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Right Side of the Wrong Bed by Frederick Smith

Chapter 1

Jeremy Lopez slipped into my life as smoothly as the rum going into my second Mojito.

"You from Cuba or something?"

He smiled. Grill gleaming like he never missed a cleaning, straight like he never missed a tightening. All six feet of him, dressed in his Daddy Yankee look-alike attire. Slim-fitted, yet baggy, low-rise jeans. White-on-white K-Swiss. Pink and white striped polo shirt, flipped collar. Oversized belt buckle. White blazer. Dog tag and silver cross pendants, on one long and one longer silver-link chain. Plain, white baseball hat, planted vicariously on his head and tilted to the side. Bling shining on his ear lobes. I was glad to see the preppy look was trendy again, after years of suffering through gangsta or grungy gear on the scene. And Jeremy wore it well.

"¿Eres Cubano o que?" He asked again, this time adding a head nod. I guess to see if I understood Spanish or English, or if I could hear him over George Clinton's "Atomic Dog" that entertained the club patrons.

I looked down at the Heineken he had just ordered. And though I could tell from his light brown skin and dark eyes and hair he might have descended from some country south or some island southeast of the United States, I decided to play along with his geography game.

"You Dutch or something?"

Blank, confused look. "Huh?"

"The beer you're drinking. It's kind of an import from Holland. Just like my Mojito originates from Cuba."

"Oh. Okay," he said, but looked over across the crowded room, smiled at someone, and then turned back to me. "Nah. I'm straight-up Latino, half Mexican, half Dominican."

"Serious? That's an interesting pair."

"For real, huh?" he said and smiled again, first at me, then at the same someone across the room. "My dad was military and came out here from New York. But I'm East L.A. born and bred."

"Cool."

"Sometimes people think I'm full-black, mixed with black, or something else cause of my skin."

"I get that too sometimes, but both my parents are black – African American," I said. "But you're part Dominican. There's some African roots there, so people would make some assumptions."

"True," he said. I guess all the ethnicity talk and explaining who he was bored him. He continued looking across the room and I wanted to ignore who my new bar friend was checking out, but managed a peek. I guess a long peek.

His clique was a group of similarly urban-prep-dressed men. College age definitely. Running in that mixed-race nontourage young L.A. residents tend to travel in, trying to look like A-List music stars but never quite making the guest list. In this case two Latinos, one black, one Filipino, a white guy, and another who looked to be a mixture of all the above. But who could really tell these days in L.A., especially in club lighting, and especially with the high number of mixed-race kids coming of age in California.

"I don't want to keep you from anything or anybody," I said and grabbed a twenty from my wallet. "My friends are around here somewhere."

"Oh. A'ight." He dug a wad of crumpled singles from his pants pocket.

"I got the drinks. Keep your money."

"Thanks bro," he said and smiled. Clinked his Heineken against my Mojito. Slid his dollar bills back in his pocket. "I'll holla at you lata."

"No prob."

"Next time the Cuba Libre is on me," he said and winked. "Lata playa."

And he glided across the room, said hello and high-fived a few in the crowd, before settling back with his boys on their side of the room. Seemed so popular and a charmer – I bet he never paid for a drink in his burgeoning club life.

Though I was ten years past having my master's degree, working around college students at the university kept me young-at-heart and in tune with the language and ways of youth. Still, I didn't expect the crowd tonight to be so full of younger people. Was looking forward to a low-key, but fun, evening with my thirty-something friends and acquaintences.

My colleague and best friend, Carlos, was throwing an eighties party to celebrate his partner Ricky's thirty-fifth birthday. He'd rented out a hip West Hollywood club and bar, which usually housed Ivan Daniel 's Wednesday night hip-hop set, Metro, that brought out the younger, urban prep crowd. And since word never seems to travel about these private party rentals, the old and the young mingled, suspiciously and tentatively, over the songs that the old grew up on while the young were being born.

Carlos and Ricky were a popular and successful couple – in fact role models, in a way, for those of us on the not-so-successful relationship track. Carlos, my colleague, was the director of campus multicultural affairs, an office that worked closely with my department, which I directed, campus organizations and leadership. Ricky was a fire fighter for the city. A little on the conservative, ¡VIVA Bush!, red-state side at times. But loved his eighties music. And loved his Carlos. For the past seven years. Loyal, faithful, and oh-so-generous with his love, time, and money. The way a relationship should be.

