



# The Perfect Accomplice

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** Behind immaculate hedges, in a neighborhood where nothing can seemingly go wrong, wealthy housewives are turning up killed, with nothing to connect them. As Jessie digs deeper, something feels rotten with this perfect community, and she has a nagging sense that the answer may be hiding in plain sight....

**Total Pages (Source):** 39

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:04 am*

Nikki Fleetwood knew she was being silly.

She had entered this mansion hundreds of times and without any issues. There was no legitimate reason for her to be skittish. And yet, for some unexplainable reason, things felt off today.

She slid the key in the lock, opened the door quietly, cringing at the slight creaking sound it made, and then locked it behind her. She walked along the long, marble-floored hallway, hearing her flats echo with each step. She made a cursory pass through the living room and kitchen, even though she was certain that the person she was looking for wouldn't be there at this early hour of the morning.

The lights were on in both rooms, which was a surprise to her. Normally, every light in this home was diligently turned off when not in use. As Nikki passed through the breakfast room, she arrived at the sliding glass door that led to the backyard and caught a glimpse of her reflection.

The image was distorted by the sunlight streaming in, but she still recognized herself. Her already pale skin was nearly translucent in the glass, and the sun made her blondish-white hair glow like a night light.

She slid the door open and stepped outside. The chill in the air was more pronounced here in the back. The front of the house faced the street and was somewhat protected against the elements. But the backyard of the Hollywood Hills mansion was exposed to the whipping canyon winds, which snuck into the opening of her jacket near the collar and cut through her like a knife, making her whole body shiver.

She put her hand to the collar and pinched it tight to keep the wind at bay as she walked along the edge of the pool to the guest house, the most likely remaining spot to find her. She noticed the powerful breeze causing ripples in the water of the pool, almost creating a mini-wave.

She had just arrived at the guest house door when a cloud passed in front of the sun, darkening the canyon and making it suddenly seem ten degrees colder than the listed 47. Nikki knew that she had gotten soft in the two years since she left Milwaukee, but she didn't feel bad about it. One of the reasons she'd moved to Los Angeles was for the weather. And even if today was nothing compared to a Wisconsin winter, she still hated it.

Before speaking, she knocked on the door softly, as she'd been asked to do in situations like this. Only then did she call out.

"Erin, it's Nikki," she said. "Just checking in for the day. Can I get you anything?"

Her boss, well-known socialite and recent best-selling author Erin Podemski, liked to start writing early each morning and had usually been at it for a couple of hours before Nikki arrived at nine. In fact, she usually timed her first writing break for right around Nikki's arrival, so she could brief her on the plan for the day.

But not always. Sometimes, she got caught up in a chapter and lost track of time. That's why Nikki could never be sure of the situation when she arrived to work. Was Erin puttering in the kitchen, thinking about her next chapter? Was she taking a mini-dance break to get the blood pumping after sitting for hours on end? Or was she in the guest house office, typing away?

It was always a mystery. And while Erin was fairly easygoing, Nikki still entered the house on eggshells every morning because she didn't want to be responsible for interrupting her boss when she was in the middle of a particularly fertile creative

moment.

But Nikki didn't know what to make of this. There was no answer to her announcing her arrival. She almost always at least got a "give me a minute." After waiting several more seconds, she knocked again, this time a little louder.

"Erin, are you in there? Can I open the door? I just want to get today's table of contents."

That was what Erin liked to call the schedule for the day. But there was no response, so Nikki made the command decision to open the door. It was locked.

That was especially odd. Erin only kept the door locked after she was done with her writing session for the day. Once she began the next morning she kept it unlocked so that Nikki could come and go without needing to be let in.

She turned and looked back at the house. For the first time, another possibility occurred to her. The only other time that Erin had left the guest house door locked without notice since Nikki had started working here three months ago was when she got the flu and was too sick to even call, much less get out of bed.

Nikki hadn't thought to check the bedroom that day and had eventually just left the house, confused. But she knew better now. She turned and headed back to the sliding door, again noting the ripples of water on the surface of the pool. Only this time, she noticed something else that she'd missed before.

From this direction, she saw the chaise lounge chairs next to the pool. Erin was lying on one. Though the woman looked relaxed in her sweatpants and cashmere sweater, Nikki was still unsettled.

It was just too cold to be relaxing by the pool. Plus, this was prime writing time.

Nikki had never known her boss to just kick back like this in the middle of the morning. And lastly, why hadn't she said anything? Erin must have seen her walk all the way around to the guest house. Why didn't she call out to her?

"Morning," Nikki said, delicately skirting the edge of the pool as she walked over. "Not feeling inspired so far today?"

The joke fell flat as Erin didn't respond at all. As she got closer, Nikki realized that the woman had fallen asleep. Her eyes were closed, and she wasn't stirring at all.

"Aren't you cold out here—" she started to ask as she arrived at the chaise, but what she saw made her stop mid-sentence. Now that she was closer, she noticed that Erin's face was ashen and pimply, and her limbs looked oddly stiff. There was a thick ugly bluish-purple bruise around her entire neck. And she didn't just look like she was resting. The angle of her body and her general limpness suggested something far worse.

"Erin?" Nikki whispered, feeling the panic rising in her chest.

Though it terrified her to do so, she reached out and shook her boss's shoulder, hoping that the woman would startle awake and make her feel like an idiot. Erin, frozen to the touch, slumped heavily over to the right, nearly falling off the chaise entirely.

Nikki, whose consciousness seemed to leave her body, heard a bloodcurdling scream. It took her a moment to realize that it was coming from her.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:04 am*

Jessie Hunt glanced at the clock and immediately knew she was going to get chastised for it.

“Somewhere more important to be?” Dr. Janice Lemmon asked sharply. “I thought you had significant stuff to share with me today.”

The psychiatrist, who was nearly seventy, might have seemed harmless, with her diminutive frame, thick glasses, and tight, little gray ringlets of hair, but she made up for her appearance with her forceful demeanor.

“I do,” Jessie said. “Sorry. I just promised Ryan and Captain Parker that I’d be in before 9:30 today and I’m getting anxious.”

“It’s barely after nine,” Lemmon noted, “and you’ve already told me about Hannah and Kat, so we’re well along. I think you’ll get there on time.”

It was true. In the half-hour that they’d been talking, Jessie had already updated her psychiatrist on the status of her relationships with her younger half-sister, Hannah Dorsey, and with her best friend, Katherine “Kat” Gentry. Luckily, in both of those instances, things were going reasonably well. In fact, she was throwing a long-delayed engagement party for Kat and her fiancé, Mitch, this weekend.

Hannah, with whom she shared a father—the now dead serial killer Xander Thurman—was finishing up her first semester as a freshman at UC Irvine. Considering everything she’d been through, the fact that she was attending college at all, much less at such a prestigious institution, was remarkable.

What was less remarkable was Hannah's level of communication since starting school. Jessie, who was also Hannah's guardian until she turned eighteen earlier this year, had been expecting a drop off in calls and texts. But even though Irvine was less than an hour away from Jessie's Mid-Wilshire-area Los Angeles home, it was as if her sister was at a college across the country for as often as she saw or heard from her.

Still, Hannah's grades were good, and when Jessie could get her on the phone, her sister sounded happy and healthy. In light of the horrors she'd experienced in the last three years, that was about all Jessie could realistically hope for.

And Kat, despite her own recent challenges, seemed to be thriving. Less than six months ago, she had been tortured within an inch of her life by a paid assassin named Ash Pierce. But now she was seemingly physically and (mostly) emotionally recovered. It was obvious that she was still working through some PTSD, but as a former Army Ranger injured in Afghanistan, it wasn't always clear which trauma she was dealing with.

Luckily Kat had turned much of her focus to her upcoming spring wedding to her fiancé, Mitch Connor. She'd asked Jessie to be her maid of honor, a responsibility she was happy to take on if it lightened her friend's load.

The one significant relationship that Dr. Lemmon hadn't pressed her on yet, the most complicated right now, was with Jessie's husband, Ryan. Detective Ryan Hernandez wasn't just her spouse of seven months, he was also her co-worker. Ryan ran Homicide Special Section, or HSS, the specialized unit of the LAPD that focused on cases with high profiles or intense media scrutiny—typically involving multiple victims or serial killers. Jessie was the unit's criminal profiler.

But to her surprise, Lemmon went in a different direction. "What's the deal with Costabile? You haven't brought him up recently."

“That’s because there’s not much to tell,” Jessie said, relieved at her own words.

“That’s not what you said two weeks ago,” Lemmon reminded her.

The doctor was right. When Jessie had learned that former LAPD sergeant Hank Costabile had been released from prison on a technicality, it was all she could do not to lose it. After all, this was a corrupt cop who, eighteen months ago, tried to impede her investigation of his former boss, Commander Mike Butters, who was paying an underage porn actress for sex. When that didn’t work, he tried to have her killed. That effort failed as well, and he was convicted for the attempt. But a complication involving inadmissible evidence had led to him being freed on the day before Thanksgiving.

”I’ll admit that I was in a bad place when I first heard the news,” Jessie acknowledged, ”But Chief Decker has been great. Remember that he used to run Central Station and oversaw HSS back when all this first happened. Now that he runs all of LAPD, he has the resources to keep tabs on Costabile, and that’s exactly what he’s been doing. He has units tailing the guy 24/7.”

“And that has set your mind at ease?” Lemmon asked.

”Somewhat,” Jessie said. ”It helps that Costabile hasn’t done anything out of the ordinary since his release, although admittedly, he could just be biding his time. More reassuring is what everyone in the know has been telling me: that the man was originally set to twenty years to life behind bars. He got a literal get-out-of-jail card. He’d have to be a complete idiot to risk that to get back at me. And whatever else Hank Costabile is, he’s not an idiot.”

“Well, then I guess we can cross that concern off the list,” Lemmon said, looking unconvinced. “It seems like everyone you consider a risk is turning over a new leaf these days.”



Jessie knew who the therapist was sarcastically referencing: Ash Pierce. The assassin who'd tortured and tried to kill Kat had, until recently, been in a coma after injuries she sustained in a second, subsequent attempt on both Kat and Hannah's lives. But she had woken up suddenly two weeks ago, claiming no memory of her past crimes.

Pierce said that she remembered her old career, working for the military in a clandestine unit known for taking out enemy operatives, but that everything after that was hazy. The memory loss conveniently included her entire life of crime as a hitwoman. Jessie, like Kat, was dubious about the woman's transformation. And from her tone, it was clear that Lemmon was equally skeptical.

"I think we both know that the person you're referencing has some serious credibility issues," Jessie noted. "Luckily, the California Department of Corrections agrees. She's still at Cedars-Sinai hospital, recovering from her coma under strict guard. But no one seems to be buying what she's selling. She's supposed to be transferred to the prison hospital at Twin Towers next week."

"You don't think there's any chance that she's telling the truth?" Lemmon asked.

"I don't, and neither does Kat, but we're not the experts that you are," Jessie replied. "Maybe you should have a session with her."

"You think she'd go for that?" Lemmon wondered.

"Not if she's smart," Jessie mused. "Besides, my concern is with the other incarcerated killer who's been in the news lately."

"You're referring to Mr. Haddonfield, I gather?"

"I am," Jessie confirmed. "I have to say, he's been causing me more sleepless nights than Costabile and Pierce put together."

“Because of the manifesto?”

Jessie nodded. Lemmon was referencing Mark Haddonfield and what the media had dubbed The Manifesto. Haddonfield was a former UCLA student and Jessie Hunt uberfan/obsessive whose enthusiasm for her curdled when he couldn't get into a seminar she taught on profiling at the school. Somehow, that setback, combined with an already borderline personality, set him off.

Haddonfield decided that if he couldn't become Jessie's protégé, he would become her nemesis, and went about it by murdering multiple people that Jessie had previously rescued from serial killers she had tracked and caught. Ultimately, he came after Jessie herself when she was hospitalized after suffering a serious head injury. But she managed, with the assistance of both Ryan and Dr. Lemmon, to stop him before he could complete his mission. He was currently being held at downtown L.A.'s Twin Towers Correctional Facility, awaiting trial for his crimes.

Unfortunately, before he was caught, he'd written a long screed, which he timed to post online on Thanksgiving day. It was an unhinged description of how Jessie had wronged him, why he had to punish her, and how he'd gone about it. Then it turned into a call to action, asking for someone to take up the mantle of vengeance and pick up where he'd left off.

Authorities had discovered the manifesto within hours of its posting and managed to get it pulled down almost everywhere. But before that happened, there was no way to know how many people had seen and embraced his entreaty. In the two weeks since the manifesto posted, no crimes associated with any of Jessie's past cases had been committed. But that didn't set her mind at ease. Someone might just be taking their time.

“Yes, because of the manifesto,” Jessie finally answered.

“Do you want to talk about that?” Lemmon asked.

“Not really,” Jessie said. “There’s not anything I can do about it right now. And as long as nobody’s acted on it, I’d rather keep my attention on issues I can actually impact positively.”

“That’s a healthy attitude,” Lemmon agreed. “So which issue would you like to tackle in our remaining time?”

Jessie sighed.

“Well, we’ve been dancing around the Ryan stuff,” she conceded. “maybe we should just dive in.”

“I’m all ears,” Lemmon said, leaning back in her chair. “What ‘stuff’ are we talking about? The boss stuff or the trust stuff?”

“Neither actually,” Jessie told her. “Since he resigned as captain of Central Station and returned his attention exclusively to leading HSS, the boss/employee dynamic hasn’t been a problem. He runs the unit, but Captain Parker has final say so there’s not much friction there. And the trust thing—we’re working through it.”

The “trust” issue that Lemmon mentioned was in regard to an incident last spring, when Ryan kept secret a threat from a killer that he thought might stress Jessie out unnecessarily, especially since the killer had already been caught and he thought it was just empty talk. Unfortunately, the threat was real and almost resulted in the deaths of Hannah and Kat. It had taken a long time for him to convince her that he could be trusted to be straight with her, even when he thought it might be detrimental to her emotional health. In fact, there were times when she still had her doubts that he’d completely changed his stripes, but he was clearly trying, and it felt petty to keep holding it over him.

“What then?” Lemmon asked.

“Do you remember how I told you that he’d expressed interest in having kids and that I was. . . less enthusiastic.”

“Of course,” Lemmon said. “I know that he wanted to have children with his previous wife but that in six years of marriage it never happened.”

“Correct,” Jessie said. “He’s told me that, in retrospect, he views that as a blessing. He didn’t want to bring children into what ultimately became a broken home. But’s that’s made him even more committed to having them now, since he doesn’t have the doubts about us that he did with his ex.”

“But you’ve expressed reservations in light of your recent health issues, among other things,” Lemmon recalled.

“That’s right,” Jessie replied. “You know all about the physical concerns I’ve had in the last few years. Since I started working as a profiler, it feels like I’ve sustained injuries to every part of my body, especially my head.”

Jessie didn’t need to repeat the details for Lemmon. The doctor was well aware of the multiple concussions Jessie had suffered, the last of which ultimately led to brain surgery ten weeks ago.

“But that’s not your primary source of reticence if I recall,” Lemmon prodded.

Jessie could tell the doctor wasn’t going to let her off the hook on this one. Truth be told, she didn’t really want her to.

“No,” she conceded, “there’s the standard concern I’m sure lots of women in my position face. I’m just not sure I’m ready to put my career on hold to have a baby. But

we both know that's not what's really holding me back."

"The miscarriage," Lemmon said.

Jessie nodded, though that simple phrase failed to convey the gravity of what had happened. Barely three years ago, when Jessie was married to her previous husband, Kyle Voss, she got pregnant and was excited about it.

What she only learned later was that Kyle was a cheating, murderous sociopath who killed his mistress and tried to frame Jessie for it. However, before that revelation, when he had learned about pregnancy, Kyle had secretly poisoned Jessie as means of ending it. It turned out that he didn't consider himself the fathering type, and that was his way of handling it.

Jessie had struggled with the pain of losing the baby for months before she discovered her husband's true nature and what he'd done. Ultimately, she'd barely survived his attempt to frame and subsequently kill her. But she wasn't sure her feelings toward motherhood had survived the experience along with her.

"I've pushed dealing with what happened back then into such a hidden place that I'm not sure I can even access those feelings anymore," she admitted. "Until I can work through what happened to me, I'm not sure I have any business being a parent, which makes the choice I made recently a strange one."

"What choice is that?" Lemmon asked.

"I went to see my OB/GYN earlier this week to see if I'm even able to have children after all the physical trauma I've suffered lately. I figured, why go through the emotional rollercoaster if it's a moot point?"

"And when do you expect the results?" Lemmon asked.

“By the end of the week,” Jessie said.

“It’s already Thursday,” Lemmon noted.

“I’m well aware,” Jessie replied.

That was an understatement. The truth was that every time her phone rang over the last few days, she’d gotten a small pit in her stomach as she checked who it was from. And every time it turned out not to be from her doctor, she experienced an odd combination of relief and disappointment.

“So here’s the big question,” Lemmon said, “if you are able to conceive, what then?”

“I guess then I’m out of excuses. I’ll have to deal with this stuff for real.”

“Don’t you think you should be dealing with it anyway?” Lemmon nudged. “Like you said, you’ve kept your feelings about what happened to you buried for a long time. Maybe that’s something you should consider discussing with your husband?”

“Probably,” Jessie conceded reluctantly.

“And maybe, in anticipation of that discussion, we try to unearth those feelings here?”

Jessie shrugged. “I guess as long as I’m here, we may as well not waste the time.”

“Okay then,” Lemmon said, leaning forward. “I want you to go back to the moment when you first learned you were pregnant three years ago. Do you remember how—”

Jessie’s phone, which was on silent, buzzed softly. She tried to ignore it but saw that Lemmon had noticed it too.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the psychiatrist. “People know they’re not to contact me until after 9:30. I guess someone forgot.”

Lemmon’s eyebrows rose slightly.

“Or,” she said, reading Jessie’s mind, “someone thought it was important enough to reach out even though you specifically said not to.”

“There’s that possibility,” Jessie admitted.

“Go ahead and check,” Lemmon said. “I’ll never get your full attention unless you know one way or another.”

“Thanks,” Jessie replied, quickly pulling out the phone and looking at the screen.

She didn’t mention that some small part of her was relieved to at least temporarily delay facing the emotional minefield this discussion would unearth.

“It’s Ryan,” she said. “He knows where I am, and he wouldn’t call unless he had a good reason. Do you mind?”

Lemmon obviously did but shook her head that she didn’t. Jessie answered the phone.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your session,” he said urgently, “but a case just came in—a murder in the Hollywood Hills— and Parker wants you and me to take it. Are you able to cut things short?”

“Sure,” Jessie answered, not looking up to see Lemmon’s expression. “What happened?”

“I don’t know the details yet, but Parker said Chief Decker specifically requested us for this one, so it’s got to be big.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes,” Jessie said.

She stood up as she hung up the phone. Lemmon watched her with impressively unjudgmental eyes.

“You’re not going to ream me out?” Jessie asked.

“You do what you need to do,” Lemmon said gently. “But just remember, these other issues aren’t going away on their own. At some point, hopefully soon, you need to make your emotional well-being a priority. Otherwise, you won’t be much good to anybody.”

“Message received,” Jessie said as she headed for the door.

She really did have mixed emotions about leaving. She genuinely wanted to unshackle herself from the burden she’d been carrying all these years.

But someone had been murdered, and that, like always, took precedence.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Kat Gentry sat in her car, her binoculars trained on the motel room across the parking lot, waiting for something juicy to happen.

As a private detective who had spent many long boring hours in cars watching the doors of motel rooms, hoping for a dramatic moment, she'd learned to temper her expectations. More often than not, nothing happened, and she often had to shut her surveillance down and try again later.

But this time felt different. It was fairly unusual for a bank vice president to check himself into a motel at nine in the morning, especially a cheap Hollywood motel, especially when he lived in the same city as the motel. But that's exactly what Craig Hartley had done fifteen minutes ago.

It was fairly suspicious behavior, which may have been why Hartley's wife, Claire, had hired Kat yesterday. She feared her husband was cheating, and based on his recent, unexplained credit card charges, the lingering scent of perfume on his skin when he came home at night, and what Claire described to Kat as his "all-around furtiveness," she might have real cause for concern. This morning motel check-in certainly didn't make him look good.

Kat re-adjusted in her seat as she settled in, unsure if or when a companion for Craig might arrive. This wasn't the classiest case she'd ever handled. She preferred ones that dealt with corporate espionage or embezzlement, but sometimes infidelity paid more. The client often had intense emotions and was willing to pay big for results. And right now, Kat could use the money.

After all, weddings didn't pay for themselves. And hers was imminent. In April, just

four months from now, she would be marrying Mitch Connor. A few years ago, she hadn't imagined that she'd ever get married, much less to a warm-hearted Goliath.

After all, the injuries she sustained as an Army Ranger in Afghanistan didn't leave her looking like a beauty pageant contestant. They included multiple facial burn marks and a long scar that ran vertically down her left cheek from just below her eye, all the result of an IED. She knew those weren't exactly aphrodisiacs, and she'd accepted that long-term romance might never happen for her.

But that was before she met Mitch while helping Jessie out on a case. He'd been a San Bernardino County Sheriff's deputy based in Lake Arrowhead, a mountain town eighty miles northeast of Los Angeles.

They'd hit it off and started dating long distance. Eventually Mitch left his deputy job and moved here, where they got an apartment together a few months ago. Until recently, Mitch had been working as a movie studio security guard while he waited for his approval to join the LAPD. The guard job didn't pay great, and the stress of making the payments for all the assorted wedding costs was weighing on both of them.

But just this week, Mitch had learned that he'd been approved to join the force and would start at the beginning of the new year, in just three weeks. When he'd told her, his face was red and bashful, like a shy child telling a parent about the "A" he'd gotten on a test he thought he'd fail. It was adorable, as was he. The expression of giddy excitement had rarely left his face in the last few days.

It was great news, but news wasn't money, which was why Kat was sitting outside the Sunset Strip Motor Lodge at 9:17 on a Thursday morning, hoping that illicit carnal activity was imminent so she could record evidence of it. She got amped for a moment when she saw movement behind the curtains, but calmed down when she realized that it was only Hartley pulling them closed. By itself, the act meant little

other than that he wanted privacy. The question was, how much and for what?

She readjusted the binoculars, then eased the car seat back a smidge. Her back was hurting as a result of the unpleasant time she'd spent in the company of Ash Pierce earlier this year, something she didn't like to think about.

In fact, she immediately forced her thoughts elsewhere, choosing to focus on the party that Jessie and Ryan were hosting this weekend. It was both an early holiday party and a belated engagement party for her and Mitch. Kat was excited for the evening.

It would allow her to bask in the romance a little, but also reconnect with folks she hadn't seen in a while, including the HSS gang, some of whom she'd gotten close to in recent months. Plus Jessie's little sister, Hannah, would be coming back from college for the event, and had promised to make something special, which was always welcome. The girl could really cook.

If she allowed herself to step back and look at the big picture, Kat had to admit that things were going about as well as she could hope these days. There was only one fly in the ointment, an unspoken sword of Damocles forever hovering over her head. And no matter how many happy thoughts she fixated on, it was still there, lingering patiently, waiting to drop.

Kat's brooding was interrupted by movement at the motel. Walking up the stairs that led to Craig Hartley's second-floor room was a skinny young woman with blonde hair. Despite the cold weather, she wore only a blue denim jacket over her pink top, along with a black miniskirt that exposed her pale legs. Through the binoculars, Kat could see that they were littered with small bruises.

She switched from the binoculars to her phone camera, turned on the video, and zoomed in as the woman stopped in front of Hartley's door and knocked. It only took

moments for Hartley to answer. When he did, just his face was visible. There was no way to tell if he was still wearing the suit he'd arrived in or if he had changed into something more casual. He opened the door just enough for the woman to enter, then quickly closed it behind her.

Kat kept recording for a few seconds just in case there was an unexpected surprise. But when it became clear that the woman wouldn't be leaving right away, Kat shut off the camera and transitioned into active mode.

She got out of the car, shoved her phone in her coat pocket, and zipped it up to her neck before pulling the hood over her head. After locking the car, she walked quickly but calmly across the parking lot, making sure that the high-tech microphone in the inner pocket of her coat was secure.

She hurried up the stairs of the motel, ignoring the lingering aches in her hip, back, and shoulder, all leftover gifts from Ash Pierce's months-old torture session. Once up the stairs, she moved past Hartley's room, 206, to the one next door, 207. She pulled out the key to the room, which she had called and reserved from the motel office minutes after seeing Hartley check into 206, and stepped inside.

Then she locked the door and, without turning on the lights, got to work. If she was going to get her payday, she had a lot to do and quite possibly not much time to do it. The down payment for her honeymoon might only be one thin wall away.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Central Station was bustling.

When the elevator door opened, Jessie had to move quickly to dodge three people who rushed in as she was getting out.

She walked down the long corridor that led to the station's giant bullpen, trying to stay out of the way of numerous officers who were all moving with brisk purpose. At one point she almost collided into the glass doors that led to the bullpen. She took the advantage of the accidental opportunity to look at her reflection and make sure she was presentable.

She was wearing tan slacks that complimented her athletic frame and a long-sleeved black turtleneck that she hoped would protect her from this morning's chill. Her shoulder-length brown hair was tied back in a ponytail and her green eyes looked alert. She wore utilitarian brown loafers that added a half inch to her already formidable five foot ten height.

Satisfied that she wouldn't embarrass HSS with her attire, she pushed open the glass doors and entered the bullpen, where she found more of the same chaos from the hallway. She tapped the shoulder of a young female officer nearby.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Big protest in Pershing Square," the officer responded. "Something to do with a homeless encampment that was attacked by a group of hooligans overnight. The protesters have spilled out onto neighboring streets, causing massive traffic issues. All area stations are being mobilized for crowd control."

The officer scurried off, and Jessie continued on, darting and weaving to steer clear of the other cops rushing about. When she got to HSS's section of the bullpen, walled off by a wobbly square of sad, thin, fabric partitions, she found it virtually empty. None of the unit's detectives were anywhere to be found.

"They were all called in to help with the protest," a familiar voice said from behind her.

She turned around to find her husband and co-worker, Detective Ryan Hernandez, standing there with coffee in each hand and a smile on his face. The sight of him, as usual, made her melt a little bit.

His warm brown eyes, shy grin, and adorable dimples—the features that had first attracted her to him—were on full display. So too were some of his other attributes, which included a square jaw and a well-muscled, two-hundred pound, six-foot-tall body that strained at his dress shirt.

"Everyone?" she asked.

"Yep," he said, handing her one of the coffees. "This one's yours—cream and two sugars. Susannah and Sam just wrapped up a case last night and Karen and Nettles have a suspect in interrogation that they figured could sit on ice for a bit. Parker decided it was all hands on deck."

Susannah was tough but volatile Detective Susannah Valentine. Sam, formerly of Vice, was the newest member of HSS, Detective Sam Goodwin. Karen was Detective Karen Bray, the only parent among the team, at least for now. And Nettles was Detective Jim Nettles, a long-time street cop who had only recently been bumped up to detective and was the veteran of the group. Along with Ryan, they made up HSS's detective squad.

“All hands except for you and me,” Jessie noted, taking the coffee and giving the man who’d secured it a kiss on the cheek.

“That’s right,” Ryan said. “Apparently whatever this case is was enough to keep me from helping out and asking you to leave your session early.”

“You still don’t have any more details?” Jessie wondered.

“Parker wanted to hold off until you were here, so she didn’t have to repeat herself.”

There was a slight edge in his voice, but he said nothing more. Jessie could guess why. When he’d been captain of Central Station, before he’d decided to return to HSS full-time and recommended Gaylene Parker as his replacement, he would have shared whatever he knew as soon as he knew it. But Parker liked to hold things closer to the vest, doling out details only when she deemed it appropriate. Ryan, as a one-time captain and current head of HSS, clearly chafed at not getting more preferential treatment, but he tried not to show it.

“Well then,” Jessie replied, “let’s let her know that I’m here.”

They started toward Parker’s—formerly Ryan’s—office but had only gotten a few steps when the captain opened the door and came out. The woman exuded an authority that was at odds with her physical bearing.

Though the forty-four-year-old mother of two wasn’t physically imposing, she had presence. Rising up from a street officer to an undercover detective who often posed as a prostitute, she’d eventually been promoted to head of the Vice unit, a job she’d held for four years until getting the nod as captain.

“Shaniqua told me you had arrived,” Parker said in response to the Jessie and Ryan’s surprised looks. Officer Shaniqua George, Captain Parker’s administrative aide, sat

right outside her door.

“I thought I’d save time by coming out to meet you,” the captain continued. “As you’ve surely heard, we’ve got a bit of a crisis going on in Pershing Square that I need to keep on top of. But Chief Decker called me just before all hell broke loose, so I can’t let his request slip through the cracks either. Walk with me.”

“Where are we headed?” Ryan asked as they fell into line beside her.

“The HSS Research office,” Parker said. “I figured that you’re probably going to want their help on this one, so I’d give everyone the skinny all at once. As you know, I hate repeating myself, and the case I have for you is fast-moving.”

They moved down the hallway until they got to the door of Research, which was closed. Parker knocked once and opened it without waiting for a response. Inside, the two researchers turned around to face them, both startled by the unexpected arrival of so many bigwigs.

The head of the two-person department, Jamil Winslow, pushed his glasses up his nose. Small and skinny despite a recent, aggressive workout regimen, Jamil, twenty-five, was the unit’s resident genius. He was capable of filtering through massive databases, sorting surveillance video into manageable buckets, or making complex financial records understandable, all seemingly in the blink of an eye.

His social skills didn’t always match his intellectual ones, which is where his sole employee came in. Beth Ryerson, also twenty-five, was as adept with people as Jamil was with numbers. Her perpetually chill, friendly vibe was the complete inverse of Jamil’s constant, jittery intensity.

An unfussily attractive former college volleyball star at UC Santa Barbara, she was over six feet tall, dwarfing even Jessie. And while she might not be a full-on savant



like her supervisor, she had an incredibly sharp mind, which people tended to underestimate because of her looks.

“Hello, Captain Parker,” Jamil said with amusing formality. “Detective Hernandez, Ms. Hunt, what can we do for you?”

“HSS just got assigned a new case,” Parker replied without preamble. “It comes directly from your old captain. Chief Decker, who personally requested all of your services. I wanted to fill everyone in together.”

“We’re all ears,” Ryan said, leaning against one of the extra desks in the office.

“We just got word about a half hour ago about the death of a woman named Erin Podemski. Decker described her as a high-profile socialite and bestselling author. Her body was found this morning by her pool at her Hollywood Hills home, seemingly strangled. The well-known celebrity angle alone might be enough to justify HSS’s involvement, but there’s more.”

Everyone waited silently for Parker to continue. She took a moment to pull out her phone and scroll to a page, which she referred to as she proceeded.

“Apparently another woman was found strangled yesterday morning, also at her Hollywood Hills home. Her name was Sydney Ashe.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell,” Ryan said.

“That’s not surprising,” Parker said. “According to Decker, she was a stay-at-home mom. But you might have heard of her husband, Gabriel Ashe.”

“The producer?” Jamil asked, suddenly animated.

“That’s correct,” Parker answered.

“Who’s Gabriel Ashe?” Beth wanted to know.

“He produced the Stars on Fire films, based on the book series.”

“That sounds familiar,” Jessie said.

”It should,” Jamil replied, sounding borderline offended. ”It”s a highly regarded sci-fi series. There have been ten books, and they’ve been made into three movies. All of them were hits.”

He looked around expectantly.

“Sorry, Jamil,” Beth said apologetically. “You know science fiction isn’t really my thing.”

”Regardless of how well each of us knows these movies,” Parker interceded, ”apparently many folks do. And the wife of the film”s producer being murdered has generated media attention. Now that we have two women of note killed in the same way in the same general neighborhood, Decker said it was a clear case for HSS. And he specifically requested that Detective Hernandez take it, along with our unit”s profiler, assuming you feel up to the task, Jessie.”

“I do.”

“Great,” Parker said. “He also thought, and I agree, that while you two go to the Podemski crime scene, Jamil and Beth could begin collecting everything that Hollywood Station has on the Ashe murder so that you can hit the ground running.”

“We’re on it,” Jamil said, already punching a request into the system on his keyboard.

“So are we,” Ryan said. “Just give us the Podemski address and we’ll head right over.”

“Good,” Parker said, her own fingers moving quickly through her phone. “I don’t need to tell you two, of all people, that Chief Decker is going to be expecting regular updates.”

Jessie took a sip of coffee to hide the smile playing at her lips. Parker was being diplomatic is using the term “regular updates.” Decker was going to be on her relentlessly, which meant she was going to keep the heat on them. This moment, before they could reasonably be expected to know anything, would probably be the least stressful part of their day.

“We should go now,” she said urgently.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Hannah didn't like how things were going.

As she studied herself in the women's room of the UC Irvine Student Center, she couldn't help but notice the dark shadows under her green eyes, which were the same shade as her sister, Jessie's. No amount of makeup seemed to help.

Despite that hint of distress, she still thought she looked good. At five foot nine, she was only an inch shorter than Jessie. Her blonde hair rested below her shoulders, vibrant and bouncy. Her daily workout routine had replaced the waifishness of high school with lean, sinewy strength. Those green eyes still flashed with confidence that some people claimed bordered on cockiness. But if anyone here at college knew her as well as her sister did, they'd pick up on the signs that something wasn't quite right.

Yes, she was doing great in her classes. She'd also made several friends, including her new roommate, Eliza, or Lizzie, as she preferred. And generally speaking, she'd avoided any unnecessary conflicts. But even before school started, and especially in the last few weeks, she'd felt a familiar restlessness in her chest. She knew the source of it, and she didn't like it.

A petite young woman with an oversized backpack almost half her size walked into the restroom and Hannah snapped out of her reverie. She smiled blandly at the girl who returned it before disappearing into a stall. Hannah gave herself one last once-over, then left.

She got into line at the Student Center's Starbucks to order a coffee she probably didn't need. She was already amped up for the day. As she waited for her turn, she thought back to the origin point of her edginess. It had really escalated two weeks

ago, after she helped Lizzie, who was getting nasty, threatening anonymous letters.

