



The Perfect Betrayal (Jessie Hunt #38)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: When LAs yacht-set elite begin dying in a potential pattern, profiler Jessie Hunt must navigate through their world of luxury and lies. Unearthing links to forgotten crimes on open waters, Jessie soon realizes that catching this killer may just put her directly in his crosshairs

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Daran Peterson was surprised at how well things were going.

Maybe he shouldn't have been. After all, he was out on his sailboat on a Tuesday night, sipping champagne with a beautiful young blonde. The first part naturally explained the second.

Daran had long ago stopped deluding himself into thinking the women who showed interest in him did so because of his great looks or sparkling personality. He knew that he was on the pudgy side with hair that was receding much too fast for his twenty-nine years.

He was also well aware that he wasn't the most engaging guy who'd ever been on a date. Despite a lifetime of wealth, mostly handed down from his father, he still got nervous and quiet in social—especially potentially romantic—situations.

That self-awareness had taught him that if a girl was showing interest in him, it was likely because of the sailboat, or because he was the executive vice-president of the upscale menswear brand his father had started. Ironically, most of those clothes were too unforgiving for a guy like him to wear.

His self-knowledge had also proven to him that even with all that wealth, the ladies who gave him the time of day still needed some coaxing, often with liquor, and sometimes with a little more insistence than might be considered gentlemanly.

But amazingly, none of that was the case with Liza, the lithe, nubile young woman currently lying on the deck of the sailboat in a bikini, sipping champagne under the moonlit night. She seemed to actually appreciate him, and not just for the symbols of

his status.

Yes, they'd met in the parking lot of the South Bay Yacht Club, the prestigious Redondo Beach club where he was a member. But she didn't seem to have a clue who he was, and her playful flirting had begun well before she found out about the boat. It turned out that she'd spent the day at the beach and was walking back to the public lot next to the yacht club's private one when they bumped into each other.

Admittedly, he'd noticed her well before then, as was to be expected when a pretty girl in a barely there two-piece strolled right by. But she had begun the conversation, not him.

"Do you know how late people can park in that public lot?" she had asked.

He didn't, as he'd never had to use the lot. Despite that obstacle, before he knew it, they'd been standing there chatting for ten minutes. Eventually, he took a risk.

"Any chance you might want to join me on my boat?" he asked. "I'll be taking her out into the bay for a few hours."

She seemed on the fence briefly before ultimately agreeing. After she dropped off her beach bag at her car, she returned, still in only the bikini.

"Do you want to bring a wrap?" he asked. "I know it's late April, but it can still get a little chilly out on the water."

"I don't have one," she admitted, before adding coquettishly, "But I'm sure you've got something that can warm me up if I get cold."

That was three hours ago. In the interim, they'd had a great time. He cut up some turkey sandwiches for dinner and popped one of the multiple bottles of bubbly in his

fridge. By the time they got to the second bottle, he'd told her all about the clothing company and his distant relationship with his father, who was also his meal ticket. He left that part out.

She mentioned something about being a graduate student at USC, but he wasn't really paying that much attention, as she was readjusting her top when she got into that. By midway through the second champagne bottle, he was a little buzzed, and Liza was well beyond that.

"Do you have any interest in going below deck?" he asked, hoping she'd draw the intended conclusion.

She gave him a naughty smile.

"Actually, I'd rather get to know you better up here," she told him. "How about I go down for a minute to freshen up and grab a blanket. Then, when I come back, we can get better acquainted."

"Okay," he said dumbly, astounded by his luck. It appeared that he wasn't going to have to exert any kind of pressure at all with this one. What a change of pace.

While she went down the stairs, he turned his attention to the water. Even though they were only anchored about a mile offshore, there were no other boats nearby. It was like they had the whole bay to themselves.

And with the way the moon's reflection flickered over the waves, it was as if nature itself wanted him get laid tonight, providing the perfect romantic backdrop for him. He heard her footsteps coming up the steps and started to turn around.

That was fast," he began. "I thought that freshening up—."

But before he could finish his sentence, he felt a searing pain in his lower back, near his right kidney. He gasped in pain. Before he had even exhaled, he felt a second piercing blow in the same area, and then a third.