Unlike the one I'd ended right before Labor Day last year, just five-months-plus earlier, with Ricky's best friend and fellow fire fighter, DaVon Holloway.

Part of me knew DaVon might stop by to give his best friend a birthday greeting, though their friendship had slipped in the past months due to DaVon's dishonesty and lack of integrity regarding our relationship. And honestly, it was the only reason I'd ventured out of my house on a cold, February work night. I wanted to see how DaVon was surviving since I gave him the ultimatum, "Paper or plastic?" when I gathered his things and put him out of my house. Not that I was a particularly vindictive person.

Resentment, I've found, is kind of like taking poison, but hoping another person dies. I wished only the best for DaVon, though I wondered how he could give up a stable, upstanding, and cosmopolitan person like me.

Came crashing down just like that.

Months, though most likely years, of unprotected sex brought something to my household and life I never expected to deal with. Women. Paternity tests. Sexual relationships outside of ours. Children. He denied them all. Said they were gold-digging widows looking for a quick and steady dollar from a successful brotha. And at first I'd believed him. Six years living with someone, being with someone who you loved and respected makes you give the benefit of the doubt. Makes you borrow off your retirement, or re-finance your mortgage and pull money out the house one more time, or cash out the few stock accounts you hold in order to pay attorney and court costs to defend your man, despite the fact he made a healthy income as a fire fighter than I did. Until you learned there are countless examples of fire fighters, trauma workers, police officers who give comfort to the families and widows of victims. Until you learned there were hundreds of pending lawsuits from other women claiming their children came from relationships with those hired to serve and protect. Until the DNA tests came back and

conclusively identified DaVon Holloway as the father of not one, but two, toddlers – a boy and a girl. Possibly more out there, who knows. Really didn't want to know. All I know is after I put DaVon out, he married one of the women. A marriage formed more out of his desire to avoid further courtroom drama over visitation and child support, rather than one based on love.

I'd given DaVon six, almost seven, years of my life. Started out real fast and furious. Boyfriends after three dates, living together after three months. We just felt each other and found each other at the right time. Six, almost seven years. In my mind, I'd transitioned from fine, to cute, to handsome as I left the mid-twenties and entered my early thirties. I imagined DaVon and I being together forever as we transitioned further to wrinkles and old age. That life out in 'the scene' was over and that we would settle down into my white-picket-fence Mr. Black America suburban fantasy. That I wouldn't have to worry again about going out there again and trying to market myself to today's single scene. A CeCe Penniston-bred boy in a Beyonce-led world.

Part of me blamed myself for DaVon's ability to not be faithful. That I knew the deal. That he had been with women long before me, and that I was his first real date with a dude, then boyfriend, then partner, and that it was all new for DaVon. An experiment, or new experience, who knows? Carlos tried to caution me. Ricky reassured me DaVon's interest in me was sincere, and that DaVon was sure of the new direction of his love life and attractions. So I let DaVon Holloway, one of a few black recruits in that year's class of new fire fighters in Los Angeles, pursue me. It was good. And I let him move in with me. First, to my one-bedroom apartment in Pasadena. Then, to the townhouse I bought in the Leimert Park area. Then to the home I purchased in the hills of Monterey Park, a

suburban enclave jokingly called "The Chinese Beverly Hills," which was about ten minutes east of downtown L.A., and the entering point of the San Gabriel Valley. We were living the dream that I thought would last forever.

I held no resentment. And was far from bitter. Some might have disagreed.

As I sat at the bar, and nodded my head along to "Planet Rock" or one of those other eighties electronic songs, Carlos joined me and sat down. His white t-shirt clung to his skin, a result of sweating to the 80s oldies no doubt. He ran his hands over his hair, and grabbed a handkerchief out his pocket to dry his face off.

"Thanks for coming tonight," he said and smiled. "I hope you're having a good time."

"I am," I said and sipped on the Mojito I'd just ordered. It was terrible. Too much rum, not enough sugar. I slid it toward the bartender and pointed to it. "The drink sucks. Can you make another one? Thanks." Then back to Carlos, "Yeah, Carlos, I'm cool. And no, I'm not thinking about DaVon. I know that's your next question."