Lizzie knew who Hannah's profiler older sister was. She also knew that Hannah had worked over the summer at a detective agency and had asked for her help unearthing who was leaving the letters. Hannah eventually uncovered that it was Lizzie's own roommate, Bellamy. And not wanting her friend to deal with the painful fact that her emotional torturer had slept in the bed across from her for two months, Hannah blackmailed the offending girl into leaving school.

But ever since then, Hannah had retained the bitter aftertaste of the incident. She felt like Bellamy had gotten off easy. Some part of her regretted not making her pay a more substantial price for her cruelty. She'd had more than a few daydreams in which she waited until Bellamy was comfortably ensconced at her new college before sending the school's newspaper a copy of the recording she'd secretly made of Bellamy confessing to what she'd done.

Of course, that would mean unwanted, embarrassing attention for Lizzie. So Hannah reluctantly began looking for other ways to sate her desire for righteous vengeance against other wrongdoers. It was a dangerous road she had travelled down before, one that led to danger for others, and often herself. She knew she had to get a handle on it before it spiraled out of control again.

"You don't strike me as the type who needs caffeine to stay alert," someone said from right behind her, making her jump slightly.

Hannah turned around to find herself facing Finn Anderton. The guy was smiling at her cockily. He'd clearly just come inside as his dirty blond hair was casually windswept, and his cheeks were ruddy. His crooked grin highlighted his dimples. He shifted his feet, adjusting his wiry but powerfully built frame.

"I'm not sure you know me well enough to draw any conclusions about what 'type' I

am,” she replied coolly. “I mean, I believe this is the second time we’ve spoken.”

“But the first time was so memorable, it’s fixed in my brain,” he said. “It’s not everyday that some random gal comes to a party at my fraternity, fake flirts with me to get me alone, then proceeds to accuse me of leaving cruel, anonymous messages outside the dorm room of a girl I hardly know. It left an impression.”

Finn was still smiling enthusiastically, so it was apparent that he didn’t hold much of a grudge, although he probably had a right to. When she’d initially investigated the notes left for Lizzie and discovered that Finn went to her high school and was on the lacrosse team with her ex-boyfriend, she jumped to the conclusion that he might be targeting her on behalf of his old teammate.

In retrospect, cornering him in the laundry room of the frat house and alleging that he was terrorizing Lizzie was not the most well-thought-out plan. And as it turned out, Finn didn’t fit her preconception of the rowdy, party guy who would do something that cruel and not think twice about it. Now that she thought about it, she’d never really apologized to him.

“I might have been a little rash,” she conceded reluctantly.

“Keep going,” he said, with a wave of his hand.

“What exactly do you want me to say?” she demanded, unwilling to go beyond that.

“No, I mean, keep going forward. You’re next in line.”

She turned around and saw that she was almost next up to order. Feeling her cheeks redden, she took several steps forward. Finn moved forward too and leaned close so that only she could hear what he said next.

“How are you doing?” he asked quietly. His voice was laced with concern.

“What do you mean?” she asked, turning around halfway.

“No offense, but you look a little tired.”

Hannah stared at him, trying to hide her surprise. She was tired, mostly from a lack of sleep related to the restless pit she carried around in her gut, but she assumed that no one had noticed. She found herself mildly impressed.

“Too much late night studying, I guess,” she lied.

“I wouldn’t have pegged you for someone who needs to study that hard,” he told her. “Or are you going to call me out for drawing conclusions again?”

She knew that he was flirting but wasn’t sure how to respond. She’d bantered many a time to gain an advantage over someone she suspected of ill intent, but Finn seemed to be genuinely interested in chatting her up just for the pleasure of it. She was about to reply when she noticed an unusual absence. It occurred to her that during the course of their conversation, that restless pit inside her had temporarily melted away.

“You’re up,” he said, nodding ahead of her. “It seems like you keep losing track of things when I’m around.”

Hannah offered him a smirk before turning back around and placing her order.

“And I’ll have a large black coffee,” he said, stepping next to her. “Both are on me.”

“That’s not necessary,” Hannah told him. “I can pay for my own drink.”

“Of course you can,” he replied, flashing the crooked grin again, “but that’s not the

point. This is a gesture of friendship and human connection. Just say ‘thank you’ like a normal person and step aside so the next customer can order. That’s how things work in a civil society, Hannah.”

It was the first time she could remember him saying her name, and she felt an unexpected charge at hearing it, though she kept her expression blank.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” he replied, before adding, “although I have to be honest. I have an ulterior motive with the coffee.”

Hannah saw him suddenly stiffen nervously and waited silently for the follow-up, unsure where he was headed with this and unwilling to help him navigate his way out of whatever it was.

“So I heard through the grapevine that you solved your friend’s problem with those anonymous notes,” he continued awkwardly.

“Yes,” Hannah said, offering nothing more.

“And I noted that you resolved it without anyone finding out who did it or letting word spread about the whole mess, which probably saved your friend a lot of embarrassment.”

Hannah only nodded in response.

“And I also did a little research and found out that this isn’t the first time you’ve been involved in investigations. I guess you worked for a private detective?”

“You guess?” Hannah repeated, on more familiar ground now that she was the one



keeping the other person off balance.

“I know,” he acknowledged. “I read about your involvement in a few cases in news reports. “Anyway, it seems like you have a real gift for this sort of thing and as it turns out, I have a friend who could use your help.”

“So to be clear,” Hannah teased, deciding to throw him a lifeline, “you thought that if you bought my coffee drink, I’d repay you by helping your friend?”

“Exactly,” he said, seeming to find his verbal footing again. “I was hoping to bribe you with caffeine and sugar. How’d I do?”

“What’s your friend’s problem?” she asked, not answering his question.

“Maybe I’ll let him tell you,” Finn said. “It’s kind of sensitive and I think he’d like to share it rather than going through a third party.”

“Who is he?” Hannah pressed.

“His name is Reggie Calderone. He’s one of my fraternity brothers, or will be, if I ever move beyond being a pledge.”

Hannah felt the urge to say no flat out but managed to swallow the word.

“I’m not a fan of fraternities,” she reminded him. “You may not know me well, but you should already know that by now.”

“I do know that,” he conceded. “But I also know that—and please don’t take this the wrong way—you pre-judged me based on your personal bias and ended up kind of embarrassing yourself.”

“I think that’s overstating it a bit,” Hannah insisted unconvincingly.

“I would just hate for you to make the same mistake twice and have that reflect poorly on your character,” he said, now the one doing the teasing. “At least hear him out. You can always bail if you’re not interested.”

Hannah thought that was an eminently reasonable request, though she kept that to herself.

“When were you thinking?” she asked.

“It’s super time-sensitive, so preferably tonight,” he said quickly. “I was hoping you could come to his room at the house.”

“The fraternity house?” Hannah wanted to know.

“Yes, Hannah, that’s where he lives.”

Again, there was that little charge at hearing her name on his lips.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” she admitted.

“He just wants some privacy when he talks to you,” Finn explained. “If it helps, I’ll be there.”

“That’s supposed to be reassuring?”

“Yes,” he said, grinning broadly, his dimples nearly blinding her.

Her cheeks flushed again, and she looked down so that her hair fell around her face, hiding it. “Fine, I’ll go,” she muttered, hoping she sounded put out.

“Thanks,” he said. “Give me your number and I’ll text you a specific time after I talk to Reggie.”

Ignoring her reservations, Hannah pulled out her phone and exchanged contact information with him. Still, despite Finn’s charm, she wasn’t sure this was a good idea. The idea of going solo to a fraternity house on a Thursday night and hanging out with two guys in one of their bedrooms gave her real pause.

But she’d said yes. Backing out now would seem weak. So she ignored the little shiver running up her spine and said nothing.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Jessie couldn't take it anymore, so despite the slight risk involved, she punched Ryan in the arm.

"Hey," he protested from the driver's seat. "These Hollywood Hills streets are crazy. Do you want to make me crash?"

"Exactly," she shot back. "There are endless hairpin turns, and you're taking all of them at twenty miles over the speed limit. I know you're doing it just to freak me out, like you always do when we get up here. But it's not as amusing as you think it is. So please slow down or I will punch you again."

"It's a little amusing," Ryan insisted, fighting off the chuckle in the back of his throat.

"What's going to be amusing is how pathetic you look sleeping on the couch tonight if you don't reel it in, Hernandez," she warned.

"Okay, okay," he said, slowing down dramatically. "Besides, we're here."

He came to a stop in front of the address Parker had given them and grinned, delighted with himself.

"Do you think that pissing me off and making me carsick is the way to my heart?" she asked incredulously.

"I'm just trying to keep things spicy, Ms. Hunt," he said, hopping out of the car. "Anger is just the flipside of passion, right?"

“When’s your next session with Dr. Lemmon?” Jessie wanted to know.

“Next week,” he said, “why?”

“Because I think you should run that theory by her and see if she approves of your methods. You might be surprised.”

She got out of the car and headed for the house without another word, happy to let him ponder if she was really mad or just messing with him. As she walked up the path to the front door, she did her best to put her mild nausea out of her head and focus on what was in front of her: a crime scene.

Like many Hollywood Hills homes on the cliffside of the street, the front of the house wasn’t especially memorable. It looked like a standard ranch-style house, likely built in the 1960s or 70s, at least based on the Brady Bunch-home style architecture. But as she knew from visiting many of these homes in the hills, looks were often deceiving.

If this house was anything like the others she’d encountered, the back would be much more impressive. Built into the side of the hills, these houses were often three or four stories, only going downward instead of up.

An officer stood guard at the front door, just inside the yellow police tape that warned onlookers away. Jessie showed him her identification just as Ryan caught up.

“Right,” the young officer said, “Sergeant Cutter has been waiting for you. Go on in. Everyone is in the living room, down the hall to the left.”

Jessie ducked under the tape and followed his directions with Ryan right on her heels.

“You’re not really mad at me, are you?” he whispered as they walked.

“That depends on how you drive back down the hill,” she told him.

Before he could respond, the hallway opened up to reveal a giant living room with floor-to-ceiling windows along the back wall. They highlighted a gorgeous view of the canyon and beyond that, downtown Los Angeles.

In the living room were multiple officers and crime scene techs. They all looked up when Jessie and Ryan entered. One of them, a thin, thirty-something guy with tightly shorn blond hair moved toward them.

“Thanks for coming,” he said, extending his hand and shaking both of theirs. “I’m Sergeant Mack Cutter. I’ve been holding down the fort until you could get here.”

“Nice to meet you, Sergeant,” Ryan said, and Jessie nodded in agreement.

”Same,” Cutter said. ”Sorry it’s under these circumstances, but I’ve always wanted to work with the two of you. This is an honor.”

“Thanks,” Jessie replied. “Mind if we dive right in?”

“Of course,” Cutter said. “The victim is outside by the pool. The crime scene unit is collecting evidence out there and in here. There’s no sign of forced entry. She had a security system, which wasn’t triggered, though there are no cameras. The coroner just left; said he’d have preliminary findings in a few hours but left his card if you want to get in touch before then. He wrote his initial impressions on the back.”

He handed over the card for Dr. Michael Roone, whom Jessie had never worked with. Jessie flipped it over to find several notes scrawled on the back. They read rough time of death between 6 p.m. and midnight. Cold weather complicates assessment. Clear evidence of strangling, likely cause of death, though not definitive yet.

"Well, that gives us somewhere to start, at least," she said, handing the card to Ryan.

"There's more," Cutter noted. "We've got the victim's assistant, who discovered the body in a back bedroom. Where would you like to begin?"

Ryan looked over at Jessie deferentially. "Thoughts?" he asked.

"Maybe we start outside," Jessie suggested. "I'd like to get a clear sense of the nature of the crime before our impressions are complicated by the assistant's perspective."

"Sure thing," Cutter said. "I'll take you out there."

They followed the sergeant through the living room, past a mantle with a collection of photos that Jessie assumed were of Erin Podemski's family, friends, and even her dog. There were also multiple copies of her book on various shelves in what looked to be French, German, and what Jessie thought was Russian. They moved into the kitchen, where a door led to the pool deck.

As Cutter opened the sliding door for them, they were buffeted by the wind, which cut straight through Jessie. She zipped up her jacket, noting that it felt much colder back here than it had out front. Cutter directed them to a chaise lounge chair, where a crime scene photographer was taking close-up pictures of Erin Podemski's neck.

"Give us a minute, Joe," Cutter requested.

The photographer stepped away, and for the first time, Jessie got a clear view of the victim. Erin Podemski was lying in the chair, slumped over to her right. She was wearing black sweatpants and what looked to be a purple cashmere sweater. She had on UGG slippers. Her skin was pale with small blisters, common among the dead after about twelve hours. It was 10:08 a.m. right now, which helped explain the coroner's preliminary time of death of 6 p.m. to midnight.

Her face was partially obscured by her black hair, but her eyes were open and showed red dots, clear signs of petechial hemorrhaging, common in strangulation victims. Jessie didn't see any fingernail marks, but the woman's neck was covered in abrasions and deep indentations, likely from the murder weapon. Jessie already knew from information provided by Jamil on the drive over that the woman was 28 years old. In person, that looked about right.

Jessie took a moment to close her eyes before proceeding. Oftentimes, it was easy to focus on the minutiae of the crime scene and the body at the expense of the victim's humanity. She had to guard against that.

But in this case, it wasn't hard. Erin Podemski was a woman who had clearly been relaxing by her pool when her whole world was suddenly upended. The fear and panic she must have felt in the moments before she died made Jessie's heart ache. No matter how many times she saw a situation like this, it was gutting. The day that changed, Jessie knew she was in trouble.

She opened her eyes, took a deep breath and resumed studying the woman in front of her. Podemski had a pleasant, modestly attractive face, which seemed to be devoid of any surgical enhancements. She was about five foot five and slim. She didn't look like she would have had the strength to fight off an attacker, although it appeared that in this instance, she might have been surprised by her assailant before she could mount any defense.

"Her assistant said she found her lying upright in the chair," Cutter said quietly. "She shook her shoulder, hoping she might just be sleeping. That's when she slumped over like that."

"Maybe now's a good time to talk to the assistant," Jessie said. "I'm not sure there's much more to learn out here right now."



“I’ll take you there,” Cutter said, leading them back inside.

“Have you already interviewed her?” Ryan asked.

“Only briefly to get the basics,” he said. “We didn’t want to ask any leading questions, so she’s been on ice—poor phrasing— since then.”

“What can you tell us about her?” Jessie asked.

”Name is Nicole Fleetwood but she goes by Nikki,” Cutter answered as they passed through the living room and through a door leading to the bedroom wing. ”She”s twenty-two; got out of college last May. Has been working here for just a few months. She”s pretty shaken up, or was when I last saw her.”

He stopped at a closed door with an officer posted out front.

“What does that mean exactly—”pretty shaken up?”” Jessie asked.

”I mean that after she got over the initial shock of the situation and we got her in the bedroom, she broke down in tears and couldn”t speak another intelligible word.”

Jessie looked over at Ryan and could tell he was thinking the same thing. With what appeared to be a serial killer on the loose, they couldn’t afford an incoherent witness.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Jessie let Ryan take the lead as they prepared to enter the bedroom. She wanted to focus her attention on the witness's demeanor.

"Let's see what we're dealing with," he said to the sergeant.

Cutter nodded and turned to the officer guarding the door.

"Is Medina still in there with her?" he asked.

"Yes, Sergeant," the officer said.

Cutter turned to Jessie and Ryan. "I left her with Officer Medina. I always like her on my detail because she's great at calming down upset witnesses."

He opened the door to the bedroom. It was nicely appointed with a full-sized bed and a plush ottoman, an oak dresser with a polished silver-framed mirror above it, and a small balcony with two patio chairs. Jessie noted that everything was immaculate but characterless. The art on the walls—all seascapes—was intentionally bland, the vase had inoffensive fake flowers, and there were no personal touches to speak of. It was clearly intended as a guest room that could safely appeal to anyone.

Sitting on the bed, facing the balcony and the view of the canyon were Officer Medina and a pale blonde woman with a shawl wrapped over her shoulders. They both turned around at the sound of footsteps entering the hardwood-floored room.

Jessie could tell that Nikki Fleetwood had been crying. Her eyes were red, and she had tissues balled up in one fist. A box with more lay on the bed between her and

Officer Medina, a dark-skinned woman in her thirties with short black hair and kind eyes.

“Hi Nikki,” Cutter said. “These are the investigators I told you about. They have a few questions for you if you’re up to it.”

Nikki nodded weakly but didn’t speak. Jessie looked at Ryan, who silently indicated with a familiar glance that she should take the lead. She walked over and knelt down in front of the young woman.

“Hi Nikki,” she said. “My name is Jessie. I work with the police. And that’s Detective Hernandez. He’s leading this investigation. How are you doing?”

“I’ve been better,” Nikki said, using the bundled-up tissue in her hand to wipe her nose.

“We get that,” Jessie said, “but we’re hoping you can help us. All indications are that your boss was murdered, and we believe that you can offer valuable information that will allow us to find out who did it.”

“I’ll do whatever I can,” Nikki said, pulling the shawl more tightly around her shoulders.

“Great,” Jessie replied, “so I’m going to ask you a series of questions. Just answer them to the best of your ability, all right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“When did you find Erin?”

“Just after nine,” Nikki said. “I had just gotten here for the day. I looked around the

house but couldn't find her, so I went out to the guest house where she likes to write, but the door was locked. When I turned around, I saw her by the pool."

Ryan joined Jessie but remained standing.

"Was it common for her to lie out by the pool when it was so chilly?" Jessie asked.

"Sometimes," Nikki said. "She once told me that she found the cold air bracing. She said that when she was struggling with her material, it jumpstarted her brain. So even though I was surprised to see her there, it wasn't crazy."

"When was the last time you communicated with her?" Ryan wondered.

"The last time we actually talked was when I left for the day yesterday, a little after five," she said, pulling out her phone and scrolling through it. "But she did text me just after 6 p.m. to ask me to add an event to her website calendar. She was invited to speak at some young women writers event at USC tomorrow afternoon. I told her I would add it, which I did right away. That was our last communication."

She handed over the phone. Jessie looked at the text exchange, which was just as Nikki had described.

"Was it unusual for you not to hear from her later that night or this morning?" Jessie asked.

"Not really," Nikki replied. "She mostly kept work stuff to work hours. In fact, a message like this was uncommon. She was a pretty easygoing boss. Most days, I didn't get any assignments until I arrived in the morning. And typically, when I left here at five, that was it for the day."

"Can you tell us a little more about her work and day-to-day life?" Ryan asked. "Was

she a workaholic? More relaxed? Have friends come over during the day? Or family? Maybe a romantic partner?"

"Um, I'm not sure what to say, really," Nikki told him. "I was excited to work for her because I had read her book, *How to Be Young, Beautiful and Cool*, in my senior year of college. When I met her, I thought she'd be really edgy because the book was this sarcastic take on what is expected of young women in modern society. But she was really nice, especially for someone who was so rich and successful. She's from this really wealthy family, you know. Anyway, she told me once that she didn't expect the book to be a bestseller, but after it was, she decided to work hard to publicize it, going to events like the USC one I mentioned. She did readings, and signings, and was always being asked to do interviews or comment on some hot button cultural issue. But she was pretty chill about the whole thing, way more than I would have been in those circumstances."

"And what about the relationships that Detective Hernandez mentioned," Jessie prodded, "with her family, friends, and potential love interests?"

"She almost never had anyone over to the house," Nikki said. "She considered the time from about seven in the morning to 1 p.m. to be exclusively for writing, and she didn't want that interrupted. She has a late January deadline for her new book, and she took it seriously. I mean, she would occasionally take calls from people. She'd speak with her agent or her editor, and sometimes break things up with calls to friends or family, but she didn't have many people over. And I handled all the appointments with folks like the gardener, the pool guy, and the housekeepers, so that she could stay focused. As to romance, that wasn't really a priority for her at the moment."

"What do you mean?" Jessie asked.

"Well, I only started working for her about three months ago, but she never

mentioned that she was dating anyone or asked me to put anything like that in the calendar. And I think she would have because she would request me to put in similar things like drinks with her girlfriends, dinner at her mom's even though she hated to go over there— stuff like that. I do remember that she mentioned that she had a breakup after the book came out, which was like ten months ago. Apparently, the guy couldn't handle her success. She said he wanted a girlfriend who was a socialite, not a social issues writer. She said she was on a romance hiatus for a while."

"What about feuds with other writers or social commentators," Ryan wondered, "or maybe hate mail from folks who didn't appreciate her perspective?"

Nikki shook her head. "Even the people who disagreed with her during appearances liked her. And she's very supportive of other writers. I think because she was already independently wealthy and the book's success was such an unexpected surprise, she just wanted to pay it forward. She did a lot of free writing workshops for aspiring writers at underfunded public high schools. There was some hate online—mostly incel-type guys who thought she should keep her mouth shut. But I helped maintain her socials and checked her fan e-mail. I don't remember any threats. It was mostly just nasty insults and name-calling."

"All the same, we'd like to get access to those so our research people can take a look," Ryan said.

"Not a problem," Nikki replied. "I'll give you all that."

"Great," Ryan said, "and we'd like a list of all the service providers who came to the house as well, along with contact info. People like those you mentioned, the gardener and pool guy, etc."

Nikki nodded, making a note on her phone. Jessie waited until she was done to ask the question that had been noodling in her head.

“You said she hated going to her mother’s for dinner,” she noted. “Why was that?”

“She said that her mom was overbearing,” Nikki explained, “and since the book became a hit, she was also competitive, always trying to one-up her.”

“How so?” Jessie wondered.

“I guess that ever since Erin got out of college and came back to L.A., she’d have these semi-regular dinners with her mom, who lives in Pasadena,” Nikki said. “But according to Erin, what had once just been exhausting experiences that she felt obligated to attend had morphed into something worse. They became an excuse for her mom to offer a litany of Erin’s failures and her own victories. I mean, I never met the woman, so I don’t know how accurate Erin’s take was, but that was her perspective. She dreaded going but felt bad for her mom ever since her dad divorced her, so she suffered through the meals.”

“How often were these dinners?” Ryan asked.

“Usually every two weeks,” Nikki said. “I know she was there last Sunday.”

“That’s very helpful,” Ryan said. “We’re almost done here. I was just wondering what you did after you left work last night.”

It wasn’t the most subtle attempt to lock down Nikki’s alibi, but the young woman seemed oblivious to the implication as she looked at her phone again.

”Oh yeah,” she said, her memory jogged as she looked at the screen. ”I went to the grocery store and got gas because I was almost out. Then I went home and made dinner. That’s when I got the text from Erin. I ended up burning the chicken cutlet I was trying to pan roast. I set off my smoke alarm and everything. I’m not a very good cook. So I gave up and ordered a pizza. Then, I spent the evening streaming episodes

of Parks and Recreation. Pretty exciting stuff, huh?”

“It actually sounds like a nice night to me,” Jessie told her sincerely. “Do you mind if we check your checking account records and geolocation on your phone and car to confirm all that?”

“Why—” Nikki started to ask before she figured it out. “Oh, I see. Of course. Whatever you need.”

Thanks,” Ryan said. “We’ll have Officer Medina help you get that information to our research team.”

He handed Medina a card with Jamil’s contact information as Jessie got to her feet. “Thanks for all your help, Nikki,” she said.

They waited until they were outside the closed door of the bedroom before anyone said anything else.

“What can I do for you now?” Sergeant Cutter asked.

“I think we’d like you to continue to supervise the scene,” Ryan said. “Keep us apprised of any developments. Stay on top of the coroner and pass along any updates from him. If you can make sure that Nikki gives our folks in research everything they need as well, that would be great. Not just her alibi, but also the passwords to Erin’s socials and e-mail so they can start reviewing them for possible threats that Nikki might have missed or dismissed.”

“And please keep on her for that list of all of Erin’s home service providers,” Jessie added. “Not just gardeners and pool guys, but the security alarm company, internet maintenance techs. If she has a personal in-house masseuse or yoga instructor, get that too. Anyone who came over here. It seems pretty clear that whoever did this had



access to the home.”

“Will do,” Cutter promised. “What do you plan to do?”

Ryan looked at Jessie, and she could tell he was wondering if they were on the same page.

“I was thinking that we should talk to Mommy Dearest,” she suggested.

When he smiled, she knew that he’d had the same idea.

“Really?” Cutter asked, surprised. “You think her own mother would kill her out of jealousy?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Jessie told him with a sad shrug. “I’m sure you’ve seen it too. Even in families, competition can turn poisonous. We need to find out if it turned murderous.”

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Hank Costabile nearly sideswiped a car.

He knew he should probably slow down, and maybe not take right turns so sharply either, but he was so pissed that it was hard to force his foot to ease back off the accelerator.

It was difficult to maintain his cool when he, a decorated former police sergeant, was being tailed by a pair of cops in an unmarked vehicle. The whole thing was insulting. Did they think he didn't know? That he was okay with it?

He understood why they were tailing him, even if it disgusted him. They'd almost certainly been assigned the gig by the chief of the Los Angeles Police Department himself, Roy Decker. The old man was once captain of Central Station, where Jessie Hunt's Homicide Special Section unit operated. He had a soft spot for the profiler and apparently worried that Hank might want to do her harm now that he was out of prison. He wasn't far off base.

After all, Hunt was the reason that Hank had been imprisoned in the first place. Her self-righteous busybody mentality had cost him eighteen months of his life. And if not for a technicality that got his conviction overturned on appeal, it would have cost him decades more. He wasn't sure he would have made it that long.

Cops don't tend to do well in prison. For some reason, the people they put away hold grudges. The only reasons he'd survived this long was because he was a badass who wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty the first few times that someone came at him, and because the guards had been paid a little extra by his law enforcement friends to keep an eye on him.

There was also the small fact that he'd hooked up with a white power gang. He wasn't totally in alignment with all their views, but when it came to survival behind bars, a guy sometimes had to make compromises.

That wasn't something he needed to lose sleep over right now. His bigger priority was getting these undercover cops off his ass. Looking in his rearview mirror, he saw that they were three cars behind. He was tempted to blow through the red light and leave them in the dust but knew that the short-term satisfaction of the maneuver would be outweighed by the consequences down the line. No, he needed to lose them without breaking any laws.

Studying himself in the mirror, he noticed the deep crevices in his furrowed brow. Even his normally smooth bald head had the start of little wrinkles. He knew that it was due to stress and perpetual anger, but there wasn't much he could do about that. Anger was his fuel these days.

They shouldn't be treating him like a perp. Truth be told, they should be throwing him a parade. In his two decades on the force, he'd nailed hundreds, if not thousands of criminals. He'd gotten thieves, rapists, and murderers off the streets. Sure, maybe he'd cut a few corners here and there. Maybe he'd taken a little something on the side now and then. Maybe he looked the other way when his higher-ups engaged in legally questionable behavior, but who didn't?

Admittedly, maybe not everybody went as far as he did in covering for his former boss, Commander Mike Butters. The man was paying an underage porn actress for sexual favors, and Hank tried to shut down the investigation of her murder because Butters's bad choices might come to light. And maybe not everyone would have tried to have the profiler investigating the porn actress's murder killed before she got to the bottom of the case.

But the truth was: she deserved everything she got. He thought back to how she just

kept coming at him relentlessly back then, questioning his professionalism and his sense of duty. It was an insult to everything he'd worked for two decades. She was this fresh-scrubbed profiling savant, ignoring how things had always been done, threatening the life he'd built. She was a fly constantly buzzing around his head, and he'd resolved to swat her down.

Some might suggest he went overboard. Maybe he could have just planted drugs at her house or had a suspect in one of her cases falsely allege that she coerced him into a confession.

But in the heat of the moment, when his boss was on the verge of being charged and his own career was in jeopardy, he didn't have time to plot out some elaborate plan to undermine Jessie Hunt. He just needs her out of the way. In retrospect, he'd made mistakes. But those mistakes should have been viewed in light of his years of meritorious service. Instead, he was thrown to the wolves.

He knew there were still some folks on his side, more than the goody-two-shoes crowd realized. Jessie Hunt might be the heroine of the city, but there was a whole contingent of people who'd had enough of her antics. Powerful interests in the world of media, business, and law enforcement had suffered at her hands and wanted her to get her comeuppance. And to the extent that Hank could make that happen, they wanted to help him.

But for now, those interests had to had to lie low. Hunt was Decker's prized pet and the public's best girl. They were biding their time, waiting for the perfect moment to take her down. But he wasn't inclined to be so patient.

The light turned green, and he shot forward, honking at the car in front of him to either pick up the pace or move to the side. The driver steered over to the shoulder, and Hank sped by, glancing over. It was a mother with two kids in the back. She gave him a sour look, and he flicked her off.

He punched the accelerator and weaved in and out of the cars that served as obstacles. He needed to get away from the jerks behind him, to get a little freedom of movement. What he really felt like doing was pulling over, letting them do the same, then yanking them out of their car and pummeling them bloody. But that would be counterproductive. Best just to lose them.

Besides, he needed to save that fury for the person who truly deserved it—Jessie Hunt. And when the time was right, he would unleash all the pent-up rage he been bottling up.

He'd been waiting a long time for payback. He could wait a little longer.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

“That didn’t take long.”

Jessie held up the ringing phone so that Ryan could see it from the driver’s seat. They were almost to the home of Erin Podemski’s mother, but they wouldn’t be able to talk to her just yet. The call was from Captain Gaylene Parker.

“She warned us that she’d be following up often,” Ryan said resignedly. “May as well get it over with.”

Jessie answered the call and put it on speaker.

“Hi, Captain,” she said, hoping she didn’t sound annoyed. “You’ve got me and Ryan.”

“Good,” Parker said. “I’m sorry to call so soon but Chief Decker wanted an update, so I need one too. Where are we at on these Hollywood Hills Killings?”

“Is that what they’re being called?” Ryan asked.

“That’s what I’m calling them,” Parker said. “I’m sure the media has a more titillating name for them but I’ve been too busy to check, what with the attack on the homeless encampment. What have you got for me?”

“Nothing earth-shattering just yet,” Ryan admitted. “The coroner’s preliminary take is that she died yesterday evening from strangulation. We’re waiting to get that officially. We think Podemski’s personal assistant is going to alibi out after her financial records and geolocation are verified. Jamil and Beth are handling that, as

well as looking into the online hate messages Podemski got to see if any of them rise above standard fare. The assistant is also getting us a list of everyone who had access to the home. It doesn't look like the killer had to break in."

"Any cameras at the house?" Parker asked.

"No," Jessie told her. "The security system was pretty basic, and it wasn't triggered."

"So what's next on the agenda?" Parker wanted to know.

"We're pulling up at Podemski's mom's house in Pasadena right now," Ryan said. "Apparently, their relationship was strained. We figured it was worth checking out. Maybe she's good for this. Even if she's not, she should be able to offer context."

"What about the other victim, Sydney Ashe?" Parker asked.

"Assuming that Elaine Podemski doesn't confess outright, we'll be focusing on her next," Ryan answered. Jessie could sense a little irritation in his voice at getting the third degree and hoped Parker hadn't picked up on it too.

"All right," the captain said evenly, "let me know if anything develops. I'll leave you to it."

"Thanks, Captain," Jessie said before Ryan could respond, "Talk later."

She hung up just as they stopped in front of Elaine Podemski's home. She thought Ryan might comment on the conversation, but he didn't, instead turning off the car and opening the door without a word. Jessie did the same, then turned to take in the house before them.

It was something to behold. The home, in the heart of the Arroyo section of Pasadena,

was a masterpiece of the Arts and Crafts architectural style, which was popular in the area around the turn of the 20th century. With its low-pitched roofs, exposed beams, and giant, square-columned porch, it looked like it could be on the cover of a home design magazine, which Jessie suspected it had been.

They walked up the long path that cut through the enormous, tightly mowed lawn toward the place, which was all brown wood and green accents. Were they not in a time crunch, Jessie might be tempted to ask for a tour, assuming they could eliminate the woman as a suspect. They hadn't even gotten up the porch steps when the door opened and the woman she knew to be Elaine Podemski stepped out.

They'd done some basic research on Podemski on the way over so they wouldn't arrive clueless. The granddaughter of oil and gas titan William "Billy" Podemski and his son Arthur "Artie" Podemski, she was Pasadena royalty. That status had only increased when she married Kelvin Rossum, an east coast venture capitalist who'd moved west after making a fortune in junk bonds in the 1980s, just before the bubble burst. After that, he settled in the Bay area before moving south to take advantage of the sunnier climate. That's where he met and married Elaine.

Together, they were a power couple for nearly a quarter of a century before he dumped Elaine last year for a woman the same age as his daughter. Their divorce, only finalized a few months ago, would have been local tabloid fodder if not for the iron-clad nondisclosure agreements they both put in their prenuptial agreement. Based on what Nikki Fleetwood had said about Elaine's mood during the mother-daughter dinners lately, it sounded like she wasn't dealing with it all that well.

That wasn't obvious from her current appearance. Dressed in tan corduroy slacks and a charcoal sweater, with her grayish-black hair pulled up in tight bun, she cut an imposing figure. Jessie stiffened, preparing herself for the unpleasant task of telling the woman that her daughter was dead. But it turned out that she needn't have.



“I know who you are, and I know why you’re here,” she said, her voice brittle and sharp. “So we can skip the formalities and get straight to the point.”

Ryan glanced over at Jessie, unable to hide his surprise. She didn’t have any suggestions for him, so he did what he would have done anyway: he introduced himself.

”Mrs. Podemski,” he said, taking another step up to the porch. ”I”m Detective Ryan Hernandez with the LAPD and this is Jessie Hunt. I”m not sure exactly what you know, so maybe you can share it with us.”

“You can stop right there, Detective,” she replied, holding up her hand. “I didn’t invite you in. My sources suggest that you are here to tell me that my daughter is dead, strangled, likely last night. You’re investigating her death, along with that of another woman who lived in the area. There is no need to offer your condolences or try to make this easier for me. I’ll process this in my own way. If you have specific questions about her that I can answer, and which will help find her killer, I’m amenable to that. Otherwise, I’d just as soon you not waste your time here.”

“Well, Mrs. Podemski,” he said, impressing Jessie with his unflustered tone, “we think your insight could be invaluable, especially since we understand that you had regular dinners with Erin. We’re hoping that you might be able to shed some light on things we couldn’t otherwise know. May we come in?”

