet three, looks quite muscular in his tight ribbed sweater, and is very much a gentleman as he leads me through the crowded dance floor. His fingers and hands feel strong and very soft, like he’s not afraid of a good manicure. Cesar doesn’t notice, or pretends not to notice, that everyone’s eyeing him up and down. I notice the looks, though. But for the moment it feels good having him grab onto my hand and giving it a little reassuring squeeze.

“Is this okay?” Cesar asks referring to a spot in the middle of the dance floor.

“It’s fine. Just fine,” I say and position myself so Rafael can see my face and the back of Cesar’s head.

I’m feeling comfortable and smile. Cesar pulls me closer, and my head leans on his chest. I breathe in his masculine scent, a natural spicy fragrance. I wonder am I dreaming? Is this man actually here, holding me, allowing me to lean against him? Is he enjoying this as much as I am? Am I boring him? Am I good looking enough for him? Do I feel fat to him? Does he care that people are staring at us, this interracial dance couple? Can he feel my nervous heartbeat against his body? I think about the long dry spell I’ve been through the past couple years and feel optimistic Cesar could be the one to end it. Oh God, please let this work out. No games. No drama. Please let the drought be over. Please let me find a real boyfriend before I’m thirty.

The music stops, as the DJ steps aside for another live band to start playing, and Cesar and I separate and move to the side of the floor.

“Keith...”

“Cesar...”

“You first.”

“No. You.”

I look up at him and he is looking down into my eyes, and I swear he’s pursing his full lips as if he’s ready to kiss me. But after one dance? I don’t think so.

“You have nice lips, Keith.”

“Thanks. You do too.”

“This feels nice, Keith.” Cesar rubs my back and smiles.

“I was gonna say the same thing,” I say and then think about the next big question on my mind. I have to know if this is real. “It’s not a problem or an issue that I’m black, is it?”

“You are? Black?” Cesar asks and backs away to inspect my face. “When I see you I don’t see black. I just see a human.”

“You’re so full of it, Cesar.”

“Of course it’s a joke, Keith. And just so you know, I only date men of color, so if they’re black, brown, red, or yellow, citizens or illegals, *chunties* or professionals, it’s all right with me. I just haven’t gone white.”

“You’re not into being objectified? It’s like soooooo 21<sup>st</sup> century,” I say in my best L.A. Valley Girl impersonation.

He joins in the joking. “I can’t wait to get my little Latino houseboy, so he can cook and clean and *chupa mi pinga* every night.”

“Groovy, Cesar. Where do I sign up?”

“Silly boy,” Cesar says.

“I can’t believe you’re actually smart, and funny, and in a club,” I hear myself saying to Cesar. I pinch myself. Don’t want to appear desperate or clingy. And I want to make sure this isn’t a dream. I know there’s got to be a catch. There always is.

“So what are we going to do about it, Keith?”

“Let’s just see what happens.”

“I’m cool with that,” he says and hugs me tight against him. By now he’s felt the ten extra pounds on me, but so far no reaction.

“You know what? I need to take a bathroom break,” I say.

“No problem,” Cesar says. “I need to find my friends. I’ll be standing over where we met.”

“Cool.”

“Maybe we can exchange numbers, Keith? I’d love to meet for coffee or dinner.”

“Sure.”

“Don’t be long.”

I find a private stall and give myself my own pageant-winner performance. Full smile. High five. I jump up and down. Hug myself. Cesar is what you’d call a twelve on a scale from one to ten and he’s actually into me. Of all the fine men out tonight, Cesar’s feeling me. I can’t believe it, especially since he’s initiating everything—the approach, the dancing, the conversation. If this works out, I can kiss the club scene goodbye and live happily ever after at the magical age of thirty—every gay man’s, every single person’s (period!), self-proclaimed age for giving up club life. Maybe breaking my New Year’s resolution this weekend was worth it. They always say God works in mysterious ways.

After I wash and dry my hands, I head back out into the crowded club to look for Cesar. I don't have to look too long to know everything that glitters isn't gold. There's always a catch. Cesar's talking and laughing up a storm with Rafael. They're both drinking fresh, cold bottled beers. As usual, Rafael's wasting no time doing what he does best—seducing men. I'm not giving up on this one, though.

“Hey Cesar, I'm back. What's up?”

“Oh, this guy just sent me a beer,” Cesar says. “Rafael, this is Keith.”

I cut my eyes at Rafael. “We know each other already. We're friends. I'm his ride tonight.”

“Small world,” Cesar says and puts his arm around my waist. “Let me get you something to drink, Keith.”

Cesar goes to the bar and Rafael smiles. I don't.

“You sent him a beer? With what money? I've got your money, remember?”

“Oh, don't cause a scene bitch,” Rafael says. “Cesar paid for it when I couldn't find your ass.”

“Rafael, you can have anyone you want. Please don't mess this up for me.”

“Bitch, I'm just clinching the deal for you. Besides, I got two other men I'm workin' up in here tonight.”

“Then work them and leave Cesar alone!”

Cesar returns with a drink for me and hands Rafael a business card. “Call me if you're interested in taking some classes, Rafael. East L.A. College might be closer to where you live, and I'll hook you up with my friends in admissions.”

Well isn't this just grand? Rafael's suddenly into academics? And why the heck is Cesar handing his card to Rafael? Is he that bold?

"Thanks," Rafael says and shakes Cesar's hand. It lingers a little too long as far as I'm concerned. "See you boys later."

Cesar smiles and puts his free arm around me again. If Cesar likes me, it's difficult to tell. Especially with the flirt action going on between him and Rafael. It's too early to be suspicious, right?

"Look, if you want to go and talk to my friend, go ahead. It's not the first time."

"Are you jealous, *moreno*?" Cesar asks and squeezes my side. "Don't trip. You'll get my home, my cell, and my work number before the night is over. You'll have me on serious lock-down."

"I'm not jealous. I just know how Rafael works."

"But you don't know how I work."

Cesar purses his lips again and nods his head. I know he wants to give me a kiss. Been in this scene with a thousand different cast members. I want to kiss him, but not in a bar full of people. Especially in front of other men who will suddenly find Cesar even more irresistible and an easy target once they see us together. Plus I don't want other people thinking I'm easy or loose by kissing up on a stranger in public. I wish I were a fourth of the slut Rafael is and could live life as pornography like he does, but being a PK – preacher's kid – keeps me confined to an invisible morality code even when the Hemmings family isn't around. When what I really want to do is give one last pitch of my worthiness: a negative HIV, a positive credit record, good family lineage (a PK and Howard University legacy at that!), a shiny import in my driveway, more stocks than one

person deserves, an undergrad and graduate degrees from Stanford, and connections that could help Cesar's career. But instead I do nothing.

“Fine, Keith. We'll just talk later. I'll be upstairs.”

And though he's not my man, for a few short minutes I'd like to feel Cesar is on his way to being mine. If he gets sucked into Rafael's web, then so be it. But it's a chance worth taking, because sometimes a man has to go through all the riff-raff to find the true jewel he's meant to have. And at least for the moment, I know that jewel is me.

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