"Good. As long as you're not here requesting Toni Braxton sad love songs. There will be no slow or sad songs tonight."

"Not at all."

"Or Sade sad love songs."

"Not even."

"Or Nina Simone."

"Fine, Carlos, I get your point," I said. "So, is DaVon coming or what?"

"We invited him, but who knows what's in his head these days."

"Who knows?" I said. "Who cares?"

"Anyways," Carlos said and smiled again like he was about to instigate trouble.

"Where's the young child you were talking to?"

"You saw that?" I asked.

"Yeah. He was cute. Young, but cute."

"I don't know. Probably off flirting, looking for his newest piece. We just ran into each other at the bar while ordering."

"Mmm hmm."

"It's true," I said. "I'm not even ready to start dating someone new."

Which was true. Though I wasn't singing Toni Braxton songs anymore after five months, and could definitely breathe again, I had too much on my plate to consider letting my heart open to someone else. It was barely healing from DaVon. But I had more going on in my life than the need to jump into anything new with anyone.

My job at the university was in jeopardy as usual, with the California state budget always in limbo. You just never knew which positions would be deemed essential and those deemed not. And Carlos' and my new boss, Allison Perez, some woman out of Texas who became Vice President of Student Affairs, swooped in after the New Year with her agenda of compassionate conservatism, questioning everything that came out of Carlos' and my departments. *Only* Carlos' and my departments. Said she wanted to see more work from our departments that was more broad and campus-wide. Broad, meaning white. Campus-wide, meaning whiter. This, at California University, East Los Angeles, affectionately known as CUELA, which was home to a majority minority student body, but was attempting to increase its pool of white, and male, numbers. An initiative from our campus president, though it was never put on paper or e-mail. You just knew and

saw, based on who walked through the campus entrance each new semester. Regardless of Allison's agenda for me or my job, I had a successful business on the side as a private college coach, charging the rich and paranoid healthy fees to prep their teens for college entrance exams, while doing the same job for free with the economically-challenged students I mentored at Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

I also had just moved my mother from the winter wonderland of Ohio to the back house behind my home in Monterey Park. Third separation from my stepfather in recent years. Most of us looked forward to the day of moving out and away from our parents, but I brought her near for a few reasons. One, because she was retired and bored and alone in Ohio in the middle of winter, and my sisters, Tonya and Cecily, were too busy and crowded raising households of kids to take her in. Tonya's in Phoenix. Cecily's in Oakland. Two, to keep my mother out of the casinos in Detroit and Canada that she and her other retired girlfriends would road trip to twice a week. Spending all their little retirement checks on deflated dreams. Causing the tension between her and my stepfather. At least here, I'd be able to keep an eye on her, and prayed she wouldn't find a Thomas Guide and figure out a way to drive herself to the Indian Reservations in the Inland Empire, San Diego, or, God forbid, the big casinos in Vegas. Getting her adjusted to life in Southern California was enough of a chore to help distract me from DaVon and his infidelities. Third, I just didn't want to be alone, and figured my mom and I could be alone together while sorting out our lives and loves. Not that I needed to have DaVon, or any man, or any other person living with me. I wasn't co-dependent like that. I just had room and a void in my heart and my house.

I was definitely too busy to let someone new into my life. Yet, knew it was time to let someone new into my life and my bed. Five months was definitely enough time, though I wasn't sure if I wanted to pursue or be pursued.

"Whatever you say," Carlos said to me. "I'm taking that one home with me tonight."

"Which one?"

"This one," Carlos said as Ricky slid behind him and kissed the back of his neck. Ricky was a man's man, to use a tired cliché. The mythical kind everyone wanted, but rarely got: athletic, outgoing, yet considerate, kind, faithful, and able to blend in with gay or straight crowds with no problems, yet was not ashamed of his sexual orientation. At. All. "I just cruised him in the bathroom and told him I had a special, private birthday gift for him at my place."

"You guys are so lucky," I said. "Happy Birthday again, Ricky. How does it feel to be thirty-five?"

"Better than twenty-one, that's for sure."