She shook her head. “You may take seats on the porch bench over there,” she told him, nodding at it. “I’ll take the big chair.”

They made their way up the steps and settled in on the beautifully crafted but extremely hard wooden bench. Podemski took a seat in a large rocking chair opposite them and waved her hand like a queen to her subjects.

“Ask your questions,” she instructed.

Ryan looked over at Jessie to see if she wanted to start. She did.

“Mrs. Podemski,” she began, “did Erin mention having any serious ongoing conflicts with anyone or ever suggest that she felt unsafe for some reason?”

Podemski shook her head. “My daughter was not easily cowed. Despite her relatively spoiled upbringing, she was a tough cookie. When she was younger, she got made fun of for being a child of wealth. More recently, she was repeatedly attacked for the boldness of the material in her book. Nothing fazed her.”

“Not even you?” Ryan asked, perhaps more aggressively than Jessie would have under the circumstances.

Podemski’s eyebrows rose nearly to her scalp. “What is that supposed to mean, Detective?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” he said, before saying exactly what he meant. “It’s just that we’ve heard that your dinners here with her could sometimes turn contentious.”

“Are you suggesting that occasional mother-daughter sniping is out of the ordinary?” she asked haughtily. “Alert the newspapers!”

Jessie looked at Ryan. She could tell that the woman was getting under his skin. Whether it was residual irritation with Captain Parker or general distaste for Podemski, he had clearly chosen not to go the diplomatic route. And now that he’d started down that road, he couldn’t very well back off without looking cowed himself.

“Mrs. Podemski,” he continued, “since you said we should dispense with the

condolences and not waste your time, I'll get to the point. We have it on good authority that your dinners went beyond standard sniping and that you were quite envious of Erin's success, to the point of berating her relentlessly for any perceived flaw. Some might even call it outright hostility. How do you respond to that?"

"It sounds like you're implying that, out of some sense of jealousy, I may have gone to my own daughter's home and strangled her to death. Or are you positing that I hired someone for the task? Are you so hard up for suspects Detective, that you're reduced to making unsubstantiated allegations against a grieving mother?"

"No one has made that allegation, Mrs. Podemski," Jessie noted, stunned at just how curdled the woman's tone had become. "It's our obligation to pursue every avenue of investigation. I would think that as her grieving mother, you'd be on board with whatever we need to do to catch her killer, including asking you a few hard questions."

Podemski smiled at her, all sharp teeth and insincerity. "Ms. Hunt, your reputation precedes you, and I would never be one to question the methods of Los Angeles's profiling sweetheart, but I have to say that so far, I'm unimpressed. Any theory based on the notion that I would kill my own daughter because I resented her success isn't worth my spit. I'm a difficult woman, but I'm not that cold. I loved my daughter in my way."

Jessie was about to point out that "in her way," Podemski was still deflecting their questions, but the woman didn't let her get in a word.

"If you were doing your job properly, you would be looking at people in her circle in that Hollywood Hills neighborhood. They're a nasty lot, all plotting and backbiting. I told her many a time that she should move. Have you even looked into possible connections between Erin and the other victim, the wife of that Hollywood movie man?" She said that last sentence with complete disdain.

“That’s our next stop,” Jessie informed her.

“May I suggest you go there now rather than spend your time harassing an elderly woman.”

“You may suggest whatever you like,” Jessie replied, her tone saccharine sweet. “But before we do that, I do have one question. And I hope that at your advanced age—56, I believe—you’ll be able to handle it. Where were you last night between 6 p.m. and midnight?”

Podemski smiled back at her, and this time it felt genuine. She seemed to admire how Jessie not only didn’t back down but gave as good as she got.

“So this is the alibi portion of our chat?” she wondered.

“It is,” Jessie told her.

”Very well. Last night, I was at the annual Pasadena Women’s Society Holiday Gala. I’m on the board of the Society and made a short speech. The event began at eight and ended around 11 p.m. I showed up early to prep, probably around 6:45. I left immediately after the concluding comments and returned here. I was in bed before midnight. There are about two hundred people who can confirm my presence. I’ll give you the entire list of attendees if you like so they can confirm to you that I was there and not. . . off killing Erin.”

For the first time since their arrival, Jessie heard a slight hitch in the woman’s voice, as if the reality of her daughter’s passing had finally hit her in a deeper way than she’d allowed up to that point.

“That would be very helpful,” Jessie said, standing up and handing over a card with Jamil’s info. “This is our head of research. Please send the list to him and he’ll follow

up.”

“I’ll do it right away,” Podemski said, standing up and taking the card. “Now unless you have additional questions that cast aspersions on my general parenting or love for my daughter, I’ll ask you to get the hell off my property so I can mourn in peace.”

Jessie and Ryan started down the porch steps without another word to the woman. When they were far enough away that he thought he couldn’t be heard, Ryan muttered “so I guess it’s back to Hollywood to look into Sydney Ashe’s murder.”

“Unless you think we should cuff Elaine and drag her into the station?” Jessie whispered back. She didn’t say it, but she was annoyed that Ryan had sent them down a path that made the entire interview a confrontation from nearly the start.

“Hey,” he said, noting her tone, “you pushed just as hard as I did.”

“You didn’t leave me much choice,” she replied.

He looked like he wanted to respond but the sound of Elaine Podemski slamming the front door behind them made him reconsider and they made the rest of the walk back to the car in silence.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Kat knew she should let it go, but she just couldn't.

Otherwise, why would she be at the hospital again?

She should have been basking in the satisfaction of getting \$3000 for less than six total hours of work. After all, the Craig Hartley case had gone about as well as she could have hoped. When she provided audio evidence of his affair to the man's soon-to-be-ex-wife, along with video showing his prostitute mistress arriving at and leaving the motel earlier this morning, Claire Hartley had written her a check on the spot.

And yet, Kat couldn't seem to take the win. As she sat in the waiting room of Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, preparing to be escorted back to the nurses' station—which was as far as she was allowed to go these days—she considered how much things had changed recently.

She had been here over forty times in the two months that Ash Pierce was in a coma, and another five times in the two weeks since she woke up. They'd never actually spoken, of course.

Neither the police nor the prosecutors would allow that. In fact, had the higher ups in either the LAPD or the district attorneys' office known that nurses and uniformed officers had been allowing her to visit Pierce on a near-daily basis when she was comatose, they would have lost it. Luckily, no one had spilled those beans.

The staff had taken pity on Kat, sympathetic to the fact that Pierce had tortured her and, on two separate occasions, nearly killed her. Perhaps they'd figured that because

Kat had used CPR to save Pierce after that second failed murder attempt, she was not a threat to the assassin. But now that Pierce was awake, that assumption seemed naïve, and they wouldn't even let her within sight of the woman. In fact, Kat knew she was lucky to even be allowed on the same floor.

One of the friendliest nurses in the secure wing of the ICU, a blonde twenty-something named Jenny, came into the waiting room and motioned for Kat to follow her. She didn't say anything until they were alone, walking down the hallway to the unit.

"How are things going today?" Kat asked.

"Big doings here," Jenny said caustically. "There was a court-appointed psychiatrist brought in to interview her. This is the third one since she woke up. The doctors for the prosecutor and defense have already come by. I'm sure this one will come to a definitive conclusion that will satisfy everyone."

"You're not filling me with confidence, Jenny," Kat said as they pushed through the doors and rounded the corner to the nurses' station.

"Look, what can I say," the nurse replied with a shrug. "Pierce maintains that she has no recollection of anything that happened to her since her time in the military. She claims not to know who you are, who Hannah Dorsey is, or who Jessie Hunt is. And she certainly hasn't admitted knowing what's her name, the crazy girl who hired her to kill you and Hannah last summer."

"Zoe Malone," Kat replied, referring to the disturbed young woman who had tried to poison hundreds of people at a crowded movie theater before getting caught by Jessie and subsequently hiring Pierce to get payback against her loved ones.

"Right," Jenny said, pointing out an empty chair at the nurses' station where Kat

could take a seat. “Conveniently, she’s definitely never heard of her.”

“I’ve got to say, Jenny,” Kat noted, taking a seat, “you sound slightly skeptical about the woman’s veracity.”

Jenny smiled sadly.

“I took care of Pierce when she was in a coma and after she woke up, and personally, I found her more believable when she was unconscious. Maybe I’m biased because I’ve gotten to know you. All I can say is that the people who make the decisions seem way more conflicted. The psychiatrists looked uncertain when they came out of sessions with her. And I’ve even overheard the prosecutors complaining about whether they’ll be able to win over twelve jurors at trial, assuming it gets to that.”

“She’s murdered seven people that we know of and tried to kill at least that many more,” Kat said indignantly. “Now she can just claim amnesia and get off?”

“I didn’t say that,” Jenny replied quickly. “I’m only saying that she puts on a good show. I get why people might be taken in.”

“Well, maybe they should let me have a sit-down with her and observe that interaction,” Kat offered. “Then we’ll see if there are any cracks in her armor.”

“While I’m sympathetic to the idea, I don’t think it’s the way to go,” Jenny told her. “Even if I did agree, you might have a little trouble getting to her, what with the four cops who are constantly guarding her room.”

“You don’t know what I’m capable of if I put my mind to it,” Kat warned.

“All the more reason to keep you at a safe distance,” Jenny replied. “I do value keeping my job. If I was smart, I never would have let you leave that waiting room,



but I know that you can't sleep if you don't check in on her status."

"Honestly, I don't sleep very well even with these check-ins," Kat admitted. "I can only imagine what it would be like without them, so thank you."

Jenny nodded. After a moment, she glanced around. She must have noted what Kat did—that there were no other nurses around right now. She stood up and moved over to one of the monitors on the shared desk.

"This is definitely against the rules, so I'm going to make it quick," she said quietly, quickly typing on the keyboard in front of the monitor. A series of video images popped up, which Kat recognized as CCTV footage from various cameras on the hospital floor.

"What have we got here?" she asked.

"Normally, we only have feeds of the hallways and other public spaces for privacy reasons," Jenny said, clicking on a box in the lower right corner. "But because of the security threat posed by Pierce, we got authorization to put two fixed cameras in her room. That means you get a live look."

Kat leaned in to get a better look.

"Can you zoom in?" she asked studying the grainy image of the diminutive narrow-framed woman sitting at a 45-degree angle in her hospital bed.

"A little," Jenny said, adjusting the image marginally. "Enjoy the view for now because you won't get one tomorrow."

"Why not?" Kat wondered.

“She’s got surgery scheduled,” Jenny explained. “The injury she sustained when Hannah Dorsey stabbed her in the neck during their fight hasn’t healed properly. Doctors didn’t want to do anything about it when she was in a coma because it was too risky. But they’ve determined that she’s strong enough to handle it now. She goes under the knife mid-afternoon.”

It was impossible to get a good look at Ash Pierce’s neck. The camera wasn’t sophisticated enough to pick up on that level of detail. But Kat could at least see the woman’s face clearly.

Pierce was engaged in a conversation with the court psychiatrist and seemed to be enjoying it. Her brown eyes were bright, and her hands were moving animatedly. Someone had brushed her black hair, which had been cut short to make it presentable. Her porcelain skin and arched nose were just as Kat remembered them.

Something about seeing the woman conscious and alert made Kat’s stomach twist into a tight knot. Suddenly she pictured Pierce as she used to be, not in a hospital bed, but standing over her, happily torturing her while she was tied to a chair in the desert.

All at once, a wave of panic rose in Kat’s chest. Her heart began beating against her breastbone, and beads of sweat appeared magically on her forehead. She stood up on unsteady legs and stumbled away from the nurses’ station.

“What’s wrong?” Jenny asked, concerned.

“I have to do something,” Kat managed to gasp unconvincingly, hoping she didn’t pass out before she made it through the exit doors.

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“It’s okay,” Mitch assured her gently, holding her tight to him.

“I don’t know what happened,” Kat muttered miserably.

“It makes perfect sense,” he replied. “You hadn’t seen her like that for a long time. Of course, your body was going to react. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

He might be right. Kat had been through enough therapy after her near-death experience in Afghanistan to know that sometimes the body reacted independent of the brain and vice versa. What she should be ashamed of was how she’d kept these hospital visits a secret from her fiancé for months now. It wasn’t fair that he only learned of them when she called him in a near meltdown while standing on the curb outside the hospital.

But of course, Mitch had rushed here immediately. And since his arrival, he hadn’t mentioned a word about her deception. That didn’t mean she shouldn’t.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “I shouldn’t have snuck around like that. It was crazy. I should have told you what I was doing, coming here all the time.”

“Yes, you should have,” he chided gently. “If only so you didn’t have to carry this burden alone. I get it. This woman messed you up, and you want to keep tabs on her. You don’t want her springing any more surprises on you. You want some measure of control. That’s not crazy. It’s human nature.”

“But we’re getting married. I should have trusted you with this.”

Mitch lightly placed his index finger under her chin and delicately lifted it so that she was looking in his warm, gray eyes. His sandy hair glistened in the late morning sun. With his kind smile and jolly tan giant of a body, he looked like he’d been placed here by the gods.

“We all make mistakes, Kat,” he said. “You’ve been through a lot. It would be weird

if all of your decisions were completely logical. But we don't have to fixate on that. Let's focus on the future."

"What future?" she asked, embarrassed at how pouty she sounded.

"A future where we deal with this together," he told her. "Now we can be open about how Ash Pierce waking up from her coma has impacted you. Maybe you can talk to a professional about it too. But the one thing we're not going to do is let this define us, Okay? You're back at work full-time now. I'm starting with the LAPD next month. We've got a nice new place together. And our friends are throwing us a party tomorrow night because we're getting married in a few months. Things aren't as dire as they seem. We just have to have the right perspective, okay?"

Kat fought off a giggle. Despite the fear she'd felt earlier and the mortification she felt now, somehow this tree trunk of a human being still had the capacity to make it all seem alright.

"Okay," she said. "I'm really lucky to have you."

"Yes, you are," he agreed.

She strained her neck to reach up and give him a kiss. Because of the people walking by, he returned it a little shyly.

"You can do better than that," she scolded.

He tried again, this time with much more enthusiasm. It was almost enough to make Kat forget about Ash Pierce, awake and alert in the hospital behind her. Almost.

Jessie stewed quietly.

She was still annoyed about how the Elaine Podemski interview had gone off the rails so quickly. It was all the more frustrating, considering that the woman was never the most likely suspect. Would she have been more forthcoming with helpful information if Ryan hadn't attacked her right out of the gate? Maybe not, but it sure didn't help.

Her phone buzzed, and she looked down to find a text from Beth Ryerson.

"Beth says that Elaine's alibi looks like it's going to hold up," she told him, paraphrasing the message. "They've already confirmed her attendance at that event with three bigwigs from the Pasadena Women's Society. And the hotel will have video footage for them to review within the hour. Also, she says Jamil reviewed the messages that Erin Podemski received on social media. He couldn't find anything that leaped out as threatening."

Ryan didn't respond as they made their way through the winding Hollywood Hills streets leading up to Sydney Ashe's home, which was only a few minutes from Erin Podemski's. Jessie noted that Ryan drove much slower this time.

"Maybe I pushed a little hard," he muttered, as if replying to an accusation she'd made only moments ago, instead of as they were leaving Elaine's Pasadena mansion thirty-five minutes earlier.

Jessie was tempted to agree but worried that it would seem like she was rubbing salt in the wound. Instead, she merely nodded in appreciation at his concession. Any further comment was interrupted by their shared ringing phones.

“It’s Sergeant Cutter,” she said. “I’ll answer it.”

“Hello Sergeant, she said. “You’re on speaker with me and Detective Hernandez. What’s up?”

“I just spoke with the coroner, and he gave me an update that you might find valuable.”

“We’re all ears,” Ryan told him.

“He thinks that the weapon used to strangle Erin Podemski was made of leather,” Cutter said. “There were fibers found in her neck tissue that suggest as much. He’s guessing a belt, though it’s too early to confirm that.”

“That’s interesting,” Ryan said. “Did he find similar fibers when he looked at Sydney Ashe’s injuries?”

“Unfortunately, she was wearing a turtleneck when she was attacked,” Cutter explained. “Dr. Roone said that the only fibers embedded in her skin were from the material of her sweater. He’s going back and testing the exterior of the sweater, though, to see if he can find leather fibers there.”

“How long does he think that will take?” Jessie asked.

“He was hoping to have results by the end of the day,” Cutter replied, “tomorrow at the latest.

“Okay, please stay on him,” Ryan asked. “We already have two dead women in less than 24 hours. By tomorrow, we might have another.”

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They sat in the car outside the Ashe home, reviewing what they knew about her death one more time before getting out. The preliminary report from the detectives who had originally been assigned the case were useful, if not as comprehensive as Jessie might have liked.

“So we know Sydney Ashe was killed yesterday morning between ten and eleven-thirty, when the housekeeper was at the store and the nanny took the kids to the park,” Ryan double-checked.

”Right,” Jessie confirmed. ”The son is four, and the daughter just turned one. The park is a quarter mile west of here. The Hollywood detectives already verified the nanny’s alibi with several other people at the park during that time.”

“Okay, and the body was found on the main bedroom’s balcony, correct?”

“That’s what the report says,” Jessie said, handing over her phone to show the photos of the scene, which confirmed that fact.

“Let’s see if we can learn anything new that might not be in here,” Ryan said as he looked over the photos. “You ready to go in?”

Jessie nodded, and they got out of the car. As they approached the house, she noted that the Ashe home, while similar to Erin Podemski’s, was much more ostentatious. It too was built into the side of the cliff, but unlike Erin’s unassuming main floor, this house was already two stories high before it receded into the canyon. It was modernist in the extreme, all glass and steel.

They stopped at the front door and rang the bell. As they waited Jessie took note of the fact that the Ring camera was missing and that there were no other, obvious video cameras on the exterior of the house. She was surprised that the home of a such a successful Hollywood producer was so unprotected.

A pear-shaped, forty-something woman with a dour face answered the door.

“May I help you?” she asked in a vaguely eastern European accent.

“Yes, ma’am,” Ryan said, holding up his badge. “We’re with the police, doing some additional investigation into Sydney Ashe’s death. May we come in?”

The woman seemed briefly hesitant but then nodded and opened the door for them.

“If they’re around,” Ryan continued, “we were hoping to talk to Mr. Ashe and to the family’s nanny, Hayley.”

“Mr. Ashe is on a phone call right now and is not to be disturbed, but Hayley is in the back with the children. I will get her. Please follow me.”

“What’s your name?” Jessie asked.

“I am Marta,” she answered. “I’m the Ashe’s housekeeper.”

She led them through the foyer, past a large dining room that Jessie noted was closed off with child-proof gates, and into a sunken living room that was as large as a tennis court. Like Erin Podemski’s, it had floor-to-ceiling windows with expansive views of the city. In this case, because the room was over twice the size of Podemski’s, even more of Los Angeles was visible, from East L.A. all the way to Santa Monica and beyond it, the Pacific Ocean.

“What happened to the Ring camera at the front door?” Ryan wanted to know once they came to a stop.

“Oh, that,” Marta replied. “The battery died the other day. I was recharging it but had not put it back in place yet. I guess I forgot about it with everything that happened.”



“And there are no other security cameras on the property?” Ryan pressed.

“Mrs. Ashe wanted them, but Mr. Ashe said they were a waste of time and money; that no one could get into the house from the back and any good thief coming from the front would know how to get around them. They disagreed strongly.”

“I see,” Ryan said. “And just to reconfirm, the detectives’ report says that when ‘everything happened,’ you were at the grocery store, yes?”

“Yes,” Marta said. “I always do the grocery store run on Wednesday mornings. Mrs. Ashe likes—liked to have a full refrigerator for the end of the week and the weekend.”

There was a lull that Jessie felt an unexpected need to fill.

“How many stories tall is this house?” she wondered.

”Five,” Marta told her. ”This is the second from the top. Please wait here, and I will get Hayley for you.”

“Before you go,” Jessie asked, “how is the family doing?”

Marta paused several seconds before answering.

“It is hard to believe this is real,” she replied. “The children do not know what is happening. Alfie thinks his mother is on a trip. Baby Camilla is too young to understand any of it. Mr. Ashe uses his work to keep his thoughts busy. I wish I could do that.”

Jessie felt a pang as she imagined these children, who were so very young and whose memories of their mother would likely not survive into adulthood. She knew this

from personal experience.

Her own mother had been murdered by her serial killer father when she was just six years old. That was older than either of these kids and yet she only had a few remaining images of her mom in her head. She circulated them on repeat, like home videos on an old VHS tape that had been played too often and was now fuzzy and full of static.

“What was Mrs. Ashe like?” Ryan wondered, snapping her out of thoughts.

Marta paused again before answering.

“She was a wife and a mother,” she finally said. “It was important to her to be thought of as good at both. It is sad that she will not be able to continue that journey. I will get Hayley.”

Jessie thought that the woman had given an impressively diplomatic answer which inadvertently revealed that Sydney Ashe might not have been great at either job. Once she was gone, Ryan looked at Jessie with raised eyebrows.

“If that’s the best she could do as a eulogy, Sydney Ashe must have been a real piece of work.”

He stopped talking when they heard Marta talking in the back.

“Hayley, more police are here to see you. I can watch the children while you talk to them.”

They heard another woman’s voice whisper something unintelligible, to which Marta replied loudly, “I don’t know.”

While Jessie waited for Haley to appear, she glanced at several photos on a nearby table. One was a family portrait on the beach. In the photo, Sydney Ashe, frighteningly skinny, with long black hair, blue eyes and pale skin, offered a pinched smile for the camera.

A moment later, a young woman with brown hair and a pleasant, if bland bearing, stepped into the living room.

“I heard you wanted to talk to me?” she said nervously.

”That”s right, Hayley,” Ryan confirmed. ”I”m Detective Hernandez. This is Jessie Hunt. We”re taking over Mrs. Ashe”s case from the original detectives, and we had a few questions for you. Have a seat.”

Hayley sat on one of the cream-colored couches, and Ryan and Jessie took seats in plush chairs across from her. The nanny shifted uncomfortably for several seconds before sitting still.

“We understand that you found Mrs. Ashe,” Ryan began, “is that right?”

”Uh-huh,” Hayley answered. ”We—me and the kids—came back from the park. We”d been gone about two hours in all. Marta was still at the store. I put Cammie—Camilla—down for her nap. Mrs. Ashe likes to have lunch with Alfie, so I texted her that I was making his PBJ with the crusts cut off and baby carrots. She didn”t answer, and Alfie was really hungry, so I tried calling her. I could hear her phone ringing upstairs, so I told Alfie that he could start on the carrots but to eat slow. Then I went up to tell her.”

“Is that typically what you do?” Ryan interrupted.

“No,” Hayley admitted. “But I was torn. Mrs. Ashe wouldn’t normally like me going

up to her bedroom. But the week before she had gotten mad at me because I didn't tell her about lunch in time and Alfie was basically done by the time she got there. That's what she considered one of her 'connection times.' She was big on special times when she could be with the kids and strengthen their bond. Meals were high on the list. Plus, earlier in the morning she had promised Alfie that they could cut their sandwiches into shapes. He wanted to do hearts with her, and I knew she wouldn't want to miss that, so I risked going up."

"What happened then?" Jessie asked.

"I got to her bedroom door, which was half-open, and called out to her without going in. When she didn't answer, I called her on the phone again to make sure I had the right room. I could hear it ringing inside, so I poked my head in. That's when I saw her on the balcony. She was in one of the chairs, and I could tell right away that something was wrong."

"How?" Jessie asked.

"Her neck was bent in a really awkward way that would never happen on its own," Hayley answered, closing her eyes as if to blot out the memory. "I walked out there just to make sure and that's when I saw that her eyes were open, but you know, not right."

Hayley started to whimper softly as she continued.

"I wanted to scream, but I knew that I couldn't. It would have freaked out Alfie and woken up Cammie. Plus, Mr. Ashe was at his production office at the studio in Burbank and Marta was at the store, so I was alone. I was scared that whoever did this might still be around. So I grabbed Cammie from her crib, went downstairs, told Alfie that we were eating a picnic lunch, and we all went out front. That when I called 911. Marta came back a few minutes later, and the police arrived soon after

that.”

She stopped talking, and her whimpers turned into quiet sobs. Jessie tried to redirect her with an unemotional question.

“Hayley, the police got a list of all the service providers for the house from Marta yesterday but under the circumstances, they weren’t able to confirm its accuracy with Mr. Ashe. We were hoping you could look at it and see if she might have left anyone off.”

“Okay,” the nanny said, wiping away her tears.

Jessie pulled out her phone and showed it to Hayley.

“All of these are right as far as I know,” she said. “I’ve seen them all come and go at various times. I recognize the names of the gardener, the dog walker, the masseuse, the personal trainer, the yoga instructor, and the hypnotherapist. I’ve talked to most of them at one point or another. But I know she also has a manicurist come in regularly, and an acupuncturist too. They aren’t on your list. I don’t remember their names but either Marta or Mr. Ashe might. Other folks, like the internet or utilities people listed on here, don’t come by as often, so I couldn’t help you there.”

“That’s all right,” Jessie said. “I think there’s another area where you might be able to help more though.”

“What’s that?” Hayley asked, sounding eager to please.

“We’re trying to get a sense of Mrs. Ashe’s relationships,” Jessie explained. “The kind of stuff that outsiders wouldn’t know but that you do. For example, did she mention any conflicts with any of the service providers on that list, or maybe recent arguments with friends, or even with Mr. Ashe?”

Hayley smiled ruefully. “If you knew Mrs. Ashe at all, you’d learn pretty quickly that she was always in one fight or another. I don’t say that to speak ill of her. She was just a really challenging personality. She’d have friends over for afternoon cocktails and half the time, she’d end up storming off because of some little disagreement. Mrs. Ashe was very dramatic.”

“Even with people who worked for her?” Ryan pressed.

“She was very demanding with us,” Hayley said carefully. “If people didn’t do things the way she liked, she let them know in very direct terms. She crushed me more than a few times. But eventually you get calloused to it, or at least I did. Maybe some guy who came in to fix a toilet and got screamed at might not, but if someone worked for her regularly, they knew it came with the territory.”

“What about Mr. Ashe?” Jessie wanted to know, “was her relationship with him volatile too?”

“For sure,” Hayley said. “He’s just as—difficult to please—as she was, so they would really go at it sometimes, butting heads. They didn’t care who was there or how awkward it was for everyone else. But after a while I realized that it was just their communication style. They’d have a blow up and then most of the time, it was forgotten twenty minutes later.”

“Did their fights ever get violent?” Ryan asked.

Hayley shook her head. “Not that I ever saw.”

Jessie wanted to revisit another point.

“You said that ‘most of the time’ their fights were forgotten twenty minutes later. Were there times that someone held onto something?”

Hayley shifted on the couch again, and Jessie knew there was something there.

“I guess,” she finally said. “Mr. Ashe was always getting upset about how much money she spent, and she was always calling him a cheapskate. She’s bring home a Prada bag and he’d be mad because she already had two others. She got angry because he wouldn’t pay for a decent home security system. She complained that he made millions but wouldn’t shell out a few hundred dollars for some cameras.”

“Anything else?” Jessie pressed, sensing that Hayley was holding back.

The nanny glanced down at the floor when she answered that question.

“He also didn’t like her going out to clubs and bars so much.”

“Did she do that a lot?” Jessie asked.

“Some,” Hayley conceded, as if she was the one in trouble. “I think it bothered him that she would always go to this one particular bar and stay out real late.”

Jessie had another question but before she could ask it, a door off the living room shot open, slamming hard against the wall as a man stepped out. Jessie recognized him from the research materials that Beth had sent. It was Gabriel Ashe.

He looked very little like the official photos she’d seen. In those, he was always in a suit and tie, shaved, with his curly, Brillo pad-like hair coiffed as if he’d just been to the stylist. But today, he was in sweatpants and a t-shirt that hugged his ample belly. He had 24 hours’ worth of stubble, and his hair was sticking up as if he’d rubbed it against a balloon earlier.

“Marta!” he bellowed, looking in the direction of the kitchen, “I need something to eat, I can feel my blood sugar dropping as I speak. Get me some of those chicken

tenders that Alfie is always going on about.”

His demeanor didn’t suggest a man who was in mourning, and if Jessie hadn’t already known that he had an alibi—he was in a film pre-production meeting yesterday from 9 a.m. until noon—she would have set her sights directly on him. Jamil was currently checking whether the man had made any unusual payments lately that might correspond to a murder-for-hire plot, but for now, he appeared to be in the clear legally, if not morally.

Ashe seemed to sense that there were people watching him and turned in the direction of Jessie, Ryan, and Hayley. His eyes immediately narrowed, and his face turned bright red.

“Anyone want to tell me why there are two goddamn strangers sitting in my goddamn living room like they own the place?”

He stormed over as they got to their feet. Hayley started to explain, but he shut her down.

“Not you, nanny!” he spat before turning his attention to Ryan and Jessie. “Who the hell are you?”



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Jessie could feel Ryan stiffen beside her, even as her own spine got rigid.

Her husband had already gone at another witness too hard, and she feared he might do the same here too. It was something she expected from hotheaded HSS detective Susannah Valentine, not the head of the unit. But to her surprise, when Ryan spoke, his tone was all cool professionalism.

"Mr. Ashe, I'm Detective Hernandez with the Homicide Special Section Unit of the LAPD. Your wife's case has been reassigned to us, and I'm handling it in conjunction with our profiler, Jessie Hunt."

Hearing that name made Ashe briefly pause as he did a double take looking at Jessie. It was clear that he knew who she was. But when he responded he made no mention of it.

"Does HSS have anything new for me, or is it just more dead ends?" he demanded.

"We've only been on the case for a few hours," Ryan replied calmly, "so we're just getting our bearings. That's why we're here. We were hoping you might have had additional insights in the time since the previous detectives spoke to you yesterday."

Ashe shook his head angrily.

"Well, I haven't," he snarled. "I told them everything I know. Frankly in the time since I spoke to them I've been trying to plan a funeral in between keeping my kids from finding out the truth about what happened, so they don't have nightmares for the rest of their lives. And that's all happening while I have a movie about to go into

production in less than ten days. Everyone involved tells me how sorry they are about what happened, but no one offered to cancel a meeting or sit in for me or delay production. My assistant tells me that I've got over two dozen flower arrangements in my office. But could the studio shell out a couple of million to push production back a few days? No, they send me a gift basket with apricot jam and think that makes up for my wife getting choked to death right outside our bedroom. Do you know that I slept on the sofa in the game room last night? I couldn't stand to be anywhere near where it happened. So forgive me if I haven't been trying to come up with other "insights" to make your job easier. What I want to know is why you weren't the ones here yesterday. Isn't the first 24 hours the most important in a murder case? Where the hell have you been?"

Next to her, Jessie heard Ryan take a deep breath before answering. She hoped her husband saw what was clear to her: assuming Ashe was innocent, he was grieving in his own messed up way. She sensed from Ryan's restraint that he was trying to give the guy a little grace.

"Your wife's murder didn't initially fit the criteria for an HSS case," he explained. "But it does now. This morning, another woman was found strangled not too far from here. We think they may be connected."

That statement was the first to shut Ashe up. He seemed to struggle for words. When he finally did speak, his voice was marginally softer.

"That's why the profiler is here?" he asked.

They both nodded.

"We want to get to the bottom of this," Jessie assured him.

"Well, I guess I can't complain if the great Jessie Hunt is on the case," he said. "I

suppose I should be flattered that we made the cut.”

“That’s one way to look at it,” Ryan muttered, the edge returning to his voice.

Jessie jumped in before it got sharper. “We get that you’re under an incredible amount of stress, Mr. Ashe. And we don’t mean to add to that. But you’re right. The first few hours are crucial. Time is ticking away, not just for your wife and the other woman who was killed, but for possible new ones as well. If this is a serial killer, they might be out looking for their next victim as we speak. So anything you can share, no matter how small it might seem, could be helpful.”

Just then, Ashe’s cell phone rang. He looked down at it and then grunted in disgust.

“I don’t have anything for you,” he said. “Leave your card with the nanny and if I think of anything, I’ll call. But unless there’s something else, I’ve got to take this. It’s the head of the studio and somehow I don’t think this is going to be a condolence call.”

He didn’t even wait for a response, instead spinning on his heel, returning to his office and slamming the door so hard that the floor-to-ceiling windows shook. A moment later, someone Jessie assumed was little Cammie started to cry in the distance.

“I should deal with that,” Hayley said.

“We have just a couple more questions,” Jessie told her. “I’m sure Marta can handle things for a few minutes.”

“Okay,” Hayley said resignedly, slumping back on the couch.

“Does he even know your name?” Ryan asked, handing her his business card.

"He does," she answered. "He calls me "nanny" when he's angry. But when he needs something, it's "Hayley." He thinks he's being smooth and charming, but he's not."

Jessie sat back down and leaned forward so that she and Hayley were only a few feet apart. She locked eyes with the young woman. "Before he came out of his office, we were talking about Sydney going to a particular bar, remember?"

"Uh-huh," Hayley said unenthusiastically.

"And how Gabriel didn't love her going there?"

"I remember," Hayley answered, obviously not excited to return to the subject.

That only made Jessie more keen to pursue it.

"Why did she like going there so much, Hayley?" Jessie pressed, leaning in even closer so that her nose and the nanny's were only a couple of feet apart, "and please remember that you're speaking with law enforcement."

Hayley looked down at the carpet again before meeting Jessie's gaze. "It might have been because of the bartender," she said quietly.

Jessie wasn't hugely surprised that it was something like that and immediately moved on to her next question.

"What bartender?"

"I think his name was Brian," Hayley said uncertainly. "Mrs. Ashe never talked about him to me, but I heard her on the phone with him a few times. I know he works just down the hill at a place on Highland Avenue called The Shot."

“I realize that this is sensitive,” Jessie began, “but from their conversations, did you get the impression that Mrs. Ashe’s relationship with Brian might be more intimate than just patron and bartender?”

Hayley sighed. “She definitely sounded flirty on the phone,” she acknowledged. “And from the way she talked to him, it sounded like they had...familiarity. At least until recently.”

“What do you mean?” Ryan asked.