He stumbled to the deck, landing on his knees. He didn't think he could move. In fact, even keeping his eyes open was hard. They were watery with agony. And then there were two bare feet standing in front of him on the deck. He couldn't raise his head to see anything more.

She did it for him, lifting his chin up with what he noted vaguely was a kitchen towel rather than her fingers. In her other hand was his knife, the very one he'd used to slice their turkey sandwiches in half. The knife—and her hand—were covered in blood.

“Why?” he managed to rasp.

She answered him, but by then he was too far gone to understand what she said. He was too far gone for anything.

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“It was a nightmare,” Jessie said, and she was only slightly exaggerating.

“Really, a nightmare?” Dr. Janice Lemmon asked skeptically, her eyebrows raised.

“Hey, you’re supposed to be my psychiatrist,” Jessie objected. “Where’s the understanding and support?”

“And you’re supposed to be the celebrated LAPD criminal profiler, Jessie Hunt—not easily prone to hyperbole,” Lemmon countered.

“Actually, my ‘celebrity’ status was what caused the problem in the first place,” Jessie explained. “That’s why I had to leave that place almost as soon as I got there.”

The “place” that Jessie was referring to was Beachside Harmony, located a full hour and a half north of Los Angeles, up near Santa Barbara. Despite the touchy-feely name, Beachside Harmony was an actually an intensive rehabilitation and treatment facility, designed not just for folks dealing with addiction, but also with myriad mental health issues. It was also supposed to be highly secure, which is why a variety of high-profile celebrities went there.

“What do you mean?” Lemmon wanted to know. She was the one who’d recommended Beachside Harmony, and despite her unquestioned professionalism, she sounded slightly defensive at the criticism.

“I mean that I went there with Ryan, using an assumed name, under the guise of possibly finding a place to help our imaginary teenage daughter, who we said was struggling with all manner of issues.” Jessie explained. “And within five minutes of

walking through the halls, two people recognized me. One mistakenly thought I was an actress because she'd seen me on TV. The other knew who I was and wanted to know if I was working a case. So the joint obviously isn't as concerned with protecting privacy as one might have hoped."

"I'm sorry, Jessie," Lemmon said sincerely. "I thought that with their reputation and being so far north of the city, it would be an ideal option."

"Well, I was always on the fence about a facility anyway," Jessie said. "It's not like I can speak up in group therapy and say, 'Hi, I'm Jessie and I've got an uncontrollable desire to brutally kill the suspects I'm hunting down. I know that's not super-professional, considering I'm supposed to fight for justice, not vengeance. But my father was a serial killer, and somehow, whatever sickness was in him got passed down to me. Help, please.'"

"Maybe group therapy isn't the best venue for that kind of admission," Lemmon noted drily.

"Probably not," Jessie agreed. "But you and I have been working on this together for months now, and that doesn't seem to be helping either. No offense."

"None taken," Lemmon said and seemed to mean it.

Janice Lemmon didn't take offense too much at this stage in her career. Prior to her work as a psychiatrist in private practice, the 70-year-old with a tiny body, thick glasses and tight, little gray ringlets was a highly decorated LAPD and FBI criminal profiler. Very little fazed her.

"You know that I think a facility isn't really workable anyway," Jessie added. "The only places where I might have some anonymity are going to be halfway across the country, maybe even international. And I'm not confident that I could take a leave of

absence from the police department without sharing some details about where and why I was going.”

“Does it have to be paid leave?” Lemmon asked. “You are independently wealthy.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” Jessie cracked. “But paid or unpaid, Captain Parker is going to want to know why the criminal profiler for her most prized investigative unit has just checked out for a few weeks. And even if I hold firm about not saying anything, these are cops. They know how to find stuff out. And once someone learns that I’m on leave for ‘general bloodthirstiness,’ it might impact my employment status.”

“Okay,” Lemmon replied, unfazed by Jessie’s sarcasm. “Perhaps it’s time that we reconsider the idea of medication.”

Jessie shook her head.