It was great seeing my colleague, and I guess best friend (the best one I got in L.A.), so in love with his Ricky. They were my relationship role models, even though at times I had to put thoughts of questioning Ricky's judgment of character aside and stop blaming him for bringing DaVon into my life. It wasn't Ricky's fault DaVon turned out the way he was. Ricky was just a convenient scapegoat. You just never really know a person. You can only really know yourself.

The bartender slid a new Mojito across the bar to me. I sipped it. Much smoother. I tipped him a couple bucks for the trouble. I offered up my glass to Carlos' Cape Cod and Ricky's Heineken. Tapped cheers

"Well don't just sit here at the bar all night," Ricky said to me. "Come on back and dance with us to some real music from *our* generation."

"I'll be there in a minute. I'll finish this off and dance the buzz away with you guys in a bit."

"You better," Carlos said and placed his empty glass on the bar counter. "The wicked witch, Allison, is off all this week, so we can go in late tomorrow."

I slapped him a high-five and watched Carlos and Ricky head back toward the dance floor area. Sounded and looked like a fun time for all, even the younger set. It was an eighties party, but not the typical Devo, Go-Go's, Depeche Mode eighties. Ricky, in all his ¡VIVA Bush! enthusiasm, liked black people eighties music. Songs like "Egyptian Lover," "Funkin' For Jamaica," "Meeting in the Ladies' Room," "Oh Shelia," "777-9311," and "Throw That D." Songs Hearned while visiting cousins up in Detroit in the early eighties, and watching their local dance show, *The Scene* with Nat Morris on Channel 62. It amazed me how similar musical tastes could be among people from different cultures and backgrounds. Me. Blue collar, black, first generation college grad, Midwestern. Ricky. Rich, Hispanic (his words, not mine), eighth generation American, West Coast.

I looked forward to joining my friends out on the dance floor and continuing the celebration. Until I turned around and saw him walk through the front entrance.

DaVon.

Damn. Not the way I wanted to be spotted the first time since our breakup.

Drinking alone. At a bar. No hottie on my arms or by my side to make him jealous, or at least to make him reconsider what he gave up (even though I'm the one who gave him the boot).

DaVon Holloway. In the flesh.

Minus his wife. With his real wedding ring on his third finger. Showing off his shoulders and bicep muscles in a tight wife-beater t-shirt, baggy jeans, and L.A. Dodgers hat tilted to the side. Trying to fool himself from thirty-five to twenty-five, I guess. Still looked good. Always been attracted to tall, dark men like DaVon. Our eyes met immediately, and though I tried quickly to look down and sip on my Mojito to ignore him, and maybe hope/pretend like I was turning invisible like Caspar the Friendly Ghost, he walked my way and stood next to me at the bar. Still wore Obsession, even though I had bought other fragrances, newer ones from the 2000s, for him to try. Still smelled good on him.

"Whassup?"

He looked nervous, kept his hands in his pockets, but managed a head nod. His full lips parted, a little nervously, to show off his perfect smile. He'd grown a goatee in the past five months, and looked a little older than he did during his clean-shaven years with me. Probably the stress of living with a toddler and getting woken in the middle of the night for feedings or diaper changes.

"Hey," I said and took a large swallow like a binge drinker. The sooner I finished the Mojito, the sooner I could get away from DaVon, and dance with my friends.

"You alone?"

"Uh," I said and pondered. Really quickly. Saying yes would indicate I was a loser: single, alone, not over him, no prospects, the one who should break out in Mariah's "We Belong Together." Saying no would answer the question and no explanation would really be needed. What to say to DaVon? "They're dancing."

"Cool," he looked at me and smiled. "How's the party?"

"It's alright, I guess," I said nonchalantly. "I haven't been in West Hollywood in a while. Club scene is different from when we were out and about."

"Yeah."

"It's a party. Drink up."

"But Ricky is back on the dance floor if you want to find him."

"I'll find him," DaVon said and looked at the bartender. "One Seven and Seven, and whatever my man is drinking."

"No thanks, DaVon," I said. "I'm leaving soon anyway. And I'm driving."

"Slow down babe," he said and put his hand on my shoulder. Gave it a squeeze.