Hayley shrugged before answering. “I don’t know anything for sure, but when I was getting the kids ready for the park yesterday morning, I heard her talking to someone and she sounded upset. She said something like ‘he says I bore him now.’ The way she said it, it didn’t sound like she was talking about her husband. She seemed genuinely hurt, which was rare for her.”

“Do you think that Mr. Ashe might have known about this ‘familiarity’ with Brian?” Jessie wanted to know.

“I don’t think so,” Hayley said. “Mrs. Ashe wasn’t the most discreet person in the world, but she wouldn’t flaunt something like that. I never heard her on the phone with Brian when Mr. Ashe was home. As much as she gave him a hard time, I got the sense that she knew she couldn’t push too hard. After all, he’s the one with the money and the power.”

Just then, Marta came out from the back, holding the bawling Cammie. “She will not settle no matter what I do. You are better with her. Are you done out here?”

“Am I?” Hayley.

Ryan looked at Jessie. She couldn’t think of any more questions right now, at least

not any she was comfortable asking under the current circumstances. She nodded her head.

“We’re good for now,” Ryan told her standing up. “But please give Mr. Ashe our card and remind him that we’d like him to call if he remembers anything else. And here’s another one for you, just in case something else pops up. Don’t hesitate to reach out.”

“Of course,” Hayley said, standing up and taking Cammie, who almost immediately quieted down.

Marta, looking unsurprised but a little miffed at the baby’s quick change in mood, led them back to the front of the house. Once she closed the door, Ryan asked, “thoughts?”

Jessie had one that stood out.

“My initial thought is that we should head down the hill and get a drink. There’s a bartender I’d like to talk to.”

He was late for work.

It wasn't the end of the world. After all, his job wasn't the standard nine to five gig and it's not like people expected him to be at their beck and call exactly on time. But still, he tried to arrive at least close to when he was supposed to so as to not alienate the folks who put money in his pockets.

He had a legitimate reason for being behind schedule, although it wasn't one he could share with the people who paid his bills: he was doing reconnaissance. Some people might call it stalking, and technically, they might have a point.

But to him, stalking was watching someone passively without a clear motive. The stalking could lead to something more or it might just be a way to pass the time. Reconnaissance was something deeper. One didn't do reconnaissance just for the hell of it. It indicated a sense of purpose.

And he had a purpose. Just like with the first two women, this one would be part of what he'd come to consider his personal payback tour. And just like the other two, he intended to get the satisfaction that came from watching the life fade from her eyes, a direct result of his actions, of his power.

He'd had so much power taken from him, especially recently, that it was nice to seize some back. When he'd first begun the personal payback tour, it had almost been by accident. He hadn't intended for things to get violent with Sydney Ashe, but she'd made it difficult for him to avoid it.

The way she spoke to him, her casually dismissive tone, had at one time been

something that he could put up with. But now he couldn't abide it. And when, at his most vulnerable moment, when he was in such emotional pain, she steamrolled him and swatted away his hurt as if he was a bug, he just snapped. He couldn't let it stand, so he turned the tables and showed her, for once, that she wasn't the boss.

And now that he knew how good it felt to teach her a lesson, he'd couldn't fight off the urge to recreate that feeling. So he stopped trying and gave in to it. Suddenly a whole new world had opened up to him, one in which he could take back the power he'd lost by snatching it away from these women, who were so used to plowing through men like him.

One thing he knew for certain: he had no intention of stopping anytime soon. Not until either the need for payback subsided or they caught him. And he didn't see either of those happening anytime soon.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Jessie was having trouble keeping up with everything.

As they drove downhill along the snaking road, they reviewed where they stood with Jamil and Beth on the phone. As requested, Jamil had looked into Gabriel Ashe's personal finances to see if there were any unusual recent payments that might suggest that he'd hired someone to take out his wife. There were none.

The researchers had also already done an impressive job reaching out to multiple people on the Ashe family's provider list in order to check alibis. They'd made initial contact with the gardener, the masseuse, and yoga instructor and were confirming their stories. They'd also left messages with the dog walker, the personal trainer, and the hypnotherapist.

Based on what Hayley had told them, Jamil was also looking at the family's bank records to determine the names of the manicurist and acupuncturist. Beth had also discovered that a contractor had come by a week ago to give them a quote on resurfacing their deck. She was attempting to reach him too. But when Jessie told them about Brian the bartender, they'd set all of those tasks aside to determine who he was.

"According to what I see," Beth told them after a minute of searching online, "there only seems to be one bartender at The Shot named Brian—Brian Barber. There's a publicity photo and mini biography of him on the website."

"What kind of a bar has publicity photos of their staff?" Ryan wondered.

"One in the heart of Hollywood," Jessie noted.

“Oh right,” Ryan said before asking Beth, “what does it say about him?”

“His title is listed as mixologist,” Beth said, amused. “It doesn’t give his age, but I’d guess that he’s right around thirty. He’s from Charlotte, North Carolina, and has lived in L.A. for six years. And I have to say he’s quite a looker.”

“Yeah, well that looker has a sketchy history,” Jamil noted, sounding mildly put out by Beth’s description of the guy. “He’s had two restraining orders against him since he moved here, though neither escalated beyond that.”

Jessie knew why Jamil was pouting. It had become clear in recent months that the relationship between him and Beth had become more than just friendly co-workers. They occasionally made comments in passing that indicated that they were spending quality time together outside the office. While Jessie wasn’t certain that things had become romantic, she was sure of one thing: Jamil certainly wouldn’t object to the proposition.

“That certainly seems like something worth addressing with him when we chat,” Ryan said of the restraining orders.

“There’s something else you might want to bring up!” Beth said excitedly.

“What?” Jessie and Ryan asked in unison.

“I was looking over the bar’s Instagram page and using facial recognition to see if I could get any hits on Sydney Ashe. Sure enough, it looks like she was there the night before last. In fact, there’s an image of her talking to Barber in the background of one photo.”

“Can you send us a screenshot of that?” Ryan asked.

“Absolutely,” Beth said.

”Great,” Ryan replied. ”Good work guys. We should be at The Shot in less than ten minutes, so don”t hesitate to send us anything else you find in the interim. Talk soon.”

Jessie was about end the call when Beth shouted out.

“Hold on!”

“What’s wrong?” Jessie asked.

“I just did another facial recognition search on a whim,” Beth explained. “Guess who was at The Shot last night?”

Jessie didn’t need any coaxing.

“Erin Podemski?”

“Exactly!” Beth said excitedly. “She’s not talking to Barber in the picture, but they are in the same frame. The timestamp is 7:04 p.m.”

Jessie felt Ryan press down on the accelerator at hearing the news, taking the sharp turn at about double the speed limit.

“Fantastic,” Jessie told the researcher, “That helps narrow her time of death too. Now we know she was alive at least an hour after her last text communication with Nikki Fleetwood.”

“And even if she left right after that photo was taken,” Ryan added, “It’s probably safe to assume that she didn’t get back home until close to 7:30, narrowing the

window even more.”

“Way to think outside the box, Beth,” Jessie added. “You guys know how to reach us if you find anything else.”

“We sure do,” Beth said, clearly proud of her work.

Jessie hung up and turned to Ryan.

My love,” she said.

Yeah?” he replied, his eyes fixed on the road.

“I know this guy just moved to the top of the suspect list, but I’m worried we might not get to interview him.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because at the speed you’re going, we’re going to fly off the road, fall down the cliff into the canyon, and die in massive fireball. So can you please slow down!”

“Sorry,” Ryan said, slowing down, but only slightly.

Jessie closed her eyes. She’d seen all manner of horrors in her thirty-one years, but for some reason, she couldn’t handle this.

“From now on,” she said, “I’m driving.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Jessie's stomach began to churn as she watched the sun start to disappear over the horizon, blanketing the city in growing darkness.

Their murderer had killed two women yesterday. What were the chances that they would go another full day without trying again? She hoped that the man they were going to see now would end up being their killer and they could put an end to the hunt. But even if he was, proving it would be another challenge.

It was still only 4:30, but with the approach of early evening came the crowds at The Shot, which was apparently busy at all hours of the day. According to a text sent by Jamil, it had recently been voted by one local style magazine as the third hottest bar in L.A. this year, whatever that meant.

Parking was hard to come by, but Ryan found a spot in the loading zone next to the bar and displayed his police placard so he wouldn't get ticketed. They got out, and Jessie held out her palm expectantly. Looking like a naughty schoolboy, Ryan handed over the keys.

They walked to the entrance of the bar, which had only tiny, red, graffiti-style lettering on the wall near the entrance to indicate the name of the establishment. The place was not unlike many other cooler-than-you bars in the area in that there was almost no way to know it was a bar at all.

The Shot was located at one end of strip mall that also housed a laundromat, a doughnut shop and a payday loan office. If not for the line of people stretching from the door to the adjacent alleyway and the bouncer deciding whether they got in, it would be easy to mistake the place for an abandoned storefront.

They passed the crowd of people waiting and approached the doorman, a burly dude in all black with a shaved head and a beard that reached his sternum. The guy spread his legs a little wider as they walked up, anticipating trouble. But when Ryan flashed his badge, he nodded and stepped aside without a word. Apparently, he was used to visits from law enforcement.

Once they moved inside, the dusk of the outdoors was replaced by the even dimmer lighting inside. It took several moments to adjust. Once she did, Jessie saw that the entire place was defined by alternating red and black. Not just the walls, but the banquettes and tablecloths too. Even the servers wore black with narrow red belts. Jessie noted that they appeared to be leather.

They approached the bar, where she saw their guy using two metal shakers to prepare something for a woman who was staring at him googly-eyed. Jessie understood why. Beth had been right. Brian Barber was a beautiful man.

Easily six foot three and muscular in more of a lanky surfer than a bodybuilder way, he had blond hair with bangs that fell just slightly into his brown eyes. Even in the dark of the bar, his tan skin glowed, and when he flashed a cocky smile at the woman ogling him, his teeth were near-blinding in their white brilliance. She pretended not to notice for Ryan's benefit, but her husband seemed oblivious to the man's physical charms as he slid past several patrons to get closer.

"Brian Barber?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.

Barber gave him half a glance before returning his attention to the drink. "I can give you an autograph later, man," he said dismissively. "Right now I'm helping the lady."

"Once you finish with that drink, we need to talk," Ryan told him.

Barber eyed him more closely now. After a second of irritation, he offered that grin

again.

“No one would dispute that you’re a good-looking hunk of beef,” he told Ryan, “and I’m happy to make you a drink. But you should know up front that I don’t swing that way. Sorry to disappoint.”

“I’m flattered by the whole ‘hunk of beef’ thing,” Ryan replied, clearly ambivalent to the compliment, “but it’s not that kind of talk.”

“What then?”

“It’s the sort of thing you’re going to want to go on break for,” Ryan told him as diplomatically as he could.

Barber poured the beverage concoction into a tall, frosted glass, added a cherry and a tiny umbrella, and slid it over to the woman, who looked annoyed at having to share his attention.

“I just started my shift a half hour ago,” Barber said. “The powers that be wouldn’t appreciate me taking a break this soon.”

“Trust me, it’s better than the alternative,” Ryan said.

Something about his tone gave Barber pause, even though he still appeared skeptical.

“I need five minutes, Kelleigh,” he called out to the female bartender across the way. She looked puzzled but waved in acknowledgment. He turned back to Ryan and Jessie. “Let’s go over there.”

He pointed to a roped-off section of the bar with a sign hanging from it that read: reserved. They followed him. Jessie noted that like all the other employees of The

Shot, he too wore a red leather belt. He stepped over the rope and took a seat at the four-top in the corner. They joined him.

“You’re cops, right?” he said.

“How did you know?” Ryan asked, showing his badge and ID.

“I wasn’t sure,” Barber replied. “But your total lack of interest in me or a drink and your casual arrogance were clues. Also, you’ve got that gun-shaped bulge under your sports jacket.”

Jessie found it both amusing and alarming that Barber thought Ryan exuded casual arrogance when he appeared to define the trait. She wasn’t sure what to make of it. Was the guy just supremely overconfident, or was he being intentionally blustery to mask something darker?

“Maybe you should be a detective,” Ryan said to him sharply.

“Maybe I should,” Barber agreed. “I auditioned for one in an episode of Coptown, USA a few months back. But they went for a swarthy, short dude. I think it was his mustache that made the difference. What is this about? Because last time I checked, I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“We both know that’s not true, Mr. Barber,” Ryan said, officially commencing the interrogation portion of the conversation.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the bartender asked, looking truly uncomfortable for the first time since their arrival.

“Two restraining orders when you’ve only lived here for six years?” Ryan observed.

“That’s not a great percentage.”



“Both of those were misunderstandings,” Barber insisted quickly. “And there weren’t any more issues with either woman. That’s old news. You can check.”

“We already did,” Ryan assured him.

“So what is this then?” he demanded. “Do you have a specific question or do detectives just like to show up periodically to harass people who’ve paid their debt to society.”

“I’m not a detective,” Jessie said, speaking for the first time.

Barber was looking at her in confusion when Ryan added “what debt have you actually paid, Mr. Barber?”

The bartender turned his attention back to the detective, not sure if that was a rhetorical question or a real one. Jessie didn’t let him ponder it too long.

“Do you know Sydney Ashe?” she asked, studying him closely.

Barber looked at her again. With the way he kept turning his head back and forth, he reminded her of a spectator at a tennis match. But this time, he lingered on her. He didn’t need to reply for Jessie to know the truth. His eyes were full of guilt. The question was: about what?

“Yes,” he said slowly.

“And you know that she was killed?” Jessie pressed.

“I saw that on the news,” he conceded.

“Why didn’t you come forward when you found out?” she asked.

“Why would I?” he said carefully. “What business is it of mine?”

“Well, you were sleeping with her, for one thing,” Jessie replied matter-of-factly.

“So?” he shot back, equally direct.

“You don’t see that as at all relevant?” Ryan interjected.

“I sleep with a lot of women, Detective,” Barber told him with a smarmy smile. “I didn’t know I had to report it to the cops every time something happens in their lives.”

Jessie stifled the desire to slap him across the face and pressed ahead.

“Nothing is happening in her life anymore,” she pointed out. “That’s why we’re here.”

“You know what I meant,” Barber said quickly.

“Did you recently break it off with her?” Jessie asked, ignoring his comment.

“There was nothing to break off,” he told her. “We enjoyed each other’s company, at least physically. But then she got needy. She wanted to go places, to have meaningful conversations. That wasn’t the deal, so I moved on. To be clear, there was no relationship to break off.”

“Did you get tired of her being so needy?” Ryan wondered. “Maybe decide to put an end to it?”

Barber leaned back in his chair, seeming to calculate the amount of trouble he might be in. Jessie still wasn’t sure if he was just an egotistical, horny wannabe actor or

merely using that as a cover for something more disturbing. For a guy being questioned about a woman's murder, he seemed awfully nonchalant to her, at least until now.

"Do I need a lawyer here?" he asked.

"You started out this chat by saying you did nothing wrong," Ryan reminded him. "Are you retracting that statement? Is that why you're asking about a lawyer?"

"I really don't like your accusatory tone, Detective," Barber replied, either really offended or play-acting at it.

"Right back at you," Ryan said.

Jessie could feel things going off the rails slightly and decided she needed to tighten the screws in a more productive manner. "Were you sleeping with Erin Podemski too?" she asked flatly.

Barber tore his attention away from his staredown with Ryan and fixed it on her. It took him a couple of seconds to grasp what she was asking.

"I don't think so," he said, "Who's that?"

Jessie showed him a photo from her phone.

"No, I haven't been with her," he said huffily, as if she wasn't up to his standards and he was insulted by the question.

"But you recognize her."

"I think so," he answered. "She might have been in here recently."

“How about last night?” Jessie wondered.

“Okay, if you say so,” Barber replied with a shrug.

”She was here,” Jessie assured him, showing him the Instagram photo that Beth had found, ”and now she”s dead too.”

Barber was quiet for a few seconds.

“I don’t like where this is going,” he finally said. “Now I really think I should call a lawyer.”

“That’s one way to go,” Jessie told him, briskly moving past the idea, “or you could just tell us where you were between 9 a.m. and noon yesterday and later that night between 6 p.m. and midnight.”

Barber seemed to weigh whether it was in his interest to answer the question. After a moment he smiled.

“That’s all you want to know?” he asked, his confidence returning. “Okay. I was asleep until at least noon yesterday, like almost every day when I don’t have an audition.”

“Can anyone verify that?” Ryan asked.

“The girl I was with, I guess.”

“Who was that?” Ryan pressed.

“I can’t remember her name right now, but I have it in my phone,” he said pulling it out. “I’ll need a minute to find it. We had brunch at the coffee shop down the block

from my place. Then I sent her on her way. Here it is. Her name was Gayle. I can send you her number if you want.

Jessie, increasingly disgusted by the man, didn't directly respond to his offer. "And last night?

"I was here."

"Until when?" she demanded

"From just before six until about 2:30 a.m. We close at two, but there's always cleanup after. But if you want a thorough accounting of my evening, I should probably admit that I took an extra-long dinner break."

"From when to when?" Ryan asked.

"About ten to 10:45."

"Why?" Ryan asked, though Jessie had an idea. Barber would only volunteer a detail like that if it served his purposes.

"I met a nice girl and I wanted to show her the storage room," he said with a smirk.

"So I showed it to her—a few times."

Jessie did her best to hide her revulsion. Brian Barber was the epitome of everything she detested. She'd love to lock him up just for his attitude. But she was beginning to doubt whether she'd get a chance to lock him up at all.

"We're going to need her name too," she replied without emotion, refusing to let him get a rise out of her.

“I’ll try to remember it,” he promised smarmily.

“Get it now,” Ryan instructed. “We’re talking to both of them before your break ends. And if they don’t both confirm everything you’ve said, your shift is ending early tonight.”

Jessie watched as Barber scrolled through his phone, looking for the storeroom conquest. While she waited, she came to two equally unsatisfying realizations. First, unless something else materialized unexpectedly, they had no other leads to follow tonight. They might have to start fresh in the morning.

And two, as appalled by him as she was, she already knew the truth in her bones: this wasn’t their guy. Their killer was still out there.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Chloe Henshall was exhausted.

For someone who didn't draw a salary, she felt like she sure worked hard.

She got out of her car service ride and wandered—trudged, more accurately—along the path to the front door, making a mental note to call the body shop to see if her car would be ready soon. While her driver, Albert, was a sweetheart, she wanted her personal vehicle back. It was her safe space.

Chloe tried not to let self-pity creep in. After all, she'd chosen this life. She could have happily enjoyed the spoils of being married to a tech mogul and spent her days getting facials or playing tennis at the club.

Instead she's decided to make use of the blessings she'd been given and do something worthwhile. That was why she had started the Henshall Scholarship Foundation. And she was proud of it. In just four years of existence, they'd provided over two millions dollars to 125 students from underprivileged backgrounds. The goal was help these kids finish college without any debt, something she hadn't been so lucky to do.

She got to the front door of her Hollywood Hills mansion and waved to Albert that he could leave. As he pulled away, she reminded herself that even if she'd had it rough for a while, she was in no position to complain right now. Yes, she'd had to work her way through school and graduated with nearly \$100,000 in student loans to pay off.

But now she was married to Sean, an amazing (if serially absent-minded) guy who was both kind enough and wealthy enough to pay all that off for her. She lived in this incredible home. And just last month, they'd finally found a surrogate they liked. Her

life was better than 99% of the population, so if she had to spend six hours at an endless foundation meeting going over Department of Education scholarship eligibility requirements, that was a small price to pay.

She opened the door and stepped inside, locking it behind her. Slipping off her shoes even before leaving the foyer, she dropped her files on the console table and headed for the kitchen to get a snack. Missy, their white poodle, ran up and licked her ankle. Chloe was just fishing a treat out for her when the doorbell rang.

She glanced at the security system's app on her phone to see who it was. Unfortunately the front door camera wasn't facing the porch but pointing down at a hedge off to the side. She wondered if it had been blown that way by the heavy winds in the last day or two. Since it was too high for her to reach, she'd have to ask Sean to fix it when he got home.

The bell rang again. Missy was small but had a tendency to bark and leap at visitors, so Chloe closed off the kitchen to make sure she wouldn't get out and "attack" whoever was at the door. With that done, she headed back the way she came. It was at times like this that she half-wished they had a permanent live-in housekeeper rather than the one that came in three times a week. Then, she could just ask them to greet potential guests.

She looked through the peephole, partly hoping it might be a solicitor so she could just ignore them. But it wasn't. In fact, this was someone she didn't mind seeing. She unlocked the door and opened it wide.

"Hey," she said with a smile, "I didn't expect to see you back here so soon. Did I forget something earlier?"

"No," he said. "This is a little embarrassing. I have another job nearby, but it's not for another half hour. Since I was already right here, I thought I'd see if I could stop



in and borrow your restroom really quick. Sorry to bother you.”

“No, it’s cool,” she said. “I was just trying to figure out what Sean and I might have for dinner. Come on in. I could get you some water too.”

“Actually, that would be great,” he said. “I finished my last bottle about an hour ago and I don’t have another one.”

“Not a problem,” she said, motioning for him to come in and closing the door after him. “Besides, it looks like you could use a little break from the elements. You’re shivering.”

“I have to confess,” he said, turning to face her as they walked down the hall, “I’m not shivering because of the cold. I’m just nervous.”

“Why?” Chloe asked. “You’re one of the most chill people I know.”

In fact, now that she thought about she couldn’t remember him ever seeming ill at ease.

He shook his head, looking awkward. “It’s just that I have to do something soon and I’m starting to have second thoughts about it, like maybe I should reconsider whether it’s really worth it.”

Chloe smiled. “I don’t know what this ‘something’ is, but in general, I think it’s a good idea to go for it. You know, try to push past your fears. I apologize if this is overstepping, but may I ask if this is related to a woman?”

“It is, actually,” he answered bashfully.

“Exciting,” she said as they made their way through the living room toward the

kitchen. “Do I know her?”

“That’s the thing,” he said, pausing for several seconds before continuing. “It’s you.”

Chloe, about to open the kitchen door, stopped in her tracks. Behind the door, Missy yapped excitedly, sensing a visitor on the other side.

“Oh, that’s so sweet,” Chloe said as diplomatically as she could, “but you should know, you’re talking to maybe the most happily married woman in L.A. Sorry if that bursts your bubble.”

He smiled back at her, almost apologetically.

“You misunderstand,” he said slowly. “I’m not confessing a crush. That’s not what I meant that I have to do.”

It was only then that she noticed what he was gripping tightly in both hands. Before she could do or say anything, he had swung it around her neck. He began to twist and squeeze it as she stumbled back, falling to the floor. He climbed on top of her, pulling at the ends, his knuckles white from the effort.

Chloe gasped, trying to catch her breath, but no air could get in. She stared up at his eyes, so warm earlier, now full of frenzied rage. Her vision began to blur as her arms, batting futilely at his chest, grew weak.

Even though Missy was a mere few feet away, only separated from them by a door, her yelps sounded like they were coming from a great distance. And then Chloe couldn’t hear them at all.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Hannah approached the Omega Sigma fraternity house with trepidation.

It was 9:15, late enough for some people to be out partying on a Thursday night but not so deep into the evening that things had started to get raucous. The last—and only—time she'd been to this place, there had been a huge, raging party going on, with a line of people waiting to get in. But tonight she was able to simply walk up to the pleasantly modern if antiseptic three-story structure and ring the doorbell.

As she waited, she could hear the sounds of The Steve Miller Band's "Take the Money and Run" playing inside. It wasn't blasting too loud, but she found it hard to imagine anyone inside could concentrate. She also noted with some amusement that this wasn't the same kind of music they'd played at that party two weeks ago. That night, it had been Dua Lipa and Olivia Rodrigo. But with no coeds to entertain, these guys had apparently retreated to the comfortable world of 1970s classic rock.

For a moment, she considered bailing. This place made her uncomfortable, and she had no obligation to this Reggie Calderone person. But she knew she wouldn't do it. If this guy had really been wronged in some way, she knew she had a better chance of helping than most folks.

And she had to admit, there was something exciting about possibly taking on an investigation, even if it just involved college kids. It scratched the itch that was constantly irritating her, making her look for thrills in otherwise less altruistic ways.

The door opened and she was face to face with a scruffy, curly-haired guy with a weeks' worth of unkempt stubble, wearing a plaid work shirt. "Who are you here for?" he asked chipperly.

“I’m supposed to meet Finn Anderton,” she said, far more reserved than her greeter.

“Okay, come on in. I think he’s in the kitchen,” he said, opening the door before turning and screaming, “Hey Finn, visitor!”

“Thanks,” she said, stepping inside.

“Sure,” he said. “He should be up in a minute.”

Instead of waiting with her, the guy headed over to one of the three ratty living room couches spread out in a “U” formation around the giant screen TV showing an NBA game. He plopped down next to another guy and immediately started complaining about how the Nuggets were totally going to choke.

“Hey, Hannah,” someone called out, pulling her attention away from the living room scene. It was Finn coming up the stairs from what she assumed was the kitchen. He was wearing faded jeans and a gray school sweatshirt. Unlike this morning, his blond hair was brushed, though it still looked casually mussed, as if he couldn’t be bothered to spend the time on it. In his hand was a bag of cookies.

“Hi,” she said when he got to her.

“Sorry for not being up here to greet you but I was looking for a snack to offer you,” he explained. “Unfortunately, this is all I could scrounge up. You like chocolate chip?”

“Sure,” she said, taking one from the bag.

“I don’t want to be a cliché, but can I offer you a drink too, beer maybe? Or water?”

“I’m good, thanks,” she assured him. There was no way she was accepting any

beverage provided to her here. “Do we want to do this?”

Finn smiled at her.

“I can tell you’re really uncomfortable being here and I appreciate that you came anyway, so I’ll skip the pleasantries. Shall we go up to Reggie’s room?”

Suddenly, Hannah was overcome with second thoughts. Had she really agreed to come to this fraternity house and, more than that, up to the bedroom of some guy she didn’t know with another guy she barely knew? She was now kicking herself for not telling her roommate, Lizzie, where she was going.

“I guess,” she said hesitantly, “but you should know that if I feel sketched out at any point, I reserve the right to kick both your asses. And since you know about my history, you know I can do it.”

“I have no doubt,” he said, his grin getting even bigger, “but I can assure you, no violence will be necessary.”

As they walked up the stairs, Hannah could hear enthusiastic hollering from somewhere up above, as if several guys were engaged in some kind of competition and others were cheering them on. Their voices echoed off the stairwell walls, creating a teeth-rattling echo. When they reached the second floor, Finn indicated that they should head down the long hallway. The fluorescent lights that ran along the ceiling flickered slightly.

“We should probably get those replaced,” Finn said, noting her glance up.

“That might be good,” she agreed as she walked along the sticky linoleum floor. “It could give the place less of an ‘abandoned mental hospital’ vibe. You guys might also consider mopping the floors occasionally, maybe using something with a fresh,

sanitized scent to cover the smell of beer and whatever got burned recently.”

“I think it might have been grilled cheese,” Finn admitted sheepishly. “I wasn’t here but apparently it set off the fire detectors this afternoon.”

They were halfway down the hallway and what had been flickering overhead lights now turned to semi-darkness as the majority of them the rest of the way were burned out.

“How much farther is the room?” she asked, turning to Finn. “I feel like I’m in a Saw movie or something.”

“Sorry,” he replied sheepishly. “I guess we don’t really notice this kind of stuff until a guest points it out. Reggie’s room is the last one on the left.”

When they finally arrived, Hannah noticed that the light seeping out from under the door was red, which didn’t inspire confidence.

“Why don’t you do the honors?” she requested of her host, trying to keep the discomfort out of her voice.

Finn nodded and banged on the door. “Hey Reggie, it’s Finn. I’m here with the guest I told you about. Can we come in?”

“It’s unlocked,” Reggie called out from behind the door.

Finn opened it and dramatically gestured for Hannah to enter. She did, surveying the room. It was immediately clear where the red came from. The overhead lights were off, but Reggie had a large lava lamp on a desk, which illuminated the room just enough for her to get a sense of it.

To her surprise, it was much tidier than the rest of the house. There were no clothes on the floor, all the shelves were neatly arranged with his books, and the bed that Reggie was lying on was made. He sat up as she entered.

Reggie had dark skin, a tightly shorn scalp, and anxious brown eyes. He was wearing jeans and a gray Omega Sigma hoodie. He offered a shy smile as he stood up to shake her hand.

“Thanks for coming,” he said quietly. “I’m Reggie.”

Hannah was startled and mildly embarrassed that she hadn’t picked up on one of Reggie’s primary features until he was standing. The guy was enormous. Hannah was five foot nine, and she estimated that he was probably close to a foot taller than her.

“Hi, Reggie,” she said, trying not to let her jaw drop. “I hear you’re having some kind of issue that Finn thought I could help with.”

“Yeah,” he said, pulling out his desk chair for her before returning to his bed. Finn leaned against the dresser along the wall. Hannah took the seat and waited for Reggie to go on. When he stayed silent, she realized she was going to have to prod him.

Before she could, the music downstairs changed from Steve Miller to Ariana Grande and got about twenty percent louder.

“What’s that all about?” she asked Finn.

“Oh, that,” he said. “We have a party starting at 9:30. I guess the social committee chairman realized that classic rock is like female repellent and decided to go with something that won’t scare all the ladies away.”

“Good call,” she said. Even though the song was less objectionable, it was still

overwhelmingly loud. She tried to block it out and focus on Reggie. "Why don't you tell me about this issue you're having?"

"Okay," he replied reluctantly, as he rubbed his scalp. It seemed to be a self-soothing technique. "I got accused of cheating on a test this morning and I don't know what to do."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she told him. "Can you give me some more details? The name of the class? Who accused you? That sort of thing."

"Oh, right," he said, nodding. "The class is Stats—Statistics. It's my required math course for the semester. It was the final exam for the fall. I don't know who accused me. A little after the class ended, the T.A. texted me and told me to go to the professor's office. When I got there, they were both there, and the professor said there had been an accusation that I was copying off another student. He said that while it was being investigated my grade would be put on hold and I'd be temporarily suspended from all school-sponsored activities, including basketball."

"You're on the school basketball team?" Hannah confirmed.

"Yeah," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "I have a scholarship. The professor said the investigation would probably take at least a week. But we've got two games during that time. One is this Saturday in South Dakota. The other is a huge one against Santa Clara. They've only lost twice all year. I can't miss that game."

"I hear you," Hannah said, choosing her next words delicately. "Please don't take offense at this question, but we need to be really honest with each other before going any farther. Did you cheat on the exam, Reggie? I'm not judging you, but I need to know if you're trying to prove your innocence or just hoping to find a way to work the system so that you can play in these games."



Reggie looked at her, and his eyes were watery. "I did not cheat. I'm not an amazing student, but I'm decent at math. I had a "B" going into the final and when I was done, I felt like I might have actually bumped it up a little."

"All right," Hannah said, leaning forward. "So you didn't cheat, but someone who remains anonymous claimed you did. I know that most of my classes have cameras in the classrooms. Do you know if that one does?"

"Yes, and I told the professor to check it, that he'd see I never looked at anyone else's test," he answered plaintively. "He told me that he would but that he'd never been in a situation like this before and getting access to the footage might take a while. I complained that it wasn't fair to punish me without proof."

"And how did he respond to that?"

"He said that if the accusation didn't hold up, it wouldn't impact my grade," Reggie explained. "But I explained to him that it was about more than that. Once the coach gets the official word about this accusation and I get suspended—even if it's retracted—I have to miss these games. Plus, the coach is old school. If he thinks I can't be trusted, I'm going to fall out of the rotation just when I started getting some quality playing time."

"What does that mean exactly, 'fall out of the rotation?'" Hannah asked. She had a casual knowledge of basketball, which he'd just exceeded.

"It's like this," he said. "I'm only a sophomore, and Coach doesn't usually like to play younger guys. But I managed to get into some games and play well, so he gave me more playing time. In fact, just last week, I was inserted into the starting lineup, which is a big deal. It means I get to play more minutes, score more points, and make a bigger contribution in general. But if this suspension holds up, even for a few days, I'll be back to sitting on the bench."

“And it’s potentially worse than that,” Finn added. “The coach might not play him at all because if Reggie is put into games when he’s academically ineligible, it could void any wins the team gets. The coach might decide it’s not worth the risk. Bigger picture, if Reggie’s name isn’t completely cleared, his scholarship might even be in jeopardy.”

“Okay, I get it now,” Hannah said. “So we’ve got a false accusation of cheating, which will almost certainly not hold up in the end. But in the interim, it could cost you a spot on the team in the short term, and maybe for good. Is that all right?”

“Yes,” both guys said at once.

“So,” she concluded, “the question we should be asking is: who benefits from you getting suspended?”

Both guys were silent. Hannah decided to prompt them.

“I’m assuming it doesn’t matter either way to the professor or the T.A., although we can never be sure of that,” she mused. “But I’m wondering, who was getting all that playing time before you started doing well?”

Reggie sat up straighter as he rubbed his head again.

“I took minutes from a few players, but I guess the guy it hurt the most was Marvin Jost,” he said. “He was starting until I took his spot. He used to play about thirty minutes a game, but since I’ve been starting, he plays less than half that.”

“How did he react to that?” Hannah wondered.

Reggie shrugged.

“He hasn’t said anything, but you can tell from his body language that he isn’t happy,” he said. “I can’t blame him.”

“Is Marvin Jost in your stats class?” Hannah asked.

“No, it’s an intro class, mostly underclassmen,” Reggie said. “He’s a senior.”

“Okay, are there any other teammates in the class, ones who might be friendly with Marvin?”

“Uh-uh. I’m the only basketball player in the class.”

Hannah sat quietly for a moment, studying Reggie’s floor, then looked up.

“Marvin’s a senior and an athlete, so he’s probably made a lot of friends in his time at school. They wouldn’t have to be on the team to want to help him out. Do you have a class list?”

“Yeah,” Reggie said, “the professor made a Google doc so we could create study groups and stuff like that.”

“Show it to me,” Hannah instructed.

She stood up so Reggie could have his chair. He sat at his desk and pulled up the list on his computer. There were thirty-six names listed.

“All right,” Hannah said, “Do you mind if I take over for a minute?”

Reggie shook his head and got up so she could take his place. She sat down, inhaled deeply, and started typing.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

She was at his desk for more than a minute.

In fact, it was about fifteen minutes, during which both guys stood silently over her shoulder as she worked. When she finally stopped typing and turned around to face them, Finn and Reggie were staring at her like she was some kind of alien.

“What’s wrong?” she asked self-consciously.

“Nothing,” Reggie said.

She looked at Finn.

“I just don’t know what to say,” he admitted. “I was trying to follow what you were doing but I got lost what with all the databases and programs you were using. It was like watching a chef move around their kitchen.”

“Yeah, well I’m actually a halfway decent cook too, so I guess it makes sense,” she said, unable to hide her pride. “You want to know what I found?”

They both nodded vigorously. She turned back around and pointed at the screen.

“As far as I can tell, there are three credible suspects,” she told them. “Each of them have multiple ties to Jost and two of them have known him for a couple of years at least. But in both of those cases, it looks like the relationships are casual, sharing a few classes or being in the same clubs. It’s this third person I’m most interested in.”

“Sherry Braid?” Finn asked, looking at the screen.

“Right,” Hannah said. “Do you know her, Reggie?”

“Not really,” he said. “I mean, I see her in class and I’m sure I’ve passed her around campus. But I don’t think we’ve ever even talked.”

“Well,” Hannah said, pulling up a new tab with a photo from the school paper. “I can assure you that she’s talked to Marvin Jost. In fact, I think they’re secretly dating.”

“How do you know?” Reggie asked.

“This photo was a candid from a fundraiser hosted by Black Student Union, which they’re members of,” she noted, before pointing at the corner of the picture. “I used a facial recognition program to find it, among others. Look at them. They’re not looking at each other, but they’re extremely close. I’d call their physical positioning comfortable, maybe even intimate.”

“Don’t you think you’re reaching just a little bit?” Finn asked skeptically.

“Maybe,” Hannah conceded, “but apparently so is Marvin.”

She pulled up another photo from Marvin’s fraternity page. It was from a party several weeks ago. It was a crowd image, but Marvin, who was also very tall and hard to miss, had his hand on Sherry’s shoulder. She was gazing up at him adoringly.

“And then there’s this,” she told them pulling up Sherry’s Instagram. There were no photos of Marvin visible but there was something else. “Isn’t Marvin’s jersey number 24?”

“Yeah,” Reggie said.

She then pointed to multiple instances of the number appearing in Sherry’s photos,

including on the whiteboard in her dorm room, and in one close-up photo, scrawled on the back of her hand in red marker.

“But I’ve never seen them in public together as a couple,” Reggie said, clearly not wanting to believe it. “Maybe she’s just a big fan.”

“Maybe,” Hannah conceded. “Or maybe Marvin just doesn’t want to be seen in public with a freshman, which she is. Maybe they’re keeping it quiet, and she’s just so giddy to be with him that she’d do anything for him. Or maybe I’m wrong, and they’re not together at all. It could be just a one-way crush. But that doesn’t eliminate her motive. In fact, it might give her an even stronger one. Maybe she figures that if she does something dramatic to help the guy she’s into, he’ll return the affection. Either way, I think Sherry is our most likely culprit.”

“Okay,” Finn said, “all that makes sense but without a smoking gun, wouldn’t Reggie be doing the exact same thing as her, making an unfounded accusation?”

Hannah smiled. Part of that was because she had an answer for him. But part of it, which she kept to herself, was because she felt that old familiar rush of righteous indignation rising in her. If Sherry Braid was responsible for this, Hannah felt an obligation to make her pay. The only question was how high a price she would extract.

“Under normal circumstances, I’d agree,” she said, pulling up another tab, “but not when there’s precedent. Last fall, in Sherry’s senior year of high school, three girls were busted for underage drinking at a house party. All of them were on the cheerleading team. The charges were ultimately dismissed, but the girls were kicked off the team. Guess who didn’t make the team originally but got one of the replacement spots?”

“Sherry?” Reggie said.

“That’s right,” Hannah said. “And conveniently, according to the police report, the call to the cops about the party came in anonymously. And several of the busted girls said that Sherry had been there too. But when the police showed up, she was gone.”

“How do you have access to the police report?” Finn demanded. “Isn’t that protected info, especially since they were minors?”

“Two of them were minors, but the third wasn’t, which made it accessible to other law enforcement agencies. As to how I’m able to access that data, it’s probably best not to ask too many questions.”

Finn looked uncomfortable, but Reggie was more focused on Sherry’s potential wrongdoing.

“So you’re saying Sherry has done this before,” Reggie pressed, “only this time, instead of doing it for herself, she did it for a guy she was into?”

“I’m not saying anything officially,” Hannah corrected. “I’m just noting that a suspiciously similar event happened involving her last year, and that she’s in your class and seems to have an intense personal connection to the person who could most benefit from you getting suspended.”

“Is that enough to clear me?” Reggie asked.

“It’s certainly enough to go to your professor first thing tomorrow morning with your concerns,” Hannah told him. “You seem like a pretty soft-spoken guy, Reggie, but this would be the time to find your voice. You might assert that this suspension is a violation of your due process rights under the school’s Academic Integrity Policy and that not reviewing the classroom video right away—which will exonerate you—is indefensible. You might say that it threatens your place on the team and your scholarship, which might require legal action to remedy. You might inform him that

you'll consider him personally liable if that happens. You might even tell him that your basketball game is on Saturday and unless the situation is resolved tomorrow—Friday—you'll go to the coach, the administration, the school paper, and maybe even the local news. My guess is that he'll back down pretty quickly. And if he doesn't, then I suggest that you actually do all of those things."

"Will you come with me?" he asked, sounding more like a nine-year-old little boy than a nineteen-year-old star basketball player.

"I will if you absolutely feel you need me to," she said reluctantly. "But I think it would be more powerful if it came directly from you. Personally, I think it might be enough just to have a loyal friend in the room with you for backup."

She looked over at Finn, who flashed her one of his patented grins.

"I'm happy to be your wingman if you want, Reggie."

"I'd appreciate it."

"Then it sounds like we've got a plan," Hannah said, standing up. "I recommend you spend the rest of the evening getting your ducks in a row. You don't have to bring up every detail that I just did. But demand to know if the accusation came from Sherry, point out her connections to Marvin, and assert that you'll be pursuing justice in this matter. Like I said, I think your professor will cave pretty fast. He doesn't want a scandal any more than you do."

"Thanks, Hannah," Reggie said. "Is it okay if I give you a hug?"

Even though she feared he might crush her, she nodded. He enveloped her in his enormously long arms and as he squeezed her, she felt him release a giant sigh, as if all the anxiety he'd been bottling up had left him in that moment. When he released



her, she saw that his eyes were again slightly watery.

“I’m going to head out,” she said.

“I’ll walk you down,” Finn said, then turned to Reggie,” I’ll talk to you soon, buddy.”

He closed the door, and they walked along the insane asylum hallway without speaking. It would have been hard anyway, with the sound of Lizzo’s “Truth Hurts” shaking the whole house. When they reached the stairwell, he turned to face her.

“Thanks for that,” he shouted, “Reggie’s a really good guy. He doesn’t deserve this crap.”

“Glad I could help,” she yelled back.

She started to take the first step down the stairs when he coughed dramatically. She looked over and saw that his cheeks were pink

“I was wondering if I could pay you back,” he said.

“That’s okay,” she told him. “I just want it all to work out for him.”

“I’m sure it will, but I really think I owe you,” he insisted, leaning close to her ear to be heard better, “and I think I may have a way to do that.”

“How?” she asked, suddenly apprehensive that he was going to ruin what had been a pretty pleasant interaction so far with a crass suggestion.

“I think I should let you dance with me,” he said.

She stared at him quizzically.

“Come again?”

“I said that I think I should reward you for your good deed by allowing you to join me on the dance floor.”

His cheeks were now bright red, but despite that, he somehow managed to maintain that confident, affable smile. She couldn’t help but be impressed. Even if he was the epitome of the overconfident frat boy, there was an undercurrent of appealing self-effacement somewhere in there too.

“How is that a reward for me?” she wanted to know.

“You’ve never seen me dance,” he informed her.

She had to fight off a giggle.

“I’m not really a dance party kind of gal,” she told him.

“Oh, I understand now,” he said, nodding with faux condescension, “you’re scared.”

She knew she was being teased, and yet the competitive part of her wouldn’t let that crack stand. She told herself that was the only reason she was considering the offer, that it had nothing to do with Finn’s charming cockiness or the playful look in his eyes. Before she could stop herself, she opened her mouth.

“You’re on.”

Jessie sat upright in bed.

Her abdomen was screaming in pain as cramps worse than she'd ever felt made it hard to breathe. She looked over in bed, but even in the darkness, she saw that Ryan wasn't there. Where was he?

She glanced toward her nightstand, but her phone wasn't there. Had she left it downstairs? She swung her legs over, gasping at the agony in her stomach. Then, with great effort, she pulled herself upright and began to walk.

She moved deliberately, focusing on each step to make sure she didn't lose her balance. She passed through the living room, looking there and in the kitchen, but still saw no sign of her phone. She needed help.

She made it to the front door and yanked it open. Warm air hit her in the face. She was just stepping onto the porch when another cramp slammed her whole body and she collapsed to the ground. She heard footsteps coming up the porch steps and glanced up.

To her surprise and horror, she saw Kyle Voss, her ex-husband, the man who had tried to kill her, staring down at her. He had a malevolent sneer on his face.

"I'm having a miscarriage," she managed to croak in between spasms of pain.

"I know," he said calmly. "You deserve it. You're not worthy of being a mother."

Then, his sneer was replaced by a joltingly loud cackle. She closed her eyes tightly,

unable to deal with both the pain and the pleasure he was taking in it.

“Jessie.”

The voice came in a whisper, but it felt like it was coming through a loudspeaker.

“Jessie!”

In that moment she realized the word wasn’t coming from Kyle but from Ryan. Her eyes snapped open again.

She was lying in her bed. Ryan was beside her, sitting upright, looking down at her with concern.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She took a second to get her bearings. She wasn’t having a miscarriage. Kyle wasn’t here. In fact, he was dead and buried. It wasn’t the middle of the night but 6:18 in the morning. She was safe in her home with a husband who loved her.

“Yeah,” she said. “I guess I was having a bad dream.”

“That was obvious,” he said gently. “What about?”

Her first instinct was to keep it to herself, to brush it off as nothing. But Dr. Lemmon had talked to her about sharing her concerns with Ryan, and there didn’t seem to be a more appropriate time than now. She sat up, propping the pillow behind her against the headboard.

“I was having a miscarriage. I couldn’t find you anywhere. I tried to get outside to find help but fell down on the porch. Then Kyle showed up and told me I deserved

what was happening.”

Ryan stared at her open-mouthed, then leaned over and pulled her into an embrace.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I wish I could offer some easy fix that would make the pain of what happened to you just go away.”

Jessie rested her head on his shoulder, comforted by his words but not sure he totally got it. She was reluctant to say what was on her mind but again figured there might not be another, better time.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, not looking up at him. “I’m hoping that you can see why this whole ‘having kids’ thing is so challenging for me. Until I can work out how to deal with what happened to me, I can’t realistically consider what the future might hold. I know it’s not fair to ask you to be patient, especially when there’s no guarantee that I’ll eventually see things the way you do, but I feel like I have to look out for my mental and physical health first and foremost.”

“It’s not about ‘fair,’” he told her. “It’s about you doing what you need to do. I can’t pretend I don’t have strong feelings on the matter. But right now, they’re secondary to what you need. I get that, even if I sometimes forget.”

Jessie leaned up and gave him a kiss on the cheek. She could see the disappointment in his eyes and wished she could make it go away. But she knew there was no way to do that and still be true to herself. At least not right now.

“Is that why you woke me up?” she asked, “because you could tell I was having a nightmare?”

”Actually, no,” he said, suddenly sitting upright. ”We both got a text from Parker a few minutes ago. You didn’t hear it. I know you’re exhausted from yesterday, but I

realized I didn't have a choice but to wake you up."

Jessie glanced over at her phone and saw that there was indeed a message on her phone.

"What is it?" she asked.

"There's another victim," he said. "She was just found."

Jessie shot upright as well.

"Same M.O.?" she asked.

He nodded. "And in the Hollywood Hills," he added.

She swung her legs out of bed and pushed herself upright.

"Give me five minutes to get ready. We can get the details on the way."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

By the time they arrived at the victim's house at 6:41 a.m., the sun was just starting to peek out from behind the San Gabriel mountains to the east.

They got the basics of the case from Parker, who didn't know much more than them, on the way up.

"The victim's name is Chloe Henshall," she had said. "Thirty-five-years-old. Married to Sean Henshall, the founder and CEO of Henshall MetaTech. He's the one who found her. He's there now. The same sergeant from yesterday morning is supposedly handling the scene until you arrive."

"Thanks, Captain," Ryan said. "Can you ask Jamil and Beth to start a background check on both of them?"

"Jamil's already at the station and Beth is on her way in," Parker assured them. "I'm sure that by the time you leave the scene, they'll have something for you."

On the drive up, Jessie, who was at the wheel, took the curves at a reasonable speed and fought the desire to ask her husband if he was paying attention. When she parked across the street from the Henshall home, she looked over at him triumphantly.

"Safe and sound," she said.

"Don't you mean safe and slow?" he teased, then got out of the passenger seat before they could respond.

Jessie decided to let it go and got out too. They approached the house. Unlike the

homes of the previous two victims, this one was on the upslope of a hill rather than dipping down into a canyon. But that didn't make it any less impressive.

Three stories high, with what was clearly an elevator shaft visible near the front of the house, it was formidable. But unlike the Ashe mansion, this one wasn't obnoxious. It was primarily brown and green earth tones, intended to complement the surrounding hillside rather than outshine it.

They walked up the path, passing the officers who were still rolling out the crime scene tape because the call was so recent. The coroner's van wasn't even here yet. Sergeant Cutter was waiting for them at the front door.

"Sorry to see you again so soon under these circumstances," he said.

"Likewise," Ryan replied. "The scene still seems very fresh. Is there anything you can tell us yet?"

"Not a ton," Cutter conceded. "The husband, Sean Henshall, is in the main bedroom. He's in pretty rough shape. I didn't even try to question him, especially since I knew you guys were on your way. Because that interview could easily go sideways, I recommend checking out the body before talking to him."

"In that case, we'll follow you," Ryan said.

Cutter directed them through the foyer, where the elevator was located, along the main hallway, which was lit by the first rays of sun shining through the largely glass roof. He led them to the living room, which was unpretentious in its decor, though it was about three times larger than the average den. He came to a stop by a closet at the far end of the room. It was open, but Jessie didn't look inside yet.

Instead she glanced around the room, looking for any sign that a crime had been



committed here. But there was no visible blood, and no indication that an altercation had taken place. In almost every respect, save for the police tape across the entrance to the closet, the place seemed normal.

“Has anyone looked the body over closely yet?” she asked Cutter.

“No,” he answered, “the coroner is coming from another case—a hit and run—and won’t be here for another fifteen minutes or so. You’ll be the first to get a good look.”

Jessie tried to clear her head so that when she observed Chloe Henshall for the first time, it would be without preconceptions. Then she peered into the closet.

Chloe was hunched against the back wall, her head kept upright only because it was resting against a dresser. She was dressed in business attire with a conservative navy skirt and a beige top. She still had on high heels. Her long, black hair was unruly, as if it had been messed up in the confrontation that led to her death. Her eyes were closed. Even with her chin slumped to her chest, the bruising on her neck was easily visible. She turned to Cutter again.

“I don’t want to get too close since the coroner hasn’t been here yet,” she said. “Will you make sure his conclusions get to us ASAP?”

“Of course,” Cutter said, “Did you guys want to talk to her husband now?”

“Sure,” Ryan said. “He really hasn’t said anything?”

“He tried, but he wasn’t making much sense. I got that he found her this morning but that was about it. Officer Medina is with him, just like I put her with Erin Podemski’s assistant, Nikki, yesterday. I’m hoping that she calmed him down enough to be useful to you. Shall we head in?”

“Actually,” Jessie said, glancing out at the deck beyond the living room, which was now spotlit in a square of sunlight, “can you bring him out to the deck? I’m worried that if we go into the bedroom, it’ll reinforce the upset he’s feeling. Maybe a different environment, with some cool, fresh air, will change the dynamic.”

“Not a problem,” Cutter said. “I’ll go get him.”

As the sergeant retreated to the bedroom, Jessie and Ryan stepped out onto the deck. Despite the sun, the air was biting, and she zipped up her jacket to her neck. Moments later, Cutter returned with Officer Medina and a skinny man with wire-framed glasses and a receding, brownish hair. Jessie estimated that he was about forty.

He was wrapped in a blanket, which he hugged himself with as he joined them outside. His eyes were red, and the front of his t-shirt was tear-stained. He looked like he hadn’t slept at all the night before.

“Why don’t you have a seat, Mr. Henshall,” Ryan offered.

The man nodded silently. As he settled into a deck chair and readjusted himself, Jessie noticed for the first time that he was holding a small dog in one hand under the blanket.

“Who’s that?” she asked gently.

“Missy,” he answered, his voice scratchy. “She found Chloe.”

Jessie did her best to hide her surprise.

She had expected that they'd have to ease into the questions. But when he volunteered that detail, she decided to use it as an opportunity to just dive right in.

"How did Missy do that?" she wondered.

"She would have found her earlier if it wasn't for me," he explained, sounding disconnected. "When I got home, she was stuck in the kitchen, whining. I picked her up right away and put her outside to go to the bathroom. If I hadn't done that, she probably would have led me straight to the closet."

"So you weren't aware that anything was wrong at first?" Jessie asked.

"Not right away," he said. "I got home super late last night. It was this morning, actually, around 4 a.m."

"Why so late?" Ryan asked.

"We were working on a programming issue with a new product," Henshall explained. "Sometimes I like to get into the nitty gritty with my designers. That's what happened last night. By the time we called it quits, it was 3:30. I tend to lose track of time when I'm really focused on something."

"So you got home at four," Jessie reminded him, prodding him to continue.

"Right," he said. "I was really tired, so I just didn't notice anything right away. I

didn't want to wake Chloe while getting into bed and figured she'd be up in a couple of hours anyway, so I just made a bowl of popcorn, grabbed Missy—who was still whining—for company, went to my study, and tried to crash on the couch. But I was still so wired from work that I just dove back into it.”

“When did you realize something was off?” Ryan asked.

“When I finally got up to stretch, I realized it was almost six. That's when Chloe usually gets up, so I went in to wake her. But the bed was empty and made. That was when I realized I hadn't talked to her since yesterday afternoon. I checked all around the house, but she wasn't in her normal areas, so I called her. The phone started ringing. I found it on the floor under a couch in the living room. That's when I got truly worried.”

“What did you do?” Jessie asked.

“I took Missy out of my office and went into the bedroom, which was a mistake because she was stuck there and couldn't—” he paused as his voice cracked briefly, “couldn't show me where Chloe was. I started calling everyone I could think of. She had this scholarship foundation meeting yesterday, so I called the co-chair, Angela Bossom, who said she left the meeting without issue.”

“What time was that?” Ryan pressed as delicately as he could.

“I think she said it ended around four, but you should double-check with Angela.”

“We will,” Jessie told him. “What did you do next?”

“I called other friends of hers. Some didn't answer because it was so early, but the ones I could reach didn't know anything. That's when I called the police to tell them that she was missing. They said they'd send someone over.”

“Then what?”

“Missy was whining again, and I thought she had to go to the bathroom, so I let her out of the bedroom, but instead of going to the door to get outside, she went to the closet and started scratching at that door. I opened it and then...you know the rest.”

He lowered his head, unable to go on. Cutter got Jessie and Ryan’s attention, and mouthed “May I ask a question?”

They both nodded.

“Mr. Henshall,” the sergeant said, “I know this is difficult but we’re trying to put the pieces together. Have you had any problems with people sneaking into your garage?”

“No. Why?”

“Well, there doesn’t seem to be any sign of forced entry and we understand that Mrs. Henshall’s car isn’t in the garage. We didn’t know if someone possibly snuck into the house that way and then stole the car after attacking her.”

Henshall shook his head absently.

“Her car is in the shop. I suggested she get a rental, but she said she was happy to use the car service for a few days.”

“She didn’t use rideshares?” Jessie confirmed.

“No,” Henshall answered. “She has a guy she likes. She would always request him for when we attended major events. His name is Albert something.”

Ryan had a question. “The front security camera appears to have been displaced so

that it doesn't show the front porch. Do you know why that is? Has it been worked on recently?"

"I don't think so," he said. "Why?"

Ryan answered that one.

"Because now we won't have footage of anyone who might have approached the front of the house after she got home."

Jessie saw the pained expression on Henshall's face and wished Ryan hadn't been so forthright.

"I don't know," he muttered. "Chloe handled all that stuff. I don't know how long it was like that."

"That's all right, Mr. Henshall," Jessie said, redirecting him. "Let's not focus on that right now. There are a few basic logistical questions we have to ask, which we hope will help us get to the bottom of this."

"Okay," the man replied weakly.

"You said Chloe handled things like the security system. Did she have a list of all the different providers you guys use, with their contact information? I'm talking about everyone from your housekeeper, if you have one, to whoever cuts your lawn. Plus anyone who might come to the house regularly, whether it be a personal trainer, a masseuse, or a therapist. Friends too. Basically anyone who had access to your home, we want their details."

Henshall nodded. "Yeah, okay. She kept a list of the main ones on the corkboard in the kitchen. That's what I usually used. It had folks like the gardener, the plumber,

the handyman, the dog walker, and that driver, Albert. But I know she kept a more comprehensive list on her laptop for all the stuff she knew that I didn't care about."

"Like whom?" Jessie asked.

"She had a book club. I know all the members are on that list. She had a hypnotherapist who came regularly. And in addition to our regular dog walker, she had—this is a little embarrassing, but she got a pet therapist for Missy because she kept destroying all our shoes. So they would have sessions periodically. It's all on her computer."

"We'll look into it," Ryan told him. "Now I have to ask you an uncomfortable question, Mr. Henshall."

The man looked up. His eyes were filled with apprehension.

"Please don't ask me what I want to do with her body," he pleaded. "I can't think about any of that yet."

"No," Ryan said. "It's not that. We're going to need the names of everyone you were working with on that programming issue last night."

"Oh," Henshall said, the apprehension in his eyes replaced with understanding. "You need to prove I was at work and not here killing Chloe."

Ryan didn't answer that one, but he didn't need to.

"I'll have a complete list for you, along with contact info, in ten minutes," Henshall continued. "Frankly, I'm happy to have the mental diversion, even if only briefly. May I go to my study?"

Ryan nodded, and Henshall left, followed by Officer Medina. When they were gone, he turned to Jessie and Cutter.

“We’ll need to verify his story, but I assume his people will confirm that he was there,” he said. “The main focus should be on getting the estimated time of death from the coroner. If it was yesterday afternoon or evening, he’s likely in the clear. If it was more recent, he may have some more explaining to do.”

“I’ll press Dr. Roone to get us something soon,” Cutter promised.

“Even though I don’t think it will show anything useful, we also need to review the security footage from the front door camera,” Jessie said.

“Maybe we’ll get lucky,” Cutter offered.

“Let’s hope so,” Jessie replied, “because with as far apart as these giant homes are from each other, I doubt any neighbors’ cameras are going to help much. Still, you should canvass the area.”

“Will do,” Cutter said, pulling out a notebook and writing a note.

“In the meantime,” Ryan added, “let’s get copies of that contact list in the kitchen and the more comprehensive one from her laptop and send them to research. Maybe there’s an overlap in providers with the other victims. There’s one person in particular I’d be interested in talking to first.”

“Who?” Cutter asked, though Jessie didn’t need to. She knew exactly who her partner and husband was thinking of.

“Albert, the car service driver,” Ryan said.



“Why him first?” Cutter asked.

Jessie took that one.

“Because it’s possible he was the last person to see Chloe Henshall alive. He may our best witness.”

What she didn’t add was that the guy might be much more than just a witness.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

“This could be the day, right?” he whispered as he stood at the door of his cell, waiting for it to automatically open. He couldn’t speak too loudly for fear of alienating his extremely large cellmate, Oscar, and getting punished again.

There was no reply, but that didn’t trouble Mark Haddonfield. Sometimes he just had to be patient, no matter how eager he was to start the day.

For most inmates here at the Twin Towers Correctional Facility in downtown Los Angeles, the days all ran dully into one another, but not for him. He always had something to look forward to. And in the last two weeks, even more so. Each time he entered the day room or the library, there was the promise of some new piece of news that would change everything.

That’s because two weeks ago, on Thanksgiving, his manifesto had gone live. He had written and pre-set the timing of its release just in case he was caught or killed. And despite all his precautions, the first—and almost the second had happened.

That was why he currently stood by the bars of his cell, waiting for the door to open at 7 a.m. Then he could check to see if there had been any developments since yesterday. Had anyone read his personal narrative about how he’d slaughtered people that Jessie had once saved? Had anyone listened to his call to arms and picked up where he left off?

It was challenging to come by good information. He had limited computer access and only supervised use of the internet, so he couldn’t search for updates online. He wasn’t allowed any visitors besides his lawyer, and that guy certainly wasn’t willing to provide information on whether the manifesto was catching fire with the public.

But he did have access to the television in the day room, that is when other inmates would allow it. And he was permitted to read newspapers in the library, even if they were several days old. For him, the daily search for information was like opening presents on Christmas morning, even if so far, there was nothing inside the wrapping. He had yet to see or read any news items about copycats. But all it took was one to get the ball rolling.

Sometimes, he began to doubt if that would happen, and his positive attitude took a hit. He'd find himself asking: had no one seen the manifesto? That was hard to believe. Were people too stupid to follow his directive? Too cowardly? But when uncertainty threatened to bring him down, he knew there was one person he could always turn to for support: Jessie.

"This could be the day, right?" he whispered a second time, hoping that his humility and passion would generate a reply this time.

"It could be," Jessie finally agreed. "But even if it's not, you can't lose faith."

"You don't sound confident," Mark muttered.

"I just need you to stay even-keeled," she reminded him. "Sometimes when you get disappointed, you get agitated, and you get loud. That annoys the other prisoners, which is when you get beatdowns. It won't do you much good to have someone take up the mantle of vengeance if you're too brain-damaged to know about it."

"Good point," he said under his breath. "Thanks, Jessie."

He'd noticed that in recent weeks, she had taken to berating him less. There were fewer diatribes about how Jessie Hunt had outsmarted him. There wasn't as much needling about how he'd failed to complete his mission. It seemed that she was finally starting to take him under her wing, as he'd always dreamt of.

"Don't read too much into this," she warned. "It's not like we're a couple. If you get shivved and die, I die too. It's just self-preservation on my part."

But Mark knew better. She was starting to care about him.

"I'll take whatever I can get," he said with a half-giggle.

"If you don't stop mumbling to yourself, I'm going to break a more important finger than last time," growled Oscar, who must have just woken up. "I'm tired of repeating myself, worm."

"Sorry," Mark said quickly. Having his pinkie finger snapped in half was painful enough. He didn't need to lose the function of another digit.

He let Jessie be for now and focused on his future beyond visiting the library today. His upcoming murder trial, the first of many, was scheduled to begin next month. He knew that he was certain to be convicted on some, if not all, of the charges against him. Barring a miracle, he was unlikely to ever walk free again. But he'd made his peace with that. He had accepted that this was the price he must pay for his acts of greatness.

All he wanted was for Jessie Hunt to pay a price too. And if his manifesto spoke to just one person, he was certain that she soon would.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

It took less than an hour to find him.

Jessie and Ryan had gone to the apartment of Albert Short, the car service driver who dropped Chloe Henshall off at her home yesterday, to have a little chat. But to their surprise, even though it was barely 7:30, he wasn't home. They were returning to their car when they got a call from Jamil.

"He's finishing a job," the head researcher said without an initial greeting.

"What?" Ryan asked, apparently as confused as Jessie.

"I'm guessing that Albert Short wasn't home," Jamil noted. "That's because he's already on a job. I called the car service he works for, Lux Lifts L.A., and they said he just picked up a customer at the airport."

"Okay," Ryan replied. "Where's the drop-off point?"

"That's the good news," Jamil told him. "He's going to the Marriot at L.A. Live near the convention center. So you don't have to drive all the way out to LAX. Just come back downtown and wait for him at the hotel."

"That's great," Jessie said as they got back in the car. Since there were no major hills involved, she was letting Ryan drive again. "We'll head back now and wait for him to show up. Any other updates we should know about?"

"Actually, yes," Beth piped in. "Sergeant Cutter called us a few minutes ago. He didn't want to bother you in case you were already questioning Short, so he asked us

to pass along some info from the coroner, Dr. Roone.”

“What did he say?” Ryan asked excitedly, as he started the car and pulled out.

“There were all the usual caveats about preliminary time estimates and not being bound by them,” Beth reminded him, “but according to Roone, it looks like Chloe Henshall was also strangled to death. He also estimated that the time of death was yesterday between 2 p.m. and 10 p.m. Cutter said it wasn’t official, but that Roone believes the murder occurred well before 4 a.m.”

“If that bears out, it would put Sean Henshall in the clear,” Ryan noted, saying what everyone was thinking.

“With that in mind, we’ve already begun reaching out to the service providers we got from the Henshall’s kitchen corkboard and Chloe Henshall’s personal computer,” Jamil told them.

”I know it”s early morning, but any luck so far?” Jessie asked.

“Actually, more than we expected,” Jamil said. “Her hypnotherapist, Claudine Monterey, answered right away and said that Henshall cancelled her appointment yesterday because a meeting was running longer than expected.”

“We also got hold of their dog walker, Charlie Warner,” Beth added. “He said that he normally only does walks for them a couple of days a week, but that Henshall called him and asked him to do an extra one yesterday for the same reason, because her meeting was running long, and she didn’t think she’d make it back on time for the early afternoon one. He managed to fit it in around 1 p.m. and said he didn’t notice anything unusual with the dog or see anyone suspicious in the neighborhood.”

“I spoke to the housekeeper as well,” Jamil said. “Her name is Maria Contreras. She

said she typically cleans on for them on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. She was actually on her way over to their house now when I reached her. She started crying on the phone and had to pull off the road.”

“Anyone else?” Jessie asked, making mental notes of everything they’d said.

”We still haven’t been able to reach most of the other folks on the list,” Beth conceded. ”She does have a Pilates instructor who comes over regularly. I left her a message, as well as one for everyone in her book club, which meets on Wednesdays. I was hoping to find out if something unusual happened during their meeting this week.”

“We’re also waiting to hear back from her personal trainer, Paolo Asanti, who Erin Podemski also used,” Jamil said. “I’ve left multiple texts and voice messages and have yet to hear back.”

“That’s interesting,” Ryan noted.

“It is,” Jamil acknowledged, “But we can’t find anything showing that Sydney Ashe used him too. Same thing with the dog walker, Charlie Warner. He also walks the Ashe’s dog sometimes, but not the last few days because he said the dog was at the vet for surgery. And from what we know, Erin Podemski didn’t even have a dog.”

Jessie sighed in frustration. Every time it seemed like they were close, a roadblock shot up.

“There is one provider who seems to have serviced all three victims,” Beth reminded Jamil, “the gardener. We left a message with the owner, a guy named Karl Van Hart, and are waiting for a callback from him.”

“Right,” Jamil agreed, “but we only know that all three victims used the same

company, Hollywood Green Thumb. We don't yet know if the same individuals worked at each house."

"Still," Ryan said, "that sounds promising. Keep calling on that one and let us know if anything pops."

"We will," Jamil promised. "One last thing. I just got off the phone with the pet therapist for the Henshall's dog. Her name is Cassandra Canine. I looked it up and yes, she did legally change it to that. Anyway, She sounded very upset when I told her about the murder. When she finally calmed down, she asked if I knew if Missy needed a session to work through her grief. She said that she and her therapeutic aide, Henry, could go right over. I recommended she hold off."

"Truthfully, the dog looked like she might need one," Ryan muttered under his breath.

"That's odd for sure," Jessie said to Jamil, frowning at her husband's crack, "but was there more to it? Did she work for the Ashes too?"

"That's the thing—she wouldn't say," Jamil explained. "She claimed that her client list was confidential, that it was a doctor/patient confidentiality situation and that we'd need a court order to get the list. I just thought it was worth noting."

"It is strange," Ryan admitted. "I guess go ahead and pursue the order. At this point, we shouldn't leave any stone unturned."

"Yeah," Jessie added. "We'll see what happens with Albert Short, but it probably couldn't hurt to ask all these folks to come in, especially the ones who worked for multiple victims."

"Will do," Jamil said. "Anything else you need?"



“No,” Ryan told him. “I think this stuff should keep you two busy for a while.”

“For sure,” Jessie heartily concurred. “Thanks for all the hard work guys. Keep in touch.”

She was about to hang up when Beth stopped.

“Hold on,” she exclaimed. “I just found one more thing. The driver, Albert Short, has a record. He was charged with robbery, though he ultimately pled down to shoplifting and got probation. And a year later he was busted for assault. Served two months for that one.”

“Send us the records,” Ryan requested.

Jessie couldn't help but notice that his foot was suddenly pressing harder on the gas.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Jessie sat in the driver's seat of the car, trying not to act suspicious.

They'd been at the hotel for ten minutes already. After pulling into one of the drop-off lanes in front of the main entrance, Ryan showed the valet his badge and ID and secured a parking spot in the loading zone. Then he got out and headed into the lobby, where he could watch for Short's arrival without being noticed. Jessie moved into the driver's seat and, with Ryan on speaker, pretended to look at her phone while looking up every twenty seconds or so.

It didn't take long for Short to arrive. He pulled up in a black Lincoln Continental and hopped out. Albert Short—black, diminutive, with a thick trunk and impressive belly that strained at his black sports jacket—wore a broad smile.

He opened the rear passenger door for his client, a middle-aged man in a suit with gray hair and a paunch. While the passenger pulled out his wallet to fish for bills for a tip, Albert moved to the trunk and removed one bag, which he passed to the bellhop.

Jessie watched the passenger hand Short several bills. As he did, she saw Ryan casually push open a lobby door and move next to the valet stand. Short seemed to notice it too and visibly stiffened as his smile faded. He shoved the tip into his pocket and moved to the driver's door, his eyes never leaving Ryan.