DaVon tossed his AMEX on the bar counter and sat down while the bartender finished mixing our drinks. The last thing I wanted. Didn't want to be seen alone by DaVon my first time running into him since the breakup. Didn't want him feeling sorry, sad, or nostalgic. Or looking at me like he'd won, I'd lost, and I was wallowing in my sorrows at the bar. The bartender rang up the transaction, slid our drinks toward us, and took DaVon's credit card.

"How you been?" DaVon said, half looking at me, half looking over my shoulder at the crowd around us. Needed to keep that wandering eye still, with his wife and kid at

home, and countless others popping up every other month it seemed. "I drove past your house the other day and saw your mother planting flowers out front. She's in town?"

"What were you doing in Monterey Park?"

"Is there a law?"

"You live and work near USC, right? You have nothing to stop by my house for."

"Just driving. Just thinking. That's all." DaVon looked at me and for that moment I looked back into his eyes. Would have been so easy and quick to lean over and kiss him. Make up. Or at least attempt to. DaVon probably thought the same thing, and leaned toward my face.

"Don't."

"What?" He smiled. "Six years with someone. You think about things."

Five months wasn't enough time. Memories started flooding back. How perfect it was in the beginning. Vacations. Family reunions. Arguments. Make ups. DaVon's spot below his navel that made him lose it, and how he, in turn, would ravage me like I was all he needed and wanted to be satisfied in life.

Stop. Kenny.

I'm supposed to be celebrating Ricky's birthday, not going down memory lane.

Besides, there's a reason we're no longer together. And I needed to remind him.

"How are your babies? Your wife?"

"Smooth like gravy."

"That's is?"

"It's cool. Don't worry about it. Unless you still care."

I did. As a human being. I couldn't exactly turn off six years of feelings overnight, though I was slowly getting there. Make that five. The last year, when the paternity suits started popping up and I supported and believed him, made me question if what I'd had was real. When the first DNA came back conclusive, that DaVon had indeed become the father of a little girl with Miss Mexico wannabe, Vanessa Flores, and had conceived the child sometimes during the fourth year of our relationship, I realized that not everything that seemed perfect was. Not that I'd been one of those people with their heads in the clouds, thinking that relationships were all sunshine and happiness, eternal blue skies, white picked fences, and matching Volvo wagons. Still, I'd had some expectations that people were who they said they were, that some sense of honesty and integrity existed, that without believing in the potential and good side of people what good was it to give your heart to someone. Vanessa Flores Holloway would now have DaVon's demons and issues to deal with. He'd chosen which side of the fence he wanted to live on, and apparently Vanessa's grass was greener than mine. Her bed, apparently, was more comfortable than mine.

The bartender tapped DaVon's credit card on the counter and nodded. Declined. I reached for my wallet. Grabbed another twenty. Always to the rescue for DaVon. Always to the rescue for everyone, it seemed. In relationships. With students at the university. For my mentees and their families at Big Brothers/Big Sisters. My family. Everyone always needed something, it seemed. At times, I wished I could just let it flow and not care about the consequences or outcome of situations – even for myself.

"Thanks for the drink, DaVon," I said, hoping he would catch the sarcasm in my voice. The nerve offering to buy drinks with a bad credit card.

"I'll spot you next time."

"Won't be a next time."

"We'll see."

"Paper or plastic?" I sang and smiled my famous last words to DaVon five months earlier.

DaVon snickered, got up and walked through the crowd, all eyes on him. Found his friends. Our friends. A bunch of gay firefighters and gay law enforcement agents, their partners, and the teeny-bopper boys who didn't know their hip-hop night was cancelled for 80s night. I watched DaVon all the way to the dance floor. Why he was out, past midnight, when he had a wife and baby at home was a mystery to me. But not mine to solve. I finished the newest Mojito in two swallows, left a few dollars for the bartender, and got up to leave. I wasn't ready to see DaVon. And dancing with him and Carlos and Ricky would have reminded me of our good old days hanging out as a foursome. Would have reminded me of our trips together. Our dinner parties and dancing with the other couple on the backyard patio. The comfortable and friendly way we used to connect. Definitely not ready for friendship with DaVon.

Outside the club, the winds were picking up and a light drizzle was coating the winter air. I handed my valet slip to the attendant and waited for my SUV. I noticed my Heineken friend, with two of his boys, standing next to the bar entrance smoking cigarettes. He made some hand signal, looked like gang signs. Couldn't have been signaling to me. I don't do gang boys. I turned away and looked down the street for my SUV to arrive. Felt a tap on my shoulder.