Jessie didn't know what had alerted him, but Short obviously sensed that the powerfully built guy Latino guy in the casual sports jacket wasn't just another convention-goer. He opened the door and was just starting to get back in the driver's seat when Ryan quickly approached him.

“Excuse me, sir—,” he started to say but Short slammed the door shut before he could finish. His window was open and for a terrifying second Jessie feared that Ryan might try to leap in to grab the man. But before he could even try, Short put the car in gear and started rolling forward.

Jessie, who was just ahead and to the left of them and already had her car running, did the same. As she moved forward, she saw Ryan break into a jog alongside the Continental, which was picking up speed. The look on Short’s face was one of desperation.

Jessie realized that unless she acted quickly, they would end up in a chase, perhaps with Ryan following on foot. She knew that she was likely to lose any race through the streets of downtown L.A., considering that Short was a professional driver who knew every back road of the city better than she ever would. So she punched the gas now to avoid any issues later.

She shot forward and veered left, then stopped at a diagonal, blocking the Continental’s path completely. Short managed to slam on the brakes about two feet in front of her. For a moment, he looked like he might try to flee on foot.

“That would be a huge mistake,” she warned him through her own open window.

The guy still seemed to be debating the decision when Ryan caught up. He was holding his gun in one hand and his badge in the other.

“LAPD,” he barked. “Albert Short, turn off the vehicle and step out with your hands up!”

“Okay, okay,” the man said, making a dramatic show of turning off the car. Then he slowly exited with his hands in the air. In the background, Jessie noticed the passenger he’d driven here standing still, his jaw hanging down in shock. Jessie

turned off her car and got out as Ryan pulled out his handcuffs and snapped them on the driver.

“I swear I didn’t know you were cops,” Short protested. “I thought this was a hit.”

”Why would you think that, Mr. Short?” she asked, taking immediate advantage of the man’s willingness to talk.

Short paused briefly, seeming to weigh how best to answer.

“Some of the people I drive are of. . .questionable character,” he replied carefully. “I occasionally hear things. I thought that maybe someone had determined that I’d heard too much and decided to shut me up just to be safe.”

Ryan looked over at Jessie, clearly intrigued, before returning his attention to Short.

“That’s a topic we can get to later,” he said. “Right now we want to talk to you about Chloe Henshall.”

“The Hollywood Hills lady?” he said, “what about her?”

Jessie took a step toward the man and stared at him closely as she answered.

“She’s dead.”

Short’s eyes widened immediately. Jessie was never one to trust body language exclusively. She seen multiple killers who had the ability to hide their darkness behind a mask of sympathy or shock. If Short was one of them, he was good, because his reaction was very convincing.

“Are you sure?” he asked quietly.

"We are," Jessie continued. "In fact, she was murdered. She was found this morning, but it looks like she was killed yesterday afternoon, possibly not long after you dropped her off. So you can see why we wanted to chat with you."

"Wait," he said, his voice rising anxiously, "are you saying that you think I had something to do with it? There's no way. I really liked the lady."

"Are you sure this rich lady didn't say something that made you angry?" Ryan pressed, "something that made you lose it, like you did at Tepper's Tavern, when you beat up that guy for cutting in front of you at the pinball machine?"

Short stared back at him like he was crazy.

"Are you serious?" he wanted to know. "That happened sixteen years ago when I was an idiot kid. I did my time. After I got out, I kept my nose clean. I'm thirty-six now and haven't had a brush with the law since. I've worked this job for eight years. I have an apartment and a retirement account. I'm engaged to a great woman who has two kids that I love. I haven't had time for that kind of stupidity in forever."

"And yet," Ryan noted, "you apparently drive people who do things that make you think they might want to have you knocked off. So how clean is your nose really?"

"Listen, man," Short pleaded. "I can't control who rides in my car. I get assigned by the company. Just like with Mrs. Henshall. I guess she liked me because she requested me all the time. She said I was funny and took her mind off more serious stuff. But not everyone who has me drive them is interested in my sparkling personality. Sometimes they just want a guy that stays quiet and does his job. It's not up to me."

"All right," Jessie said, deciding that this issue couldn't be resolved in the moment. But she hoped another one could. "Where were you yesterday, from the time you

dropped off Chloe Henshall until midnight.”

Short seemed to relax slightly at the question, as if he knew that his answer wouldn’t implicate him.

“I had another pickup right after I dropped her off. Some couple in Beverly Hills needed a ride to LAX. After that, I can’t remember every pickup, but I was working until eight. Then I dropped off the car and drove my own to my fiancée’s place. We had a late dinner, and I spent the night there.”

Jessie looked over at Ryan, letting him ask the question they both had.

“I assume the Continental has GPS?” he asked.

”Yeah,” Short said. ”There”s the standard one most cars are equipped with. Plus, they have an extra one so they can track locations and times and update clients on pickups and drop-offs.”

“Are you willing to let us look at the geo-location data for your personal vehicle and your phone?” Jessie asked. “If you give us permission, and what you’re telling us holds up, we can clear you much quicker.”

“Whatever you need, you can have,” Short told her. “I don’t want any trouble and whatever I have to do to prove I’m not your guy, I’ll do it.”

Normally, she appreciated the cooperation of a potential suspect, whether guilty or innocent. If they were guilty, often in their willingness to seem helpful, they opened themselves up to facts that proved their guilt. But Jessie didn’t get that feeling here.

They would have Jamil and Beth check on Short’s location data, but she already sensed that it was a waste of time. Everything in her bones told her that Albert Short

wasn't their guy, which meant the real killer was still out there right now.

She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt for the moment, if for no other reason than to get more information on his time with the victim.

"What time did you pick up Mrs. Henshall from her meeting?" she asked.

"Just after four."

"And when did you get to her house?"

"I can check the log for an exact time, but I think it was a little before 4:30," he said.

"When you picked her up from her meeting yesterday, Did Mrs. Henshall seem agitated or upset?" she asked.

"No," he answered quickly. "She said she was tired because the meeting had run so long, but after I cracked a few jokes, she brightened up and was her normal chatty self."

"What about when you dropped her off?" Jessie pressed. "Did you notice anything odd? See anyone unusual around?"

He shook his head. "Everything seemed like it always did. I feel like if there was someone suspicious around I would have noticed. I offered to walk her to the door, but she said she was fine. I did wait until she went inside before I left. She even waved goodbye. Everything was normal."

As Jessie listened to him, she could feel the tendrils of the case threatening to engulf her. If Albert Short was to be believed, there was no immediate threat to Henshall when he pulled away. But that wasn't as helpful to know as she hoped it would be.

With dozens of potential suspects, including everyone from personal trainers, dog walkers, gardeners, pet therapists, and book club friends, there were too many leads and not enough resources to follow them all. They could spend days hunting them all down and still not find the right person.

Meanwhile, another victim could be in danger right now.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

The man knew he had to act quick.

After the research people from that LAPD unit reached out, he realized he didn't have much time. They had already hinted that they might want him to come in for an interview. But that didn't have to be a problem.

After all, he felt confident that he hadn't left any evidence behind. And, of course, he still had his ace in the hole, the detail that would almost certainly lead them away from him. But there was always the risk that they might uncover the truth. So, he needed to take advantage of the freedom he still had. There were other women who had earned payback, and he felt an obligation to provide it.

As he watched his next potential target from afar, the man felt the anger churn inside him. He remembered how dismissive Margot Howell had been toward him the first time he'd met with her. She didn't care about him, could barely remember his name for the longest time. He was just a means to an end for her.

But the man wasn't in the financial position to be turning down jobs, even if they came from women like this. Howell was a big-time real estate agent to the uber-wealthy and while she wasn't as well off as them, which he knew by visiting her far less impressive home, she sure acted like she was.

Even now, as she ordered her drink at the coffeehouse on Franklin Avenue at the foot of the Hollywood Hills, she was snippy with the barista for no apparent reason. As she waited off to the side, the man moved behind a tall plant so she couldn't see him. He doubted that if she did, Margot Howell would want to come over and chat, but he didn't want to risk it.

“Excuse me, can I get by?” a guy asked.

The man realized that he was blocking the entrance to the coffeehouse.

“Oh, sorry,” he apologized, smiling warmly. “I didn’t realize I was blocking the door.”

“No worries,” the guy said, smiling back.

The man had that effect on people. He could make them smile, feel comfortable. That was his gift. At least it had been until recently. Until two weeks ago to be exact. That was when Helena left him.

They’d been married for four years, and he thought they’d been mostly happy. They found love later in life. For him, it was a surprise, as he didn’t think that he was capable of maintaining any kind of long-term relationship. And even though it was an embarrassing cliché, he knew the source of that doubt: his mom.

For most of his childhood, his single mother, resentful of the man who abandoned her with a toddler, had taken her anger out on him. Sometimes that meant yelling. Other times it came via hissed reminders that he was worthless and that, if not for him, she’d be leading a life filled with fun and adventure.

On more than a few occasions, her rage manifested via the hair curler she would hold against his belly or the sewing pins she would jab into his thighs. When she was at her wit’s end, it meant locking him in the coat closet without food for entire weekends.

When he got older, the physical abuse waned. But the verbal assaults never abated. When he was sixteen, he left home and moved west to Los Angeles, where he started a new life. He was mostly able to shove the pain of his youth off to the side and start

to trust people again.

He made friends easily, which he suspected was a result of years of trying to stay on his mother's good side when he was a boy. That ugly time had trained him and instilled in him the ability to make people feel comfortable so that they wouldn't lose their temper and take it out on him.

He had dates, and eventually girlfriends. But he could never fully commit himself to them. He understood that his reticence came from his fear that they'd eventually turn on him and call him all the things his mother did. None of them ever did, but that didn't stop him from holding them all at arm's length. After a while, every girlfriend inevitably gave up trying to get him to let his guard down. He got older and accepted that this was his lot in life—to be alone. Until Helena.

The woman was a breath of fresh air. She had sharp edges, just as his mother had, but while her comments were occasionally biting, they were never hateful. He always felt that her barbs were playful rather than genuinely mean-spirited. He was used to far worse.

Because Helena was more open with her tartness, he wasn't always waiting for the other shoe to drop. It dropped all the time. And with that lack of anxiety, he was finally able to relax and get close. It worked. After a year of dating, they got married. He didn't invite his mother to the wedding.

Things were wonderful. She made more money than he did but didn't seem to care. She knew he got satisfaction out of what he did, helping make people's lives a little better than they would otherwise be.

And then, two weeks ago, she dropped the bomb. She had filed for divorce and was moving out. She said that her needs had changed, and he couldn't provide for them. She was tired of him always being at the beck and call of the people he worked for, of

how they could never go on vacation because his work prevented it, of how his chances for real advancement beyond his current status and of a comfortable retirement seemed impossible. Then she handed him the papers and walked out.

He'd been stunned, and after a few hours, skeptical. She had always known about how committed he was to the work he did and said that she respected it. And now that was a problem for her?

So he followed her from work that day. Sure enough, she didn't stay at a hotel or at a friend's house. She stayed at the apartment of a male co-worker she'd always been especially chummy with. The man snuck into the building and scurried over to the co-worker's front door. He thought he could hear intimate sounds coming from inside, but he wasn't positive.

He'd gone home that night, forlorn. It wasn't until the next morning that he saw their shared bank account was cleared out of all her funds. Soon after, he realized he wouldn't have enough money to pay for December's rent. He ended up having to move into a studio apartment in a sketchy part of Hollywood so he could stay close to work.

He found out just how sketchy the neighborhood was last weekend when he was mugged and hit in the head with the butt of the guy's gun. Then, just this Monday, he got an e-mail from Helena, admitting that she had been having an affair. She said that she'd always felt like she'd settled for him, that her life with him had become a source of endless disappointment, and that she needed to start living for herself while she still had the time.

Even though she never used the word "worthless" or held a hot hair curler near his belly button, the man felt all the pain and helplessness of his childhood wash over him. Only this was somehow immeasurably worse. He'd opened himself up to her, and she'd used his vulnerability against him, squashed him like a bug on her

dashboard.

Just like his mother, she viewed him as a burden and wanted a life with a man who could provide everything that he couldn't. He felt a rising tide of fury in his chest. He wanted her to feel the pain he was experiencing. He wanted her to suffer.

But he couldn't do that. He still loved her. Just like, in some pathetic way, he couldn't make his mother experience his pain because, despite everything, he loved her too.

With those thoughts circling in his head, he went to work arriving at the Ashe home right on time and prepared to get started. But from the bedroom balcony above, Sydney Ashe had yelled down to him that he'd gotten the date wrong, that he wasn't needed today, and that he should "work on being more professional."

In the middle of her snide putdown, he had an epiphany: Sydney Ashe, entitled wife of a Hollywood producer, was just like his mother, just like his soon to be ex-wife. She treated others like crap while she enjoyed the spoils of a life she didn't deserve. In fact, she didn't deserve life at all.

It was that realization that had made him enter the house that morning, go up the stairs to the bedroom, walk out onto the balcony where she was lounging, and choke the life out of her. It had seemed almost like a frenzied dream at first, an out-of-body experience, as if he was watching another version of himself do this thing. But when she started to struggle, the dream became a reality, and his mind snapped back into his body. He knew he had to fully commit and redoubled his efforts.

As he did the deed, it was almost as if he was standing outside himself, watching another man squeeze her neck until she went limp. But it wasn't another man who got the thrill from it. This feeling—of being powerful, of finally making the decisions—was all his. The satisfaction he felt bordered on the sexual, though he pushed that down.

Once he was done, he left quickly. There was no one else in the house. The housekeeper was at the store and the nanny had taken the kids to the park. But for the rest of the day, the man couldn't stop thinking about the pleasure he'd derived from killing her. That's when he realized he needed to do it again to get that feeling back. But he had to take precautions, so this time he chose someone that wouldn't lead directly to him.

He felt a little bad about it because Erin Podemski had never been directly cruel to him. She was pleasant, if distant. But like Sydney Ashe, she had come into her wealth by luck rather than skill. True, she'd written a bestselling book, but she was already awash in family money well before that.

Accessing her hadn't been difficult. He knew how to do it. And when he found her idling on that chaise by the pool, looking out at hills and away from where he crept up behind her, it was like she was inviting him to do this. Because she was looking away, he didn't have to face her, make eye contact with her, or feel any guilt that might result if he saw her expression.

Killing her was just as easy. The power he felt as he cut off her oxygen and dug the leather into her skin was more than any he'd ever felt before. His only regret was that it ended too quickly. He left without looking at her, not wanting to see her accusatory eyes. But even before he was out the door, he knew he needed to do it again.

But he had trouble thinking of a good candidate and went a full day before finally settling on a new target. She was chosen more out of convenience than animosity. Chloe Henshall wasn't cruel or condescending at all. In fact, he'd always found her to be thoughtful and kind. But that was what made her such an excellent choice. She was trusting and wouldn't have any hesitation about letting him into her home. She'd done it many times before.

Admittedly, this one was harder. While he strangled her in her own living room, and

her little dog, Missy, barked and whined from behind the kitchen door, he couldn't help but feel a measure of shame. It didn't stop him from finishing the job. But afterward, he'd moved her into a closet so that her husband, who was rich and clueless but equally nice, wouldn't walk in on her body.

That's when the man decided that from now on, all his victims would deserve what they got. He wanted the ecstasy that came from snuffing out these lives, but he couldn't handle the guilt that came later if they weren't awful enough to justify his actions.

He'd felt no such guilt with Sydney Ashe, so he used her as a model going forward. And the second that she became his guiding light, his next target fell into place immediately: Margot Howell—a snappish, self-involved social climber who cared more about her reputation than those in her life.

She proved her worthiness for him even as he watched her from behind that plant in the coffeehouse. Without putting anything in the tip jar, she barked at the barista who handed over her drink because she hadn't added the "t" at the end of Margot, as if that was either obvious or important. Then she pushed past the other waiting customers and strolled out through the other door.

The man left, too, following her down the sidewalk from a safe distance. Margot was oblivious to him and apparently, to most everything else around her. This stretch of Franklin had cute cafes, a charming bookstore, a flower shop, and a newsstand.

But she ignored all of that, as well as the happy couple that walked past her, holding hands. The man, about fifteen paces behind Margot, gave them a knowing grin and they returned it. Margot, up ahead, didn't even look down at the baby being pushed along in the stroller, who stared up at her curiously. When the man walked by the little cherub, he made a silly face, and she burst out in a giggle fit.

Margot returned to her office in an upscale strip center and pushed the door open. As the man walked by, he noted that the door closed slowly. He could hear Margot berating her assistant for some failure or another but disregarded the urge to glance inside. He didn't want to be noticed, and he didn't need any more proof.

Margot had more than earned what was coming to her.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Ryan Hernandez had a splitting headache.

Usually when he got one, it made him immediately think of Jessie and wonder when her last migraine had been. But his wife hadn't had any major pain in her head in weeks, so he allowed himself to focus on his own discomfort. He grabbed a couple of ibuprofen from the desk in the research office and popped them, hoping they'd kick in soon.

It was no surprise that his brain would show signs of wear and tear. He looked at the clock on the wall. It was after four already. They'd been at this all day, ever since they'd parted ways with Albert Short, whose alibi had borne out.

They'd cleared one guy but that still left at least a dozen other credible suspects. The job was so daunting that they'd brought in Detectives Susannah Valentine and Sam Goodwin, who had just closed their own case, to help. Even Captain Parker was pitching in, despite having to simultaneously manage the aftermath of the homeless encampment attack yesterday. When she had walked into research an hour ago to check on their progress, they didn't have much to offer.

"Not to put too much pressure on you, but I got another call from Decker," she said. "He's getting questions from the press, especially since it came out that one victim was married to a Hollywood bigwig, and another was the wife of a tech mogul. I told him that you would have already let me know if you had anything new, but I promised I'd check in anyway. So here I am. Anything to share?"

Ryan knew it wasn't Parker's fault. She was getting pressure from above, so she was putting it on them. When he was captain of Central Station, he often did the same

thing. But that didn't mean he wasn't irritated. It felt like she always came calling at the most inopportune time. And because she didn't yet have a strong relationship with Homicide Special Section, her check-ins sometimes felt intrusive. He knew it was something he would have to get over, but that didn't make it any easier.

"We've already had a few potential suspects come in for interviews," he told her, making sure to keep the impatience out of his voice. "The hypnotherapist, Claudine Monterey, just left. We're following up on her alibi, but it looks like we may have to cross her off. The dog walker, Charlie Warner is on his way in now. Me and Jessie will talk to him as soon as he arrives."

"We also expect the pet therapist, Cassandra Canine to arrive in the next hour," Jessie added.

"I thought you said she wouldn't share her client list," Parker replied.

"She claims she won't," Jessie confirmed, "but she is willing to talk about Chloe Henshall specifically. We're hoping that once we get her in the room, we can convince her to be more forthcoming."

Ryan knew that if anyone could talk her into a change of heart, it was Jessie. Her ability to empathize with witnesses, and even suspects, was part of what made her such a good profiler.

"Maybe you can put some pressure on her therapeutic aide to spill some personal details about her clients," Parker suggested.

"That's interesting, actually," Jessie said. "Ms. Canine said she hasn't been able to get hold of him. The guy's name is Henry Pogue, and it's his day off. He was supposedly going hiking today so we're not jumping to conclusions, since he could just be out of cell range. But Jamil is ready to ping his location if need be."

“Okay,” Parker said. “Any other strong contenders?”

“A few,” Ryan told her. “You want to fill the captain in, Jamil?”

“Sure,” the head researcher said. “We finally got a response from Paolo Asanti, the personal trainer who did regular in-home sessions with both Erin Podemski and Chloe Henshall. He said he’s seeing clients at the gym he’s affiliated with today and would come in after his last session. Detective Hernandez found that response. . . unacceptable and sent Detective Valentine to have a chat with him.”

“Also,” Beth added, “other than a perfunctory conversation this morning requesting he come in today, we have yet to hear back from Karl Van Hart, the owner of Hollywood Green Thumb, the gardening service that all three victims used.”

“That lead maybe feels like it should be a priority,” Parker noted, her eyebrows raised.

“We were going to head over to his office right after talking to the dog walker,” Ryan explained, again feeling irked at the captain’s second-guessing.

“Maybe Detective Goodwin could take over that interview,” Parker replied, “while you and Ms. Hunt pay a visit to the suspect who has yet to agree to one and who has a connection to all three women.”

“We can do that,” Jessie said quickly. “We just need to wrap up some odds and ends here first.”

Ryan knew his wife had jumped in because she was concerned that he might react poorly to being essentially ordered to change the direction of his investigation. As usual, she was right about how he felt and how he might have responded if she hadn’t spoken up.

“Great,” Parker said. “I’ll fill in here as long as I can while you’re gone, at least until I get called to handle some other fresh hell.”

Once again, he asked himself why he was letting this get to him so much. Parker was just doing her job, much as he would have. She was a competent professional, just trying to do the best she could.

He thought about the captain in relation to his wife, another strong woman trying to balance her challenging career with a complicated home life, including a husband who was hell-bent on having kids, even when she was far less certain. Maybe he needed to look at himself a little closer and ask if he should be doing a better job at handling not getting his way. Maybe this was his problem, not theirs. That was something he could explore later, perhaps with Dr. Lemmon.

Right now, he apparently had a suspect to question. He turned to Jessie.

“Let’s pay a visit to Karl Van Hart.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Jimmy Platt didn't know why no one had yet acted on Mark Haddonfield's call to arms in his manifesto. To Jimmy's knowledge, nobody had tried to punish Jessie Hunt. Of course he could be mistaken.

As he pondered the issue, Jimmy drove carefully, making sure to keep several vehicles back to avoid suspicion, watching closely as his target drove through the city. It wasn't easy. She drove with the arrogance of someone who didn't think the rules applied to her. But that was about to change.

It was always possible that someone had already tried to make a move against Jessie or one of her minions, and it had been kept secret from the public. He knew from his internet deep dives that it wasn't uncommon for the media and government officials to work together to cover up the truth. If someone had made an attempt on Hunt, there was no way that the establishment would let regular people like him find out.

It was just like how the news kept saying that the assassin named Ash Pierce had been in a coma for weeks before recently waking up. If that was true, why hadn't anyone interviewed her? Why were there no photos of her, either in a coma or after she regained consciousness? The answer, at least according to people he trusted online, was that she had been taken to a CIA facility where she was being reprogrammed to go after foreign government leaders. It made perfect sense.

But none of that mattered now. Wherever Pierce was these days, he'd know that he'd never find out. And if anyone had attempted to make Jessie Hunt suffer the consequences of her actions, regular people like him were being kept in the dark about it. He had accepted that this was the way it had always been.

It was his turn to change all that. He would be the one to make a difference. When he made his move, it would be brutal, and it would be public. There wouldn't be any way to hide it. He would livestream it to make sure.

In addition, there would be countless onlookers around, with their phones at the ready. They would all capture his victorious image, with his freshly cut blond hair, wearing his bright red puffy jacket and his camo pants, both chosen specifically for the occasion. No amount of government and press collusion would prevent the truth from getting out this time.

And Jimmy would be the one to get the glory. His name would be splashed across the web and whatever channels were still willing to broadcast reality and not just the red-pill, Matrix-style universe that most people accepted as real. Most important of all, his hero, Mark Haddonfield would notice.

Even with a prison media blackout, word would get to him. Jimmy had considered trying to visit Haddonfield at Twin Towers, but doubted they'd let him in. And whether they did or not, it wasn't a smart move. He would be on their radar from that point on. They'd red flag him and follow him home, monitor his communications, and eventually grab him up before he could complete his mission. He couldn't take that risk.

He was too smart to make such a dumb mistake. After all, he had gone to college for two years. Of course, that was before his bitch of a professor had failed him for supposedly plagiarizing some political scientist on his Government class essay. So what if he'd borrowed a few lines from the guy and neglected to put them in quotes or footnote them? It was just an oversight. Maybe it was cause for a warning or even a drop in letter grade. But to flunk him entirely? It reminded him of how Mark Haddonfield had described Jessie Hunt refusing to let him take her seminar, which basically ruined his college career.

The same thing had happened to Jimmy. Flunking government dropped his GPA below 2.5, which was required to keep his financial aid. Without that, he had to drop out. His mom made him enroll in a community college, but he lost interest, mostly because no one there took seriously his plan to start a new political party that focused on the needs of the voiceless, people like himself who constantly got a raw deal when going up against powerful interests.

So he dropped out of that school too, got his old high school job as a pizza delivery guy, and used his spare time to focus on getting the truth out to the masses. It seemed to be a fruitless effort until that night two weeks ago when he was, as usual, surfing the web.

Just after midnight on Thanksgiving day, he started getting alerts about some manifesto written by the guy who had taken out multiple people that Jessie Hunt had previously saved. He already knew about Mark Haddonfield and how close he'd come to snuffing out Hunt in a hospital room a few months ago.

Now the guy was challenging others to pick up where he'd left off. Jimmy knew he didn't have long. He immediately printed out the document, which was 43 pages long, and then took screen shots of every page. Sure enough, just hours after it popped up, the manifesto was pulled down. It appeared other places after that but was always scrubbed soon thereafter.

That was okay. Jimmy had his copy, which he referred to constantly. It spoke to him so deeply that he had large chunks of it memorized. He didn't need to know Jessie Hunt personally to have animosity towards her.

He felt a kinship with Mark Haddonfield, as if they might have been close friends if not for the prison walls separating them. And Mark said that this woman was the reason his life had fallen apart. That wrong demanded righting. It was unconscionable that Mark was behind bars while Jessie Hunt was out and about, living her life with

family and friends surrounding her.

But it wasn't until recently, after news broke of a trial date for Mark Haddonfield, that it hit Jimmy. His hero was facing hundreds of years in prison for multiple murders. There was no way the man was ever getting out.

That meant that it was up to those who admired him to do what he could not. It was up to Jimmy if he had the courage to take action.

So he'd come up with a plan, one that was elegant in its simplicity. And after several days of hemming and hawing, he'd finally woken up one day and found that his resolve was as steely as his spine.

That day was today. The time was now. Retribution was coming.



*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Jessie parked in the Hollywood Green Thumb parking lot.

She and Ryan were listening intently on speaker as Sergeant Cutter updated them on developments in the case.

“I just got off with the coroner, Dr. Roone,” he told them. “He says he discovered something that he didn’t pick up in his initial exam of Chloe Henshall. There was a hair embedded in her neck that didn’t match her own. He’s trying to identify it now.”

“Did he have any preliminary conclusions?” Ryan asked excitedly.

“Just that he tested it against hers and it didn’t match,” Cutter said. “He says it was so deep in the neck tissue that, if it wasn’t hers, it almost certainly came from the murder weapon, which we know was leather. If that was a belt, he’s hoping it might be a hair from the murderer, but since he doesn’t have a suspect’s hair to compare it to, he can’t make any firm determination. He is testing it to see if he can determine any other markers that might be of use.”

“Did he have a timetable for that?” Jessie asked.

“He thought he’d have something by tomorrow for sure but couldn’t promise anything sooner than that.”

“Would it help if I called and put the screws to him?” Ryan wanted to know. “We’re worried about another murder today and every scrap of evidence could be a difference-maker. In fact we’re about to question a suspect now and if we knew if that hair matched his, it would help enormously.”

"To be honest, Detective," Cutter replied, "I think it would be counter-productive. Roone knows the stakes, and I could tell he was feeling the pressure. He's not slacking, I assure you. I told him to call the second he had something, and he promised he would. I recommend we let him do his work."

Jessie tended to agree. When Ryan looked over, she silently nodded to let him know that.

"Okay, thanks Sergeant Cutter," Ryan said. "You obviously know how to reach us, so we'll wait to hear back from you."

He hung up, and they got out of the car. As they walked through the parking lot, which was adorned with large potted plants placed in between parking rows, they reviewed what they knew about the owner of Hollywood Green Thumb.

"According to what Beth sent us," Jessie said, looking at her phone, "Karl Van Hart is forty-two. He emigrated from Austria fifteen years ago and has had this business for a dozen years. It was mostly a one-man operation for the first few years, just him and his truck. But about a decade ago, he got a few high-income customers in the Hollywood Hills and began to specialize in that clientele. He eventually hired a crew of gardeners and bought multiple trucks. Now, he has a staff of eight: two folks in the office and six gardeners in addition to himself. Apparently, he still occasionally does jobs for his most important clients."

"No criminal record?" Ryan asked.

"There was an issue with unpaid taxes to the city a while back," Jessie said, "but it looks like it was more of a miscommunication than anything. He paid the back taxes and hasn't had any hiccups since."

"Sounds like he's either a solid citizen or using that as a front for something

nefarious,” Ryan replied as they approached the front door. “Hard to give the guy the benefit of the doubt when he doesn’t make an effort to get back to us about a murder investigation.”

That conversation stopped as they walked in. The receptionist, a young woman with a short black bob, looked up at them with a plastered-on smile.

“How may I help you?” she asked.

“We need to speak to Mr. Van Hart,” Ryan told her.

“I’m sorry but Mr. Van Hart has meetings for the rest of the afternoon,” she said, trying to sound apologetic. “Perhaps I can help you, or we can schedule an appointment for another time. What’s this regarding?”

Even before he spoke, Jessie could see that her husband had lost patience with the niceties of the moment.

“It’s regarding a murder investigation,” he said, holding up his badge, “so he’s going to have to push his meetings. Which is his office?”

The young woman gulped hard and pointed at the one closed door at the end of the hall.

“Thanks,” Ryan said, starting that way.

Jessie followed him without a word. Once Ryan Hernandez got a bee in his bonnet, there was no point in trying to slow him down. She knew because she was exactly the same way.

Ryan opened the door and stepped inside. As Jessie did the same, she took in the

situation. The entire office was a monument to Van Hart's work. There were plants on almost every surface, from bookshelves to counters to windowsills, as well as two tall ones rising from large pots on the floor.

Van Hart was seated behind his desk, also littered with small plants, talking on the phone. The man had longish black hair, a neatly trimmed beard and mustache and wore a work shirt.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded in an accent that was still strong but easy to understand.

"Hi Mr. Van Hart," Ryan said casually, as if his visit had been expected, "glad we could get together. I'm Detective Hernandez with the LAPD, and this is Ms. Hunt. We've been trying to reach you all day to have a friendly chat down at our station, but it feels like you've been ignoring us, so we thought we'd come to you. You might want to call your friend back."

Van Hart looked at the phone before realizing he needed to speak into it at that point.

"I'll call you back," he said quickly, then hung up and looked at them. "I got your co-worker's message, Detective, but I didn't know it was such a pressing matter. I thought I could call you at the end of the day."

"You didn't think multiple messages asking you to come in to discuss several murders involving clients of yours was pressing?" Ryan asked skeptically.

"No," he insisted, "why would a gardening service be important to such a thing? We just do our work and move on. With very few exceptions, I don't know the details of these people's lives. I assumed you were—what's the phrase—casting a wide net. I was happy to help but thought it was probably a waste of time. I'm sorry if I misinterpreted the importance of the situation."

Jessie was as dubious as Ryan. She couldn't think of very many people who wouldn't make a request to discuss a murder case a priority. To her mind, that was an indication of either idiocy, arrogance, or guilt. She wondered which best applied to Van Hart and decided to find out.

"You can make up for that 'misinterpretation' by being forthcoming now, Mr. Van Hart," she said, cutting to the chase. "Have you ever personally worked at the homes of Erin Podemski, Sydney and Gabriel Ashe, or Chloe and Sean Henshall?"

The man paused, either stalling or trying to remember. "I used to do work for the Henshalls," he finally said. "They were one of my first clients and I went there with my crews as late as three or four years ago. But I eventually handed them off to others. As far as the Ashes go, I visited them for an initial consultation, along with a couple of my guys, when they were considering hiring me, but never actually worked at their home. The name Podemski doesn't ring a bell, which makes me think it was handled from the start by one of my team members."

"I assume you can check your database to see which of your team members did work at the Henshall and Podemski homes and joined you for the Ashe consultation?" Jessie prodded.

"Of course."

"Do that now, please," she told him. "Check for employees who have been at those homes in, say, the last six months."

Though he clearly didn't like being ordered around, Van Hart did as he was instructed. While he was searching, Jessie stood up and put her hands on his desk, leaning forward as if she wanted to look at the monitor. But in truth, she had a different motive for her actions.

She'd noticed a single hair lying on the surface of Van Hart's desk and thought it could be used to compare against the one found in Chloe Henshall's neck. She pinched the hair between her thumb and forefinger, then stood upright to await the results of Van Hart's search. It took less than thirty seconds for him to come up with an answer.

"Only two of my current people have been to all three properties in that time. One, Roberto Garza, is currently on his honeymoon in Acapulco. He got married last weekend and won't be back until Sunday. The other is one of my team captains, Emilio Vega. He's currently out on a job."

"Tell us about Emilio," Jessie said, sitting back down.

Van Hart shrugged. "He's a hard worker, has been with me for almost a decade. He's maybe forty, divorced I think. I don't really get into my people's personal lives that much."

"Where is the job he's currently working?" Ryan asked.

"In the Hills, like almost all of them."

"Is he leading a team today?" Jessie asked.

"No," Van Hart said. "This is a smaller maintenance job, just some mowing and pruning a few trees. It will probably take less than two hours."

"We need the address," Ryan said.

Van Hart wrote it down and handed it over.

"Thanks," Ryan said, handing over a card of his own. "Now I want you to call this

number and ask for Jamil Winslow. Give him everything you have on Vega, from address to social security number, got it?”

Van Hart nodded nervously. Ryan started for the door, but Jessie held back a moment.

“And Mr. Van Hart,” she warned. “Please don’t call Vega to let him know we’re coming. That could be construed as aiding and abetting. You don’t want that.”

Van Hart nodded again, and as she left, Jessie noted with satisfaction that whatever arrogance the man had displayed when they entered was now gone.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Hannah stood in line at the residential dining hall, engaged in an intense internal debate.

As she studied the buffet, she tried to decide between a salad or a calzone. Her diet during finals week hadn't been the healthiest, and a nagging sense of guilt had her leaning toward the greens. Then again, the calzone smelled so good.

"Tough call, huh?" someone said from just over her shoulder, making her jump slightly.

She turned to find Finn Anderton behind her, a broad grin on his face. She thought of about three different responses in that moment, but decided to go with the one that was least informative.

"Why are you here? Don't you eat at your fraternity house?"

He seemed happy to be interrogated.

"Remember, I'm still just a pledge, not a member, so I only eat there when I'm invited, and I was not invited tonight. Besides, I was looking for you."

"Why?" she asked suspiciously, before immediately moving on to a more pressing question. "How did you know I'd be here?"

"I stopped by your room and asked Lizzie," he explained. "After I convinced her that I meant no harm, she very reluctantly admitted you were here. She looks out for you. Is that because you helped her out with those threatening messages she was getting?"



“I think she mostly looks out for me because she’s a nice person,” Hannah replied, deadpan.

“Well, I’m here now,” he said. “I sure hope that I didn’t scare you when I came up behind you like that.”

“You didn’t,” she assured him. “There’s a difference between startled and scared.”

“If you say so,” he teased.

Hannah, irked by his cockiness, grabbed the calzone as if it might somehow spite him, though she wasn’t sure that he would see it that way.

“Good call,” he said, noting her selection,” they’re yummy.”

“Why are you here?” she demanded, not engaging in his playful banter.

His grin dimmed slightly, and she could tell he was about to get serious.

“I thought you might want to know what happened with Reggie today.”

Hannah put a parfait on her tray and headed for the register, hoping she wasn’t betraying her intrigue. As badly as she wanted to know, she didn’t want to look like it.

“I guess I’m mildly curious,” she conceded.

“Somehow I think that’s the understatement of the day,” he noted, before launching in. “Anyway, it went really well. I joined him in the professor’s office. The T.A. was there too. Reggie methodically went through many of the points you made last night. He noted that a fellow student, Sherry Braid, might be dating Marvin Jost. He

explained the playing time situation.”

“And they just caved?” Hannah asked as she handed her meal swipe card to the student at the checkout register.

“Not at first,” Finn told her. “The professor initially said he couldn’t do anything based on a mere allegation from another student.”

“But that’s exactly what was done to Reggie!” Hannah protested.

“Which is what he told them,” Finn agreed. “He said his scholarship was at risk and demanded that they look at the footage from the test immediately. They started to object, suggesting they couldn’t access the video so quickly, but he nailed them.”

“Really?” Hannah asked, unable to keep the excitement out of her voice as they walked to an unoccupied table in the dining room.

“Yeah, he was great,” Finn went on. “He said that he was coming to them as a courtesy but if they didn’t resolve things right away, his next stop would be to the coach and then to the dean’s office. I barely said a word the whole time. Anyway, that’s when they caved.”

“What did they do?” Hannah wanted to know.

“After all their claims that it would be so difficult to access, the T.A. managed to get the test video in less than a half an hour,” Finn said. “Of course, it didn’t show anything incriminating against Reggie, although you can see Sherry staring daggers at him from a couple of rows back.”

“So where do things stand now?” Hannah pressed.

“Reggie’s suspension is lifted, with a note of apology in his academic record for the ‘miscommunication,’” he told her. “Reggie asked what would happen to Sherry. They said they couldn’t get into that, but I have a feeling that it’s not going to end well for her.”

Hannah sat down at the table and, in what she considered a show of tremendous restraint, took a spoonful of parfait instead of going right for the calzone. After swallowing, she replied.

“I’m glad everything worked out.”

She noted that Finn suddenly looked nervous. Sensing something unpleasant coming her way, she tried to nip it in the bud with her own attempt at humor.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Are the blisters you got from your terrible dancing giving you trouble?”

It was the first acknowledgment by either of them about last night. It seemed to work, as his grin quickly returned.

“No,” he assured her, “I feel great. If you want, I could play a song on my phone right now and we can trip the light fantastic right here among the dining hall dinner crowd.”

“I would, but I don’t want my calzone to get cold,” she replied without missing a beat.

“Fair enough,” he said before returning to the topic he’d clearly originally intended to broach. “I had an idea, but you’re so prickly that I’m hesitant to suggest it.”

“Well, you’re starting off great,” she said acidly. “It’s always a super move to win

someone over to your idea by calling them prickly.”

“Anyway,” he replied, not taking the bait, “I was thinking—you helped out your friend, Lizzie, with her harassment issue. Now you’ve done the same for Reggie with this false cheating allegation. I’m starting to wonder if you should try to make this a regular thing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that there are a lot of students on this campus who could use your help,” he explained, “you know, folks who don’t want to go through official channels like the school administration or campus police. Maybe they don’t want to deal with the bureaucracy, or go on the record, or just think it will take too long, or not do any good at all. But if they could come to you, share their issues, and get some advice, or even have you look into their situations. I don’t know, it seems like you could do some real good.”

Hannah listened to him quietly, waiting for the moment when an objection would pop up in her head. She expected that once the first flush of Finn’s mix of flattery and flirtation passed through her, some obvious reason to reject the idea would come to her. But nothing did.

The idea of helping other students in need, people who didn’t think they could go the authorities for whatever reason, appealed to her. She had to admit that when her mind was fully occupied with both classes and cases, it tended to mute what she could only describe as her latent bloodlust.

That intense desire to punish wrongdoers, even through violence if necessary, didn’t ever really go away. But when she was focused and busy, the volume turned way down. If helping other students could serve the twin goals of righting wrongs and keeping a lid on the fury inside her, one that often felt like it was on the verge of

bubbling over, maybe it was worth considering.

She looked up from her tray at Finn, who was already smiling again, seeming to already know what she was going to say. She wanted to wipe the grin off his face. But he appeared so sincere and hopeful that she couldn't bring herself to do it. Instead, when she answered, she was almost affable.

“I'll think about it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Despite Ryan's protests, Jessie refused to punch the gas.

They were making the last turn leading to the Hollywood Hills home of Raquel and Stewart Morris, and she had refused to let her husband anywhere near the driver's seat. As she pulled to a stop across the street from the home, she turned to face him.

"See," she said. "It took me about sixty seconds more than it would have taken you to get here. But here's the big difference: we're alive."

"Yeah," Ryan agreed, getting out of the passenger seat, "but Raquel Morris might not be. In a situation like this, every second counts."

Jessie got out of the car too, making sure the Ziploc baggie with Karl Van Hart's singular hair was safely secured in the glove compartment for later analysis, and locked the doors.

"We're no good to anyone if we don't make it here in one piece," she reminded him. "So how about you stop backseat driving, dearest, and help me find this guy?"

Her tone successfully indicated that she was tired of the debate, and Ryan wisely let it go.

"Emilio Vega was booked for this job until five," he said, "but it's 5:21 now and his truck is still here. That makes me a little nervous."

Jessie too had noticed the big vehicle parked in the driveway, facing the street, with Hollywood Green Thumb on the side door.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” she warned as they walked up the drive. “The job could just be running long.”

“Let’s find out,” Ryan said. He pointed to a gate leading from the driveway to the back of the house. “Should we go that way or try the front door?”

“How about we do both?” Jessie suggested. “I’ll take the front and you can go around back.”

“Okay,” he agreed, “but call me now and put it on speaker so we’re in touch the whole time.”

She did as he asked. Once they were squared away, she walked up to the front door, taking in the place. After seeing so many of these hillside homes, she thought they might all start to run together. But like the others, this one still managed to impress. It had an understated Mediterranean look, though the closer she got, the more she appreciated the detailed craftsmanship of the of the stone and tile work.

It seemed befitting for the couple. From the background information that Beth gave them on the drive up, they’d learned that Stewart Morris was a senior vice-president with a corporate bank and that his wife, Raquel, was the in-house counsel for the west coast division of an oil and gas firm. Frankly Jessie was surprised the house wasn’t even bigger.

Once on the front step, she rang the bell. It only took a few seconds for it to open. She was met by a middle-aged Latina in a maid’s uniform. “How may I help you?” she asked warmly.

“I’m Jessie Hunt with the Los Angeles Police Department. I was hoping to speak with Mr. or Mrs. Morris. Are either of them in?”

“Not right now,” the woman said. “Mr. Morris is on a work trip. Mrs. Morris is delayed home because of a work meeting. May I take a message?”

Before Jessie could reply, she heard what sounded like scuffling on the phone, followed by several grunts.

“Excuse me,” she said quickly, before speaking into the phone, “Ryan, are you okay? Ryan!”

There was no response, only the continued muffled sound of what seemed like people physically struggling. That was enough for her.

She turned and sprinted across the lawn toward the open gate near the driveway. Her heart was pounding as she pulled out her sidearm and reminded herself to breathe. If something happened to Ryan, she didn’t know what she would do.

She rounded the corner of the house, with loud grunting still audible on her phone. There was a large bush blocking her view of the backyard. She took a moment to regroup, then stepped out from behind it, her weapon gripped tight. After a moment to process the situation, she allowed herself to exhale.

Ryan was kneeling over a man, putting handcuffs on the guy, who was lying on his stomach. From his driver’s license photo, Jessie recognized him as Emilio Vega. Short and heavyset, with black hair and a mustache, he looked stunned but not surprised by his predicament. Jessie holstered the weapon and jogged over.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I approached him, holding up my badge,” Ryan explained. “He saw me and started running before I could say a word. I tackled him. Could you grab my phone from over there on the grass by the deck? He knocked it out of my pocket in the hubbub.”



That explained why he hadn't responded to her desperate entreaties. As she retrieved it for him, she asked, "Why did he run?"

"I don't know," Ryan answered, then looked down at Vega. "Why did you run?"

"It was a misunderstanding," Vega replied, his words slightly muffled by the grass in his mouth, a result of Ryan's takedown.

"Would Raquel Morris think it's a misunderstanding?" Ryan demanded.

"What?"

Ryan was about to press the issue when Jessie motioned to him. He leaned in her direction, and she whispered in his ear.

"I just spoke to the maid," she said. "Raquel's not home. Apparently a meeting ran late."

"That doesn't exonerate him," Ryan insisted quietly before turning his attention back to the man on the ground. "So Emilio, did your plan get messed up? You didn't expect Raquel Morris to still be out of the house?"

"I'm not saying anything!" Vega shot back before spitting out some grass and dirt.

Jessie saw Ryan stiffen at that response and put a hand on his forearm before he could offer a comeback. Again she whispered. "Would the killer leave his truck out front, with his business's name on it, while he was inside murdering someone? Would he do it with the maid home? I'm not saying that gets him off the hook. He could just be here to scope things out for a future attack. But this doesn't feel right, Ryan."

He briefly looked at her with frustration, before seeming to get control of himself.

After a few seconds, he nodded back.

“Why don’t you see what you can find out?” he replied quietly.

She leaned down close to Vega. “Refusing to tell us anything is a bad idea, Mr. Vega. Do you know why we’re here?”

The man didn’t respond. In fact, he dramatically turned his head away from her. She didn’t mind. He’d come around.

“We’re investigating the murders of three women, all in in this immediate area, at homes where you’ve worked. You’re a possible suspect in their deaths. If that’s not why you ran when you saw Detective Hernandez, you better come clean now. Otherwise, we’ll have to take you down to the station, where this will become a very long night.”

As expected, Vega turned his head back toward her. His expression was hard to read, though she could see a hint of panic in there.

“I didn’t kill anyone,” he said defiantly.

“Then why did you run?” she pressed.

He was silent for a moment. “How do I know that you won’t bust me for something else?”

“You don’t,” she told him, “but unless you’re a murderer, anything that explains your behavior, even if it incriminates you in another crime, is better than the alternative.”

He rested his forehead on the dirt briefly, before looking up again.

"All right," he began, "I was—."

"Hold on," she interrupted. "Let's make this official and have Detective Hernandez read you your rights before you say anything else."

Ryan gave Vega the Miranda warning, then Jessie said, "Now go ahead."

"I took some of Ms. Morris's jewelry when I went into the house to use the bathroom," he said, wincing at the admission. "I thought that was why you were busting me."

"Where is it?" Jessie asked.

"I put the pieces in the glove box of the truck," he muttered.

"Is this the first time you've done that?" she wanted to know.

"No," he admitted. "More like the fourth."

"Is your boss, Van Hart, involved?" Ryan wondered. "Is this some kind of jewelry theft ring?"

"No," he said. "Karl's a good guy. I'm going through a divorce, and money is tight. I've been pawning the stuff I took to help pay some bills. It was a desperate, stupid thing to do, I know. But I swear, I didn't kill anyone. I'll take a lie detector test to prove it if that helps."

Jessie glanced over at Ryan, who looked as crushed as she felt. Lie detector tests didn't hold much sway with her, but the fact that Vega was volunteering to take one did. Either he was guilty and thought he could beat it, or he wasn't involved and was willing to do whatever it took to prove it.

They would go through the motions, take him back to the station to interrogate him and check his alibi, but she doubted this was their man.

“Let’s take him in,” she said, knowing she sounded despondent.

As Ryan pulled Vega to his feet, she stared up at the sky. It was starting to get dark. She couldn’t help but ask herself if the sudden chill she felt was from the cold or what she feared might be coming later tonight.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

She let Ryan drive back downtown.

They were still in the hills, but she felt confident that he wouldn't push the speed limit as they traversed the twisting roads. They were approaching the base of the hills when a call came in. It was Cutter. She put him on speaker.

"What have you got, Sergeant?" she asked, trying to sound more chipper than she felt.

"You asked for any new updates," he said. "I've got Dr. Roone on the other line, and he says he has one for you. Can I conference him in?"

"Go for it," she said excitedly, pulling the Ziploc-bagged hair from the glove compartment as if that might somehow impact the results they got.

"Okay, doctor," Cutter said a moment later, "you're on with Detective Hernandez and Ms. Hunt."

"All right," Roone replied, his voice gravelly and tired-sounding. "I'm sorry we haven't been able to meet in person, but I'm glad we can touch base now."

"Don't worry about it, doctor," Ryan told him. "What have you got for us?"

"I'll get straight to the point," he said. "Apparently, that hair embedded in Chloe Henshall's neck tissue was from a dog."

Jessie felt herself deflate at the words. As she tossed the plastic bag back in the glove

compartment, Ryan said what she was thinking.

“Thanks for the info, but I’m not sure how much that helps us. We already know she had a dog. This tidbit doesn’t really change the game.”

“I understand,” Roone said. “I just thought you should know. Sorry, I couldn’t give you more.”

“Thanks anyway,” Jessie told him. “Please don’t hesitate to call if you have other updates. Even if they seem unimportant, they could be valuable. Same for you, Sergeant Cutter.”

“Of course,” Cutter said. She could hear the disappointment in his voice too.

She hung up as they arrived at a long light at the bottom of Beachwood Drive where it intersected with Franklin Avenue. She sat silently in the passenger seat while Ryan did the same beside her. In the back, Emilio Vega spoke up softly.

“Does that help me?” he asked. “I don’t even have a dog.”

“Please, Mr. Vega,” Ryan said irritably. “We can litigate all this back at the station.”

Jessie was slightly annoyed by the man too, but something he said caused an odd sensation in her. She couldn’t define it. It reminded her of those times when she’d leave her house, sensing that she was forgetting something but not sure what it was.

She closed her eyes, shutting out the brake lights of the cars in front of them and the whoosh of vehicles passing them as they went back up into the hills. What was bothering her? She cast her mind back to the last crime scene at the Henshall house, following the mental map of the place that she’d created.

Then her thoughts stopped, fixing on one that hovered, like a ghost, just out of her field of corporeal vision. The thought was about a door. As she recalled, by the time they arrived at the scene, the door connecting the living room—where Chloe was killed—to the kitchen was open. But Sean Henshall had told them that when he got home, Missy the dog was stuck in the kitchen, with the door to the living room closed.

If Missy was locked in the kitchen, how did her hair get on Chloe's neck? The easy answers were either that Chloe had either played with the dog earlier, gotten a hair on her hand, and then rubbed her own neck, leaving the trace hair on her skin, or that she'd simply picked Missy up and nuzzled her. Both were possible. But that conclusion made an assumption, and Jessie knew the danger of assuming too much.

She opened her eyes and pulled out her phone, scrolling to photos of the Henshall crime scene and to Missy specifically. The little white poodle was in the arms of Sean Henshall, who seemed to be clutching at her for comfort. The photo reminded her of another one that she'd seen recently and dismissed.

As quickly as her fingers would allow, she exited her camera roll and clicked onto the police report from Erin Podemski's house. Then she pulled up the photos from that scene, scanning through them until she found the one she wanted. She clicked on it and zoomed in. Sure enough, her memory was right. She immediately called Dr. Roone back.

"This is Jessie Hunt again," she said without any greeting, "can you describe the dog hair you found in Chloe Henshall's neck tissue?"

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Like the breed? I don't know that yet."

"No," she told him, "just the basics: color? Style? Specifically, is the hair white and curly?"

“Definitely not,” he said. “It’s darker, black or brown. And it’s straight.”

“So it wouldn’t have come from a white poodle?”

“Definitely not,” he assured her.

“Thanks,” Jessie said, a charge of electricity coursing through her. “Please let me know when you get something definitive.”

She hung up without waiting for a response and pulled up another phone number.

”What”s going on?” Ryan asked as the light turned green, and he began moving.

“Can you pull over?” she asked.

Ryan seemed to sense that she was on to something and, without another word, eased into the nearby parking lot of a cheap motel. Jessie found the number she was looking for and dialed. After two rings, she heard a voice.

“This is Nikki,” said Erin Podemski’s personal assistant.

“Nikki, this is Jessie Hunt. Does Erin have a dog?”

“Oh, hi, Ms. Hunt,” Nikki said, taken aback. “Um, no, she doesn’t.”

“I’m looking at a photo from the mantle in her living room and in it, she’s kneeling next to a dog. It looks like a border collie, maybe?”

“Oh yeah,” Nikki replied. “That’s Max. He was her dog, but he died a few months before I started working for her. Cancer, I think.”



“Do you know if Erin ever used a dog walker or a pet therapist for Max?”

“I don’t,” Nikki said. “Erin didn’t like to talk about Max very much. Every time he came up, she’d cry. It was still pretty raw for her, I guess. But I still have access to her checking account records. I could look back to before he died and see.”

“That would be great.”

“Now?” Nikki asked, surprised.

“Yes, please,” Jessie said firmly.

“Okay, just give me a minute to pull them up.”

Jessie, Ryan, and Emilio Vega sat silently in the car, waiting. Finally, Vega spoke up hesitantly.

“Can I say something?”

Ryan looked annoyed, but Jessie figured the guy wouldn’t volunteer anything at this point unless it was important.

“Go ahead.”

“I remember that some guy walked her dog from time to time,” he said. “I wasn’t really paying close attention because I was working, but I think I assumed he was a boyfriend, because one day the dog was gone, and I never saw the guy after that. But I guess if the guy was a dog walker and the dog died, that would explain why he stopped coming around.”

“Can you describe him?” Jessie asked.

“Nah,” Vega said. “It was a long time ago. I mean, he was white, and I think he had dark hair, although he always wore a baseball cap. He was real friendly though, always said ‘hi’ and ‘how’s it going?’”

“I found something,” Nikki said over the speaker. “Up until five months ago, I see regular Venmo payments to something called Waggy Walks. There are dozens of them.”

“Is there a person’s name listed?” Jessie asked.

“I don’t see one.”

“Okay, thanks Nikki,” Jessie said. “We’ll be in touch if we have more questions.”

She hung up and tried to search for Waggy Walks on her phone, but nothing would load.

“I can’t get an internet connection,” she muttered in frustration.

“Yeah, this area has terrible reception,” Vega said. “I have that problem all the time.”

Jessie gave up and called Jamil. “Hey,” she said urgently the second he answered. “I’m having connectivity issues with my phone. Can you look up a company called Waggy Walks and tell me who owns it?”

“I don’t need to look it up, Ms. Hunt,” Jamil replied, unfazed by the intensity of her request. “We’ve already done that. It belongs to Charlie Warner, the dog walker for the Ashes and the Henshalls.”

Jessie felt a surge of adrenaline course through her system.

“Yeah, well, it looks like he used to be Erin Podemski’s dog walker too, at least until five months ago,” she told him. “Wasn’t he supposed to come in for an interview this afternoon?”

“He did,” Sam Goodwin called out from what sounded like the other side of the room. “I talked to him for a half hour.”

“And?” Jessie demanded more forcefully than she’d intended.

“He was very forthcoming,” Goodwin answered, sounding suddenly uncertain. “He acknowledged walking dogs for the Ashes and Henshalls and gave us his alibis for each murder. We were going to follow up later, but for now, we didn’t see any reason to keep him here. We were prioritizing suspects who had yet to come in or get back to us.”

“Did he ever mention that he used to walk Erin Podemski’s dog?” Ryan asked.

“He did not,” Goodwin conceded.

“How long ago did he leave?” Jessie wanted to know.

“Maybe forty five minutes?” Goodwin said.

Jessie turned to Ryan. “Even in rush hour traffic, he could be back up in the hills by now.”

Ryan opened his mouth, but before he could reply, they both heard a loud gasp.

“What is it?” Jessie asked.

“This is Beth,” the junior researcher said. “As you all were talking, I went back to the

Waggy Walks website. As you'd expect, there are lots of photos of Warner with dogs. But I noticed something else: in several of them, he's holding what looks like a leather leash."

There was a long stretch of silence that Jessie finally broke.

"Can you guys locate his current location using his phone?"

"I can," Jamil said, "but it might take a little while. If he's planning another attack right now, it might be too late. Of course, there is another alternative."

"What?" Jessie asked.

"I could hack into his website. People are able to book walks through it and I could try to access his internal database to see if he's currently on a job."

Jessie looked over at Ryan, who spoke slowly but without hesitation. "Take us off speaker, Jamil."

A moment later the head researcher replied, "you're off."

"Do it," Ryan told him. "Let us know as soon as you have something."

"Will do," Jamil replied immediately. They all knew the move was on the edge of legality, but if it saved a life, Jessie doubted anyone would lose sleep over it.

Once they hung up, she offered her own suggestion. "Let's go back up the hill. All of our victims lived within a mile of each other. The next intended victim probably does too. I'd rather be close by when Jamil comes up with something."

"Okay," Ryan said, putting the car in drive. "Can I punch the gas this time?"

Jessie gritted her teeth and nodded.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Charlie Warner parked his beaten up, 2008 Kia Sportage by the greenbelt and got out.

It was after six and the sun had completely set now, which was to his advantage. Even though he parked in this area all the time when he was walking dogs, he often still got suspicious, sometimes dirty looks from residents who didn't like how his dented vehicle sullied the neighborhood. But in the dark, no one noticed as much.

Parking by the greenbelt had another advantage. Because he wasn't stopping in front of any homes, no security cameras would pick up the car. The only thing they'd record was a guy wearing a cap pulled down low over his face and a windbreaker pulled up to his neck. He could be anybody. With that self-assurance in mind, he walked toward the house, the leash bulging in his jacket pocket.

This time would be different than all the others. With each of his previous victims, he'd gone to their homes. Chloe Henshall had been kind enough to let him in through the front door. At Sydney Ashe's, he'd inadvertently forgotten that their dog, Freddy, was at the vet's that day for surgery and came over, only to be scolded for his idiocy by Ashe.

Luckily, when he entered her house, blinded by rage, it was when the housekeeper was at the grocery store and the nanny had taken the kids to the park. He wasn't thinking about those details in the moment. But what he did remember, even in his agitated state, was the fact that the Ashes always left their backyard sliding door unlocked and that their side gate didn't close properly. And since Freddy wasn't around, there wasn't any barking to warn Sydney of his presence.

As for Erin Podemski, that was easy enough. After the unfortunate death of her

sweet, furry guy, Max, she'd simply forgotten to request her house key back from him. Erin was his "get out of jail" free card if the cops ever looked into him. No one who was alive knew he had the key, and since he wasn't walking her dog anymore—hadn't been to her home in months—it would be hard to tie him to her death. Her new assistant didn't even know he existed.

That had made his questioning at LAPD's Central Station relatively painless. Charlie knew he was a personable guy, and he answered all of Detective Goodwin's questions in a straightforward manner. Admittedly, he was lying when he said he didn't know Erin, and he gave bogus alibis for all the murders. But the fact that the detective let him walk out the door suggested that he wasn't at the top of their suspect list.

Of course, it wouldn't stay that way for long. Eventually, perhaps sometime soon, they would follow up and realize that his story didn't add up. That was why he had to act tonight and why this would be his last piece of retribution before he gave it up and left L.A. for good.

He had a plan, of sorts. Charlie was an avid hiker and camper who always kept his gear in the back of his car. After he completed this final task, he would head east, through the California desert toward Joshua Tree, picking up supplies along the way.

Once there, he would trek to one of the isolated caves he knew, where he'd never once seen another living soul. He'd hole up there, where he figured he could stay for a few weeks, maybe even a month if necessary. Eventually, he'd have to move on. Maybe he'd attempt to sneak into Mexico. Or perhaps he'd try to slip onto a cargo ship leaving from the Port of Los Angeles down in San Pedro. He hadn't figured out the details yet, but there would be lots of time for that later. Right now, he needed to focus on the job at hand.

And that job was teaching Margot Howell a lesson. As he walked toward the house

where he knew he'd find her, he couldn't help but feel a little pride in how he'd gotten to this point. Earlier this afternoon, while at the home of a dog-walking client named Moses Capote, he'd called and, pretending to be Capote, asked for a personal showing of the mansion he was currently approaching.

Of course, he knew that Margot would leap at the opportunity. Moses Capote was a well-known manager to multiple music stars. His current Hollywood Hills home was a rental, since he'd only moved here from New York a couple of months ago. The idea that Margot could sell the guy a place with an asking price of \$32 million likely blinded her to the risk of meeting with him alone after dark.

They scheduled the tour for 6:15. Warner knew the home was unoccupied, but the foyer light was on as he walked up the path to the front door. Like a good realtor, Margot was already there, prepping for his arrival. He pictured her shock when she opened the door to find him, and not Capote, staring back at her.

Margot Howell was perhaps the bitchiest client he'd ever dealt with, even worse than Sydney Ashe. But at least Ashe had an excuse: she was ridiculously rich and had grown accustomed to others constantly doing her bidding. Margot could make no such claim.

The woman surely made a good living with the commissions she got on these home sales. But she wasn't swimming in money like the people who lived up here. Unlike them, Margot lived in West Hollywood in a moderately impressive West Hollywood apartment tower, not all that far from Charlie's crappy one-room studio. That was why he couldn't get to her at her own place: the building's security staff, and the risk that, even if he got into her apartment, people might see him coming or going.

There was one more reason he couldn't kill there, the same one that kept him coming back to work for her despite her objectionable personality. Her dog, a miniature schnauzer named Welker, was adorable. The little fella would come up and nuzzle



Charlie's ankle each time he came over, then flop over onto his back, exposing his belly for a scratch. It melted Charlie's heart every time. He couldn't bear the thought of killing Margot there, in little Welker's presence.

So he would do it here, in a large, isolated mansion. And he'd enjoy it. The last time he'd seen Margot, she had told him that he needed to shower longer to keep "that goddamn grotesque mix of patchouli and body odor" out of her home, and that was one of their warmer recent interactions.

As he stopped at the porch step, he reiterated to himself that this would be the last time. Conveniently, Margot was the client who reminded him most of his execrable mother, and more recently of his ex, Helena. He would close his eyes as he twisted the leash around her neck, picturing their faces as he choked the last breaths out of this vile woman.

Once she was dead, that would be the end of it. He'd be done with killing. And he'd finally be free.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Jessie was getting anxious.

It was well after six at night and they'd been driving around the neighborhood for ten minutes now without any luck.

Jamil had sent them the details for the car registered to Charlie Warner, a 2008 silver Kia Sportage. But so far, they hadn't come across it. They'd gone to the house of his most recent dog-walking client, The Lerner family, who had a 5:30 appointment for a half-hour walk and knocked on the door. But all Burt Lerner could tell them was that Charlie had left immediately after returning their dog.

With no other appointments scheduled for the day, they didn't have any leads to follow, so they'd begun driving the streets near the home, slow working their way out. They were still only half a mile from the Lerner's after traveling down more than ten streets.

"We still have Susannah and Sam headed to his apartment?" Ryan asked unnecessarily, referring to the detectives who he'd personally asked to go there.

"They promised they'd call as soon as they got there," Jessie reminded him, "but we both know that's not where he's headed."

"Do I really need to be here for this whole manhunt thing?" Emilio Vega complained once again from the back of the car. "You can drop me off anywhere and I'll just walk back to my truck."

One scowl from Ryan shut him up. The car's clock had just flipped from 6:13 to 6:14

when Jessie saw it.

“Look!” she shouted, pointing.

The Kia was parked along the curb near a green belt set a good distance away from any homes. It was empty. Ryan pulled up next to it, and Jessie hopped out. She rested her hand on the hood.

“Still hot,” she said. “He can’t have parked that long ago.”

“But where would he go?” Ryan asked, looking around. “The closest house is a hundred yards from here. He could have picked any of them.”

“I think that’s the point,” Jessie said, getting back in the car. “He knew it was only a matter of time before we honed in on him. This gives him extra time for whatever he has planned.”

Ryan looked at his phone, and Jessie knew why. Jamil had sent them a screenshotted map of all Warner’s dog-walking clients in the neighborhood.

“None of his clients are on this street or any adjacent ones,” he said. “So why stop here? It can’t just be because it’s not in front of a specific house.”

“No,” Jessie agreed. “Whoever he’s after is close by. If they don’t live here, we have to figure out why he picked this area. Can you drive up the street again?”

Ryan obliged, slowly working his way to the end of the cul-de-sac and then turning around. They passed by the green belt a second time and continued toward the intersection again. They were halfway there when Jessie noticed something she hadn’t picked up on before.

“Stop here, please,” she said.

Ryan hit the brakes right in front of a giant mansion on the upslope of a hill. It was styled like a French chateau and rose upward a good five stories, all built into the hillside. But none of that was what mattered to Jessie.

“What is it?” Ryan asked.

“Look,” Jessie said, pointing at the “for sale” sign in the yard. It read: Howell Realty Advisers, viewing by appointment only.

“Isn’t one of Warner’s clients named Howell?” she asked.

Ryna looked at the message from Beth that listed all of them.

“Yes,” he said excitedly. “Margot Howell. She’s got a miniature schnauzer named Welker.”

“This is it,” Jessie said, beyond certain. “It’s perfect. He calls her up for a private showing using a fake name and gets her alone in an isolated home where no one can hear what’s happening. We have to get in there now.”

“How do you know he’s already there?” Emilio asked from the backseat.

Jessie pointed at the house.

“The lights are on.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

They sprinted across the lawn from the car to the house.

When they arrived at the front door, Jessie immediately noticed something that filled her with dread: The door was ajar.

Ryan pulled out his gun and indicated that Jessie should do the same. He'd already called in the address before they'd left the vehicle, but dispatch had indicated that the closest squad car was five minutes out. That might be too late for Margot Howell. They couldn't wait.

"Don't take any chances," he whispered to her. "You're still recovering from that concussion. If he gets close to you, just shoot. Don't physically engage."

Jessie nodded. She didn't have any intention of letting Charlie Warner get anywhere near her. But her assurances wouldn't have offered Ryan much comfort, so she didn't even try.

Ryan quietly pushed the door open with his foot and darted inside. Jessie followed him, pressing her back against the wall. She immediately noticed a giant spiral staircase that looked like it led all the way to the top of the house. Next to it was an empty glass tube for what clearly housed a capsule-style elevator. On the floor beside that was a broken vase with flowers strewn about.

"Looks like there was a struggle," she said quietly.

Just then, they heard a dinging sound from somewhere high above them. They both looked at the indicator light above the clear elevator tube door and saw that the "5"

was lit up.

“You think he took her up there?” Ryan asked, voicing her question aloud.

She was about to reply when she heard a loud grunt. That was followed by what she thought was panting. It sounded distinctly male.

“No,” she replied in a hushed tone. “You hear that? I think she somehow got in the elevator and took it to the top floor, leaving Warner to take the stairs to get to her. I’m guessing he’s at least halfway up.”

“We can catch up to him,” Ryan said confidently.

“You can do that,” she replied, walking over to the elevator and pushing the “up” button. “Like you said, I’m still recovering. I’ll just slow you down. But I’ll meet you at the top.”

Ryan looked like he wanted to argue. Jessie understood why. He didn’t want them separated. But after a second he seemed to calculate that what she was saying made sense.

“Be careful,” he pleaded, then without waiting for a reply, started bounding up the stairs three at a time.

Jessie watched him go. Once he disappeared from sight, she turned her attention to the elevator. The indicator light showed that it was coming down, just passing the third floor. She felt a tingling sensation in her fingers as adrenaline poured through her system. She reminded herself that this was normal. She just had to control it.

She checked the weapon again as she forced slow breaths out of her mouth and back in through her nose. Once the glassed-in elevator arrived and she stepped inside, she

continued the routine. The process was calming, and she felt the buzz in her fingers fade just as the elevator reached the top floor. She didn't see anyone through the glass, but just to be safe, she crouched down. There was a loud ding, after which the door slid open. Jessie waited a beat, and rolled out.

The stairwell was to her left. A long hallway extended to her right. There was still no one in sight. She held her breath for a moment so that she could hear any noise, however slight. But there was only silence. It didn't last long. As she exhaled, she heard a scream from the end of the hall. She got to her feet and sprinted in that direction.

As she approached, she could see that the door to the last room on the left was open. She slowed down even as the screams continued, well aware that barreling in would only put her at risk. She took a moment to gather herself just outside the door, then spun in, her weapon raised.

Her eyes scanned the scene, processing everything at once. She was in a large bedroom. At the far end, on the other side of the bed, Margot Howell stood by an open window, one leg on the ledge, as if she might leap out at any moment. Charlie Warner, leather leash in his hands, was approaching her with his back to Jessie.

He clearly didn't want Howell to jump, so he moved slowly. Even so, he was almost close enough to grab her. Howell, her arms quivering as she gripped the edge of the window pane, glanced over and saw Jessie.

She was a slight woman in her late twenties, with sculpted brown hair and an angular face. She was wearing a business jacket and a long tight skirt that made it hard for her to keep her foot on the ledge. Her eyes were filled with terror, and it was clear that she hadn't calculated that as bad as the threat from Warner was, jumping out a five-story window could be worse.