"What's crackin' playa?" Heineken man asked. Cute boy-man voice, with a tinge of East L.A. I guess he was straight-up East L.A. as he told me earlier. "Why didn't you come here when I called you?"

"I didn't know you were talking to me," I said and smiled. "Sorry."

"Where you going so soon?"

"Home. I work in the morning and I've had enough celebration to last me 'til Memorial Day."

"Too bad you're leaving," he said. "I was gonna get your Cuba Libre. To thank you for the drink earlier that you got me. That was real nice of you. Half these mofos cheap and won't offer you anything."

"No problem," I said. "It's cool. Thanks."

He pulled out his cell, a Treo.

"Can I holla at you sometimes then?"

"Me? Please."

"Why not?"

"Uh, it was just a drink. No need for future conversation."

"Dude, don't leave me hanging out here in front of my boy," he said and winked.

"Come on playa. Don't leave me hanging."

I laughed. Well, smiled a little. OK. A lot. This Usher-slash-Daddy Yankeedressed Latino kid was hitting on me. Was flattering. Maybe I passed for a teeny-bopper. NOT. Well, it wasn't my intention. I had on my favorite True Religion jeans, a chocolate brown and light blue t-shirt, and white and blue sneakers. And now, he just pulled up his

pink polo just a bit. Knew he wasn't itching. Just showing off that young, tight torso and that sexy thin trail of hair going down... Stop. Kenny. Now.

"Here's my card," I handed him my card from the university. The way professionals and grown up did it. Wanted to see his reaction. See if he would run away once he realized I was way out his target demographics. He read my card out loud.

"Kenneth Kane. Director of Campus Activities & Student Leadership, California University, East Los Angeles," he said. "Damn. You got a good job. A real job."

"Yeah, a real job," I said and laughed. "But I go by Kenny, not Kenneth."

"Cool. Kenny," he said and put out his hand. Did the three-part Chicano-style handshake. "Jeremy Lopez."

"The Mexican-Dominican from East L.A., right?"

"Yeah, how'd you know?"

"Duh, you told me at the bar, remember? You're straight-up Latino... East L.A. born and bred. The military dad from New York. And the handshake confirmed it."

"Yeah, right," Jeremy said and put out his cigarette on the sidewalk. "Where you stay?"

"MPK."

"Shut up."

"Excuse me?"

"We're like... neighbors. That's cool."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"So I can holla and step to a brotha on a regular basis then?"

"Uh, I didn't say that."

"Well, I'm ready to jet from here, too," Jeremy said. "Can you give me a ride back to East Los?"

"What about your boys? Won't they be looking for you?" I hadn't known this boy, except for a brief, shallow conversation at the bar. I wasn't the type to pick up random people and give them rides. "If your friends..."

"Nacho, tell them I'm gone," Jeremy shouted to his friend standing solo by the bar entrance. "I got a ride home."

"You go boy," Nacho shouted back.

"Oh God, Jeremy," I said and looked around to see if any of my friends were within earshot. "Tell him it's not like that."

"Nacho, tell them I found him again." Jeremy laughed. "He taking me home."

"Nacho, tell them not like that," I said. "Just dropping him off."

"Claro qué sí," Nacho said and laughed.

The attendant pulled up to the sidewalk with my SUV. My baby. BMW X5. Silver with silver-gray leather interior, wood trim, panorama moonroof, and heated seats. A very-needed luxury on a cold February night in L.A.

"Damn, this your ride?" Jeremy asked, grill gleaming in the midnight air, cigarette steam still billowing from his mouth. "Take our picture, Nacho. Me and my Kenny."

Nacho put out his cigarette, and grabbed Jeremy's phone. Snapped two pictures of us next to my SUV. Felt real car show at a swap meet or something.

"Thank, man," Jeremy said and took his phone back. "And tell them what I'm riding in when you go back in, Nacho."

I tipped the valet attendant a five and got in my side of the SUV. Jeremy got in the passenger side and buckled up. Slipped into the warm leather seats like he belonged there. And I guess, in a way, he did belong.