“Freeze,” Jessie shouted, just as Warner reached out to Howell. His arm stopped in mid-air. “Turn around slowly with your hands in the air!”

He did as ordered. For the first time, she got a good look at him. He was wearing a logo-less black baseball cap from which grayish black hair peeked out, as well as what appeared to be a thin line of blood trickling down his forehead. His salt and pepper beard was scraggly. His brown eyes were wild, but he had deep bags underneath them, as if he hadn’t slept in days. He wore a black windbreaker and faded jeans, along with once-white sneakers that were now a muddy gray. The leash dangled in his left hand.

“I’m so sorry,” he insisted. “I give up. Here’s the leash.”

He extended his hand as if he intended to toss it at Jessie’s feet, but at the last moment, he flung it upward so that it flew toward her face. As Jessie swatted it away with her left hand, Warner darted to his right, yanked Howell in front of him, and wrapped his right arm around her neck. Jessie pressed down slightly on the trigger of her gun before stopping and easing back. He was too close to Howell. She didn’t have a shot.

“Jessie!” Ryan shouted from the hallway.

“We’re in the last room on the left!” she yelled back, her eyes never leaving Warner.

A moment later, Ryan entered the room and moved into position beside her. His gun was pointed squarely at Warner as he surveyed the situation. While he did that, Jessie took the initiative.

“Charlie,” she said, speaking in a calm, quiet tone, “you don’t want to do anything crazy here. We can find a way out of this.”



Quaking in front of him, Margot Howell whimpered softly.

“I wish that was true,” Warner said, smiling sadly. “But I don’t see one. What else do I have to lose at this point? I’ve already lost my wife and most of my self-respect. As long as I’m done for, I might as well take this hateful bitch with me.”

He squeezed her neck tighter in the crook of his right elbow. Howell gagged slightly. Jessie felt Ryan stiffen beside her and feared that he might shoot. If he did, there was a real chance that both Warner and Howell would topple backward out the window. She couldn’t change that.

“Okay, listen,” she said, lifting her gun high in the air above her head, “I’m going to put my firearm away as a show of good faith. Let’s talk this out, Charlie.”

Warner shook his head. “Your buddy there doesn’t seem to be following your lead,” he said, agitated.

“For him to do that, you have to give us something, Charlie,” she replied. “It’s only fair.”

“I don’t have anything to give, lady!” he shouted.

“Okay, okay,” she said, “everything’s cool. By the way, my name is Jessie.”

“Nice to meet you, Jessie. Now screw off!”

“You know I can’t do that,” she insisted, “but I can hear you out. Tell me what’s got you so upset. Talk to me.”

“It’s too late to talk.”

“It’s never too late to talk,” she replied. “Don’t you want someone to know why you’re doing all this?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“It’s my job to understand, Charlie,” she told him. “Try me.”

He hesitated and she could tell that he was thinking about. Everyone wanted to tell their story, to be understood. She was counting on Charlie Warner’s desire to be heard, outweighing his desire to kill.

“Everything’s gone to crap.” He finally said with an exhausted sigh.

“How exactly?” she asked, imbuing her voice with as much sympathy as she could muster.

“Listen, I know it’s not an excuse, but I had it pretty rough as a kid,” he explained.

“What happened?” she asked, pretending as if it wasn’t completely absurd to think that anything that was done to him might justify his actions.

“We don’t need to go into all that,” he said sharply, before seeming to regain some measure of control. “The point is, I thought I’d clawed my way out of all that. I got married. I got to do what I loved for work. I was happy. Then my wife cheated on me and left me. I lost all my money, Now I have no future. And I have to deal with awful people like this one all the time. What’s the point?”

Jessie considered returning to his childhood. She wondered if getting him to confide in her might create some kind of bond that she could use to talk him down. But she also feared that broaching the subject again would only agitate him more. It was a risk she couldn’t take, so she went a different way.

“What about Welker?” she asked, referring to Margot Howell’s miniature schnauzer.

She saw his eyes flicker briefly in warm recognition.

“What about him?”

“If you kill Margot, he loses his mom. She might be a terrible person, but she obviously cares for him, and so do you. Would you do that to him? Leave him without his person?”

Warner looked conflicted, so she kept going, hoping to further burrow doubt in him.

“I know you care about him, just like you care about Chloe Henshall’s dog, Missy, and the Ashe’s dog, Freddy. Just like you cared about Max before he died. But this is different, Charlie. Max has passed away, and at least Missy and Freddy have other people left to take care of them. Welker would be all alone. You don’t want that.”

She saw him relent slightly, and unconsciously loosen his grip on Margot’s neck a little. His eyes were misty.

“They deserve better owners,” he said quietly. “You’d be surprised at how many people just don’t care. You know, you can tell how people will treat each other by how they treat animals. And some people are just bad.”

His eyes hardened at the thought, and Jessie knew she’d lost him. They were out of time.

“Now,” she muttered to Ryan under her breath.

Almost as soon as the word was out of her mouth, he fired, hitting Charlie in the left shoulder. Crying out in pain, the man dropped to ground. Margot immediately ripped

herself free of him, but as she did, she lost her balance and stumbled backward.

Jessie watched as her body began to topple over the window ledge, seemingly in slow motion. Without thinking, she dashed forward and threw herself at the window. As she landed, with her stomach hitting the floor, her hands grasped hold of Margot's left ankle just before it disappeared from sight.

Even though she couldn't weigh more than 120 pounds, Margot's fast-dropping body pulled Jessie upward toward the window and she felt herself starting to slide over the ledge as well. She tried to brace herself against the wall but knew it was a losing proposition. Her own upper body was just starting to careen over the edge when she felt two firm hands wrap around her waist and stop her momentum dead.

"Still got her?" Ryan asked, his lips close to her ear.

"Uh-huh," she grunted, "but pull us up quick."

He did exactly that, tugging her back in and then grabbing Howell's right ankle so that together, they could carefully ease the woman back inside. She was screeching incoherently, and Jessie couldn't tell if she was just terrified, in pain, or both.

Ryan stepped away, and Jessie looked to see where he was going. Apparently Charlie Warner had used the chaos to try to escape and was crawling toward the bedroom door, his left arm dangling and bleeding. Ryan caught up to him in moments and cuffed him. In an act of undeserved kindness, he cuffed him in front so that his destroyed shoulder wouldn't be stretched backward, causing him more pain. She returned her attention to Margot Howell.

"You're safe now," she said in a hushed, reassuring tone. He can't hurt you anymore."

The words seemed to register, and the woman stopped screaming.

“Are you okay?” Jessie asked. “Are you injured?”

Howell took a second to check herself out. After a few moments she seemed to decide that at least physically, she was all right. Then she stared up at Jessie. But instead of looking grateful, her brow furrowed, and her eyes got stormy. When she answered, her voice was filled with acid.

“What the hell took you incompetent people so long!”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Former LAPD sergeant Hank Costabile finished his shot of whiskey. It was his sixth but, as far as he was concerned, by no means his last.

He'd been in this San Fernando Valley bar for an hour now, and in addition to the shots, he was nursing his second beer. He felt like he was owed it.

After all, a man deserved to drown his sorrows from time to time. It hadn't been a great couple of days. He'd spent them canvassing his old comrades from the department, seeing who could help him mete out a little justice to Jessie Hunt.

But everywhere he went, he found cowards. Sure, there were folks who resented the way the woman went after good cops who made mistakes, like he had. And there were people in power who would love nothing more than to see her brought low or disappear entirely. But no one was willing to step up and offer the resources or access required to get close to her.

Yes, if he wanted to just drive up to her when she was out on the street investigating a case and shoot her dead, he could do it. But the cops that Chief Decker had tailing him all the time would catch up to him. And if they didn't take him down then and there, he'd ultimately end up back in the very prison he'd just gotten out of. And that wasn't the outcome he was looking for.

He wanted to take her out without having the deed tied to him. That required the money to make it happen and the people to give him cover. And right now, he had neither. All he had were a bunch of dithering weaklings who talked a good game but got cold feet when it mattered. So for now at least, he was on his own.

The guy sitting three barstools down from him started singing. It was an off-key rendition of the theme song to The Dukes of Hazzard TV show, which he'd apparently chosen from the jukebox in the corner. Hank didn't mind the song. And in this bar, which was populated largely by cops who saw the world the way he did, it felt appropriate. But the singing guy, who was both sloppy drunk and not a cop, was getting on his nerves.

"Hey," he called out, "keep it down."

The singing guy had five empty beer mugs in front of him and was wearing a mechanic's work shirt with an iron-on patch on the chest that read "Lenny." He looked over at Hank in annoyance. His eyes were watery, and his longish greasy black hair was disheveled.

"How about you mind your business, friend," he slurred. "I'm not bothering anyone."

"You're bothering me," Hank said, turning to face the guy directly. "If you want to sing, do it in key or take it outside. But don't make the rest of us suffer."

The mechanic sighed in exasperation, slid off his chair, and stood up. Hank hadn't realized how big Lenny was. Easily six foot three and 250 pounds, he looked like he might have played linebacker somewhere before he let himself go. His stomach rode over his belt, straining against his shirt. At one point he might have been intimidating to folks. But not to Hank.

"I think you should go back to your beer, friend," the man sneered. "Maybe it'll put you in a better mood."

"Lenny," Hank said, sliding off his own barstool, "You have two choices. You'll either enjoy your beer in silence or you'll eat your mug. It's up to you."

“Oh yeah?” Lenny challenged, taking a step toward him.

“Yeah,” Hank said calmly.

He didn’t wait for the guy to reach him. Instead he picked up his barstool by the seat and swung it at the guy’s legs. Lenny tried to leap over the thing to avoid tripping. While he was briefly in the air, Hank stepped forward and punched him in the neck just before his feet hit the ground.

Lenny’s legs crumbled, and he hit the floor like a sack of potatoes. His body had barely stopped flopping when Hank was on top of him, punching him in the face with rapid, vicious blows. Lenny’s face was a pulpy mess when Hank brought his right arm up over his head, ready to deliver a final, brain-damage-inducing strike.

“Don’t,” someone said firmly from behind him.

He glanced around to see Trevor Tinsley, an old cohort from Valley Bureau. He’d heard the guy had recently been named Deputy Chief of Operations. Gray-haired and craggy faced, the man was scowling. Hank would have happily taken him on too, but Tinsley didn’t seem interested in that. When he spoke again, it was in a harsh whisper. “Come with me.”

He walked toward the back of the bar, near the “employees only” area. Hank, surprised at the man’s reaction, lowered his raised fist. He glanced around the bar. There were about a half dozen guys there. All of them were staring at him in shock, but none of them made a move toward him. He got up and followed Tinsley, ignoring Lenny’s dull moans.

Tinsley walked through the employee entrance to the back, past the small kitchen and stock room until he reached the back door. He turned around just as Hank caught up.



“Nice to see you again, Hank,” he said with a crooked grin.

“You too, Trevor.”

“I see you’re doing all you can to get thrown back into lockup.”

“Are you planning to arrest me?” Hank asked.

“No, I’m trying to help you. Decker’s guys, the ones who are parked out front, assigned to keep an eye on you, are going to get suspicious when an ambulance shows up in a few minutes. They’ll probably ask a few questions. Don’t worry. Once I go back in there, no one will have seen a thing. And I’ll convince Lenny that he isn’t able to come up with a description of his assailant. But you should still go home out this back door, and while you’re at it, wipe the blood off your fists.”

Hank wasn’t sure what to say. Tinsley didn’t seem bothered by that as he continued.

“Were you paying with cash, or did you have a tab going?”

“Tab,” Hank said.

“I’ll get your card and cover your drinks. Eli, the bartender, is a friend and he’ll keep quiet too. This won’t turn into anything, but can I give you a piece of advice?”

“You can try.”

“You need to cool it for a bit,” Tinsley said. “Word is out that you’re trying to recruit people who aren’t fans of Hunt. They are out there. Hell, I don’t love the chick. But she’s extremely popular these days. If you want to knock her off her pedestal, you’ve got to be patient. Lay low for a while, at least for a few months. Maybe Chief Decker will lose his clout or get tossed. The mayor loves him, but I’ve heard some city

council members don't like how hard-charging he is. Once he's in political trouble, you can dirty her up a little. But right now, you're headed down a dangerous road."

"What if I like that road?" Hank asked.

Tinsley sighed.

"Get out of here," he said. "Go down the alley and wait at the corner. Give me two minutes to clean up this mess. Then we'll call your guard dog officers inside. When they come in, you can hop in your car and get out of here."

"Thanks, Trevor," Hank said. "You're the first person to show me any love since I got out."

"I'm afraid this is as far as our romance goes, buddy," Tinsley said before patting him on the shoulder and heading back into the bar.

Hank stepped outside into the cold and walked down the alley to the corner, just as he was told. He peeked around the corner and saw that the officers tailing him were still sitting in their sedan, parked two cars behind his. While he waited, he thought about Tinsley's recommendation. He could follow the guy's advice and wait it out, hoping that Chief Decker lost some power and could no longer protect his star student.

But he knew he wouldn't. It just wasn't in him. If he couldn't get anyone else to help him, then he'd just have to take down Jessie Hunt on his own. Of course he'd think it through so whatever plan he came up with made sense. After all, he didn't intend to get caught. But it wouldn't be the end of the world if he did.

It wasn't his favorite place, but he'd survived in prison before, and he could do it again. One of the things he'd learned from his decades on the force was that if a man was willing to pay the price, he could do just about anything. And Hank was willing

to pay.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Jessie looked at the clock again. It was almost 9 p.m. She should be home by now.

Instead, she was stuck in this hospital waiting room, hoping to get word on Charlie Warner's status. He'd been in surgery for a couple of hours, and they'd supposedly get an update soon. Once they had that, they could leave him in the care of the medical professionals and the officers who would watch him until he could be transferred to the infirmary at the jail.

Margot Howell, charmer that she was, had already left. She'd been treated for a slightly sprained ankle and a neck contusion. Other than that, she was fine, except for her attitude. During her surprisingly combative interview, they'd learned how she had initially escaped from Warner.

She had opened the front door of the mansion for him and immediately recognized him. "I could tell he had something bad in mind and started running. He chased me, but I grabbed the vase and smashed it on his head. He fell back toward the front door. He was blocking my way out. I knew I couldn't run up the stairs in this skirt, so I hit the button for the elevator. The door opened right away, and I got in before he recovered. You can guess the rest."

They could but made her go over it all anyway. The whole time, she complained about having to give a statement at all, at having to repeat herself, and even at having to conduct the interview in a cramped, hospital meeting room just off the emergency room waiting area rather than in a "more expansive conference room on an upper level where I can get away from all the noise of addicts and screeching children." The experience was excruciating. By the end of it, Jessie half-wondered if she should have just let the woman fall out of that window.

Once she left, they updated Captain Parker. In return she filled them in on the press conference that Chief Decker had scheduled. He hoped that word of Warner's capture would make the 11 p.m. news and calm the rattled nerves of the city's residents.

"I guess we'll see you down here once you're done at the hospital," she concluded.

"I guess so," Ryan acknowledged before hanging up.

Jessie groaned. She'd conveniently forgotten about all the paperwork they'd have to deal with to wrap up the case.

"Don't worry," Ryan told her once they ended the call, "I'll close out the file. That is, under one condition."

"What's that?"

"Maybe you could whip up a nice post-serial-killer-catching dinner that would be waiting for me when I get home?"

"You bet," she assured him, debating whether to admit to him that "whipping up" dinner would likely entail take-out pizza. Before she could decide, she saw a familiar face walking down the hall and quickly turned back to Ryan. "You mind if I run to the restroom?"

He shook his head that he didn't, and she hopped up, moving quickly in the direction of her intended target. Her stomach did little flips with every step. The woman walking down the hall saw her and was about to say "hi" when Jessie shook her head and indicated that they should go around the corner.

"Everything okay?" Dr. Capaldi asked.

“Yeah,” Jessie said, “I just wanted a little privacy to chat.”

“Of course,” Capaldi, said, pushing her long, blonde hair out of her eyes. “I assume you got my e-mail? Is that why you’re here?”

“No,” Jessie said, “I’m here because of a case. I was waiting to hear from you, but I must have missed it. I’ve had a bit of a crazy day.”

“Oh, okay,” Capaldi said. “In that case, should I just fill you in now?”

Jessie felt the stomach flips pick up speed.

“Might as well,” she said.

She tried not to look too nervous as she waited for her OB-GYN’s response.

“All right,” Dr. Capaldi replied. “We got your test results back. The short version is: despite all the physical trauma you’ve suffered in the last few years, including the miscarriage, it hasn’t impacted you in any way that compromised your fertility or your reproductive system in general. If you choose to, there’s no medical reason that you can’t have children.”

Jessie felt a wave of conflicting emotions wash over her. She could identify relief among them, but also dread. And somewhere in there she thought she sensed an inkling of joy too.

“Are you all right, Jessie?” Dr Capaldi asked.

“Yeah,” Jessie said. “I guess I’m just processing this.”

“Well, take your time,” Capaldi said. “Now you just have to decide what you want to

do next.”

“Oh, is that all?” Jessie asked, her voice full of in terrified giddiness.

Capaldi smiled.

“I’ll wait to hear from you,” she said, giving Jessie’s forearm a little squeeze. “Have a great weekend.”

Jessie watched her walk out the front doors, then turned her attention back to Ryan, who was on the phone, almost surely conferring with the team back at HSS. She stared at him with a mix of happiness and trepidation, unsure what to tell him and when.

Before she did that, she needed to decide what she wanted. The truth was that at this moment, she had no idea.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

Kat squeezed Mitch's hand as they left the theater.

She didn't think the movie was great. It wasn't even good. But they had enjoyed giggling at its absurdity as they sat in the back row, trying not to offend other audience members who might consider it a masterpiece.

They stepped out of the lobby, and a rush of bitter air cut through her. She'd forgotten how cold it was and had neglected to zip up her jacket. Mitch saw her shiver and pulled her toward him.

"Use me as your personal windbreaker while you zip up," he said.

She did exactly that, huddling against him to keep warm until she was bundled up.

"My hero!" she exclaimed when she was done. "I think you deserve an ice cream cone as a reward for your gallantry."

He shook his head. "I'm still full from dinner," he said. "That steak was big."

"Yeah, well you're big too," Kat said.

"Still, there's no way I could have another bite of anything," he protested. "Besides, I'm amazed you want ice cream, what with how cold it is."

"I'm going to tell you a little secret about me that will help guide you through our lives together, Mr. soon-to-be-an-LAPD-officer Mitch Connor," she said leaning in conspiratorially.



“What’s that?”

“I will never say no to ice cream,” she informed him. “When we go to the engagement party tomorrow night at Jessie and Ryan’s, I assure you that Hannah will have made cakes and tarts and pies. I will try all of them. But if there’s ice cream, it’s mine.”

“Noted,” he said with a smile, “Then let’s get you some ice cream. I saw a place just up the street.”

He took her hand in his and they waited to cross the intersection. Because of the large crowd in the area on a Friday night, there was an officer helping direct traffic.

“You should chat him up,” Kat teased. “After all, pretty soon you’ll be co-workers.”

“You should stop messing with me,” he countered, before leaning down from his considerable height to kiss her.

The officer blew a whistle and motioned for their group to cross the street. They did so, trying to dodge the swarming mass of humanity all around them. They had just stepped onto the curb on the other side when a young man just ahead of them turned around.

He was short and skinny, with sandy blond hair, freckles, and a weak chin. He wore a red puffy jacket and camouflage cargo pants. For some reason, he was grinning crazily at her. Kat didn’t know what his problem was and decided to give him a wide berth. She tugged at Mitch’s hand to let him know she wanted to go around the strange little guy. But then the guy opened his mouth.

“I am the new chosen one!” he shouted, his voice somehow both squeaky and feral at the same time. “I will complete the mission begun by my predecessor. I am the

assassin now!”

Then he pulled a handgun out of his jacket and aimed it at Kat. She barely had time to comprehend what was going on before she saw his finger squeeze the trigger.

She felt Mitch release his grip on her hand. Just as the gunshot sounded, her fiancé leaped in front of her. He stood there for a second, blocking her view of the shooter, then dropped heavily to the ground.

People began to scream. Kat’s mind went blank, and her body went numb. Unclear exactly what had happened, she knelt down to check on him. Mitch was slumped on his stomach, and she reached over to roll him onto his back. But then her attention was pulled elsewhere.

“Two is better than one!” the guy with the gun screamed.

Kat looked up and saw that he was now standing directly over her, the gun pointed at her head. In the back of her mind, she remembered that she had a weapon too, but there was no way she could reach it in time and right now, that wasn’t her priority. Mitch was.

“What’s your name?” she asked the young man, staring into his frenzied eyes, hoping to do anything she could to delay the inevitable.

The question seemed to take him by surprise. But he recovered quickly.

“I’m Jimmy,” he told her, “but you can call me the angel of death.”

He extended the gun, and she saw him squeeze the grip harder as he prepared to fire. She was about to close her eyes when she heard a loud pop behind her. Jimmy was slammed back onto the sidewalk in front of her. Blood spewed from his chest, dark

red against his bright red puffy.

He managed to lift his head up slightly and look at her. He opened his mouth to smile, and she noticed blood on his teeth. His eyes were still wild and then all at once, they weren't. They went dull, and a moment later, his head dropped back on the sidewalk.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" someone asked from over her shoulder.

She looked up to see the officer who had been directing traffic at the intersection behind them. He was holding his service pistol.

"My fiancé needs an ambulance," she said, noting that her voice sounded strangely disembodied.

"I'm calling for one now," he said. "Let me assist you."

He knelt down and helped her roll Mitch onto his back as he called in their location to dispatch.

The first thing Kat saw was that Mitch had a hole in his gut, just to the right of his belly button. It was big. He was breathing quickly, and his eyes were squeezed shut in pain.

"Mitch," Kat said, "Can you hear me?"

Her voice made his eyes pop open.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said, looking at the bleed seeping rapidly out of his wound. "You?"

“I’ve been better,” he told her, gritting his teeth as he answered.

“Just hold on,” she said, unzipping her jacket, taking it off, and pressing it against his wound. He groaned, but she didn’t let up. “I know this hurts but I have to put pressure on it to stem the bleeding.”

He nodded weakly and Kat noticed that he was horribly pale. She put her hand on his forehead. It was clammy.

“The ambulance will be here soon,” she said, “just stay with me. Remember, you owe me an ice cream.”

He smiled thinly at the crack before wincing.

“It hurts,” he said.

“I know it does, babe,” she replied. “But the ambulance will be here really soon. They’ll give you some meds for the pain and patch you up. Just hold on.”

“Kat,” he said, suddenly looking at her with eyes more intense than she’d ever seen, “it really hurts.”

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

“We’re almost there,” Jessie assured her, hoping that keeping her own voice calm would help Kat do the same. “Now explain what happened.”

Over the phone, she heard Kat take several deep breaths as she tried to get control of herself. All Jessie knew was that Mitch had been shot and that the ambulance had taken them to Cedars-Sinai, the same hospital that she and Ryan just left a few minutes ago.

“Some kid pulled out a gun on the street where Mitch and I were walking,” she said, talking extremely fast. “He was aiming at me, but Mitch jumped in the way and got hit in the stomach. A nearby officer took the guy out.”

Kat paused to catch her breath. Jessie considered saying something to help focus her, but before she could, her friend dived back in. “Before he pulled out the gun, he shouted something about being the chosen one and completing someone else’s mission. Jessie, he specifically said that he was the assassin now. I think he might have somehow been in contact with Ash Pierce and that she put him up to this, to take over for her. We both know she’s just pretending to have amnesia. But she’s probably been secretly planning this as payback. I wouldn’t be surprised if this kid is an orderly or nursing aide here at the hospital and that she brainwashed him over the last few weeks.”

Jessie would never put anything past Ash Pierce, but Kat seemed to be jumping to a pretty specific conclusion without much evidence. Still, she didn’t feel like this was the time to make that point.

“We’ll figure it out,” she said instead. “How is Mitch?”

“He’s lost some blood and is in real pain, but he’s alert,” Kat said. “They’re working on him now. I think he’s going to be all right.”

“Good. Where are you exactly?”

“In the emergency room, bed fourteen,” Kat told her. “Hold on—something’s happening. I have to go.”

“Okay, we’ll be there in a minute,” Jessie promised, but Kat had already hung up.

She gripped the dashboard as Ryan swerved in and out of traffic at nearly triple the speed limit. Right now, she didn’t mind. He shouted to be heard over the siren.

“What’s the situation?”

“A guy yelled something about being an assassin and shot at Kat. Mitch jumped in to take the bullet, but Kat said she thinks he’s going to be okay. A cop at the scene took out the shooter. Kat thought the killer was acting on Ash Pierce’s orders.”

“Do you think that?” Ryan asked as he ran the last red light before they reached the hospital.

“I don’t know,” she replied. “That woman is capable of anything, but—.”

She didn’t finish her thought. Ryan cut into the emergency room driveway and came to a hard stop.

“You go in,” he told her. “I’ll move the car out of the way and be right behind you.”

“Okay,” she replied. “They’re at bed fourteen.”

She dashed through the main doors and ran over to the emergency room reception window, holding up her ID. “Jessie Hunt, LAPD. I need bed fourteen!”

The nurse buzzed her in without question. Once inside, the woman directed her down the hall.

“Halfway down and to the left,” she said.

“Thanks,” Jessie said. “My partner will be in here any moment. Please send him there too.”

The nurse nodded, and Jessie sprinted ahead, dodging two nurses and someone pushing a patient on a stretcher. The walls had numbers next to each curtained alcove. She passed them quickly and was just to bed ten when a doctor stepped out from behind a curtain just ahead of her. The expression on the man’s face told her all she needed to know. She stopped in her tracks.

“Mitch Connor?” she demanded.

The doctor’s dejected face morphed into confusion.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Jessie Hunt, criminal profiler for the LAPD,” she told him, holding up her ID. “I’m also a good friend of Mitch and his fiancée’, Katherine Gentry. What’s his status?”

The doctor took it all in with surprising calm, a characteristic that she suspected was cultivated by working in this environment.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “but Mr. Connor’s injury was beyond our capabilities to treat. We did everything we could, but unfortunately, he died.”

Jessie stood there silently, trying to process the words she'd just heard. She had no reason to doubt the doctor, but part of her wanted to ask if he was sure. Of course, she knew that was pointless. Instead, she focused her attention on the next question that popped into her head.

"Is Kat in there?" she asked quietly, "Ms. Gentry, I mean?"

The doctor shook his head.

"I'm afraid that she rushed out right after we called the time of death," he said. "I sent a nurse after her but I'm not sure where she went."

Jessie nodded. She could understand Kat's reaction. Her friend had seen all manner of death and destruction, both in Afghanistan and here at home, but this was something else entirely. Just then, a young nurse with short, brown hair walked over.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Rustin," she said, "But I couldn't find the patient's girlfriend. I thought she went to the restroom, but she wasn't there."

"Fiancée," Jessie corrected absently.

"Excuse me?" the nurse asked.

"They were getting married in a few months," she explained. "Kat was his fiancée."

"I'm sorry," the nurse said unconvincingly.

"Which direction did she go?" Jessie asked.

The nurse pointed behind her.



“I saw her run out the back door to the left,” she said. “I assumed she was going to the restroom back there, but I couldn’t locate her anywhere.”

“I’ll find her,” Jessie said. “A detective named Ryan Hernandez will be back here any minute. Please tell him everything you can about the incident—the nature of the gunshot wound, anything Mitch Connor might have said before he died. Details matter.”

She didn’t wait for a response, instead rushing to the back of the emergency room and pushing through the doors. She immediately saw the restroom the nurse had mentioned. But something else caught her eye. Just to the left of them was a bank of elevators. Suddenly, a heart-stopping thought entered her mind.

She knew this hospital like the back of her hand, which meant that she knew far better than most where those elevators led. On the fifth floor was the secure unit where Ash Pierce had been held for the last eleven weeks. Kat knew it too. There was no way that she could have seen those elevators without the same thought entering her head.

Kat was going after Pierce.

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:05 am*

“Oh god,” Jessie muttered to herself as she dashed over and hit the “up” button.

The doors to one elevator opened immediately and she leapt in, pushing the button for the fifth floor. A young man in a white coat stepped in too and reached out to push the button for the third floor.

“Nope,” Jessie barked. “We’re going to five first. You can get three on the way back down.”

“What are you talking about?” the man demanded before extending his hand closer to the button.

Jessie reached out, snagged his hand, and twisted his wrist backward, making him drop to his knees in pain.

”You”ll wait, or I”ll break your wrist, got it?”

He nodded, his eyes watering. Still, she kept him in that position until the doors opened on her floor.

“Thanks, Doc,” she said, releasing his hand and stepping out into the hall, “you understand—police business.”

He grunted something unintelligible as the door closed behind her. She hurried over to the nearest nurses’ station.

“Where is Ash Pierce being held?” she demanded, holding up her ID. “I’m with

LAPD.”

The two nurses at the station looked startled, but one, older and apparently less inclined to get into an argument with law enforcement, pointed down the hall to the left.

“Room 522,” she said.

“Thanks,” Jessie said, dashing in that direction.

She pushed through a pair of double doors, went down a long hallway and then, following the room number listings on the wall signs, made a right. That’s when she saw her.

Kat was about twenty paces ahead of her, peering through a small window for a closed set of doors marked with a sign reading, “Secure Area: medical and law enforcement personnel only.” Jessie noted that her right hand was shoved deep in her jacket, clearly intended to hide the gun she was holding.

“Kat,” she said in what she hoped was a normal speaking voice.

Her friend spun around, the gun still in her pocket but protruding forward prominently. She looked emotionally untethered. Her dirty blonde hair was all over the place, and parts of it appeared to be matted with blood. So were her clothes. Her eyes were as intense as Jessie had ever seen them.

”Hey, Jessie,” she replied, her voice flat and emotionless.

“What are you doing?” Jessie asked, though she already knew the answer.

“Righting a wrong,” Kat answered simply.

“I get that,” Jessie said, moving toward her friend, “but we can’t be sure that she’s behind this. And even if she is, if you do that, the prosecutors won’t view it as justified homicide. They’ll view it as murder.”

“I don’t care,” Kat told her.

Jessie nodded.

“I don’t blame you,” she replied. “If I was in your situation, I’d feel the same way. But remember, there are officers in there guarding her. They’re not just going to let you take her out. What are you going to do, shoot them too in order to get to her? Those are innocent people doing their jobs.”

That seemed to give Kat pause, if only briefly. She was about to reply when the doors were pushed open by a tall, black-haired officer. He looked startled by the two of them.

“What are you doing here?” he asked sternly. “This is a secure area.”

Jessie saw Kat tense up and decided to jump in first.

“It’s all right, officer,” she said, holding up her ID. “I’m Jessie Hunt with Homicide Special Section. I wanted to check on the status of Ash Pierce. There was a recent murder, and we’re here to make sure she wasn’t involved in some way.”

Jessie noticed Kat flinch at the word “murder.” The officer looked briefly confused before finally replying.

“It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Hunt,” he said. “I’m a big fan of HSS. But it would be pretty hard for Pierce to be involved in any kind of crime right now.”

“Why is that?”

“Because she only just got out of major neck surgery a few hours ago. She was under anesthesia, and she’s been groggy ever since. In fact, she’s out like a light right now.”

“When was the surgery?” Jessie asked.

“It started at three and ended around seven.”

“Where was she prior to that?” Kat asked, speaking for the first time.

The officer looked like he wanted to ask who she was, but apparently decided that if she was with Jessie, he would give her the benefit of the doubt.

“As usual, she was in her room, under armed guard,” he answered.

“And then?” Kat demanded.

“Then in surgery prep, under armed guard,” he told her, then expounded, sounding slightly offended. “Her surgery was performed with two officers in the room along with the medical staff, and while she was in recovery, she was under armed guard. Like I said, she’s back in her room now, still under armed guard.”

“You’re sure she was never unsupervised?” Kat pressed.

“Considering that I was one of the officers watching her during most of her conscious hours, I’m pretty confident,” he said. “I’m only just getting off my shift now.”

“What about her phone access?” Kat asked. “Does anyone listen in on her calls?”

“She doesn’t have any phone access, ma’am. There’s not even one in her room. In addition, all of her personal communications are strictly supervised,” he explained, before turning back to Jessie. “Can I ask what murder you think she was involved in?”

Kat flinched again at the word “murder.”

“I’d rather not get into the details right now, officer, but you’ve been very helpful,” Jessie replied quietly.

“Of course,” he said, eyeing Kat cautiously, “but I’m still going to have to ask both of you to leave this area. I’m happy to escort you back to the general waiting room if you like.”

“Kat?” Jessie said expectantly, hoping that was all she’d have to do.

Her friend looked back at her, then at the young officer. She didn’t speak. The officer waited, shifting nervously from one foot to the other. He seemed on the verge of saying something else when Kat finally spoke.

“Okay,” she muttered quietly, then turned and shuffled down the hall to Jessie, who wrapped an arm around her and led her back in the direction of the nurses’ station and then to the small waiting area beyond it.

“Are you planning to wait here?” the officer said. “I can ask one of the doctors to come out and answer any additional questions you might have.”

“That’s okay,” Jessie told him, pushing the elevator button. “I think we’ll just go back down to the lobby level.”

“All right,” the officer said, seeming to sense that there was much more going on here than he could possibly understand. “I hope everything works out.”

“Thank you,” Jessie said as a pair of elevator doors opened. They got in, and Jessie pushed the button for the lobby. Once the doors closed, Kat looked up at Jessie.

“Thank you for stopping me,” she said softly.

“Of course,” Jessie replied. “What can I do for you?”

Kat stared at her with lost, helpless eyes.

“Mitch is dead,” she whispered.

“I know, sweetie,” Jessie whispered back. “I’m so sorry.”

Kat shivered violently, as if the truth of what had happened was at first consuming her, and then passing through her system. Tears filled her eyes, and her whole body appeared to hiccup violently. Then she leaned over, wrapped her arms around Jessie and pressed her face into her shoulder. Her sobs made them both shake, though she didn’t make a sound.

Jessie didn’t speak. She simply hugged her friend back.

She didn’t know what else to do.