“I was under the impression that any medication that could curb those kinds of desires would mess with my brain chemistry,” she said. “I kind of need to be firing on all cylinders to do my job.”

"That depends," Lemmon said. "Some people do have reactions. They can be extreme in rare cases. Most of the time, the side effects are a bit of temporary fuzziness, like you've had a bad night's sleep and need a nap. For you, we would try a low dose of something mild and see how that worked. If it wasn't effective, we could change things up. And, of course, I'd recommend that you first try it out during a stretch when you're not on duty."

“Not on duty?” Jessie chuckled. “I don’t think that kind of stretch exists.”

Lemmon shrugged.

"Well, it's the next step," she said. "I can give you a sample dose and fill a prescription for you. It's your call. But if you want something to change, then something has to change."

"That's some deep stuff, Doc," Jessie quipped, before relenting. "I'll take the sample, but I can't promise when I'll take it."

"Excellent. I'll give it to you at the end of the session," Lemmon said. "But we still have a little time left, so why don't you update me on anything else that you think is relevant."

"Like what?"

"For starters, how are things with Ryan?"

Ryan was Ryan Hernandez, her husband and sometime work partner. He ran the LAPD unit they both worked for, Homicide Special Section—or HSS—which specialized in cases with high profiles or intense media scrutiny—typically involving multiple victims or serial killers. But Ryan was currently on desk duty.

"He's getting there," Jessie said. "That dustup with the killer we caught who poisoned him set him back more than he expected. He's on desk duty for the rest of this week. Assuming all goes well, Captain Parker said he can return to the field on Monday."

"That's great news," Lemmon said, "but I was thinking more about how things were going between you two, especially in light of the adoption situation."

Jessie sighed as she tried to think of the best way to explain things. "The adoption situation," as Lemmon described it, was complicated. A while back, Ryan had expressed his desire to have kids. Jessie had balked, worried about her career, about how her battered body would handle childbirth, and whether she might pass down

whatever vengeful gene she seemed to have inherited from her father.

She floated adoption as an alternative, hoping that taking in a child of toddler age or older would still meet Ryan's needs while not upending her life quite as much as an infant might. But after she'd recently missed an important meeting with an adoption counselor because of a case, he'd put a halt to the process.

"We're not really discussing it much these days," she admitted to Lemmon.

"Why is that?"

"He thinks I'm not serious about kids," Jessie conceded. "And truthfully, I'm not entirely sure that sure I am either. So we've set it aside for a while."

"How's he taking that?" Lemmon asked.

"Mostly by being quietly resentful."

"And how are you reacting to that?"

"Mostly by trying not to think about it."

"That sounds healthy," Lemmon noted wryly.

"Hannah's doing really well," Jessie said, suddenly and quite awkwardly changing the subject to her nineteen-year-old half-sister, Hannah Dorsey, who she'd become the guardian of after the murder of her parents three years ago.

"Okay," Lemmon replied. "That's wasn't the smoothest transition, but clearly you no longer want to talk about your marriage, so I'll let it go for now. Tell me more about Hannah."

“There’s not much to tell, which I consider a good thing,” Jessie said. “She’s in her spring quarter at UC Irvine after rocking the fall and winter. She gets along with her roommate. She was kind of, sort of, maybe dating a guy there for a while, but I think she put a pause on that. She’s pretty tight-lipped about it.”

“No recurrences with her?” Lemmon asked.

“Recurrences” was a diplomatic reference to how Hannah, who shared the same serial killer father as Jessie, had gone through her own bout with bloodthirsty desire. In her case, it had escalated to the point where she actually killed a man. Her action had been officially deemed self-defense, but those who’d been there, including Jessie, knew different.

And yet Hannah had managed to get a grip on her urges. She had gone to a treatment facility for several months, where no one recognized her, and had found tools that allowed her to stay in control. Of course, unlike Jessie, she wasn’t exposed to the worst of humanity on a regular basis, which probably helped. Still, it was an impressive achievement.

“No recurrences,” Jessie answered flatly.

“And Kat is doing well?” Lemmon wondered.

“You would know better than me,” Jessie said of her best friend, private detective Katherine Gentry. “You’re the one treating her.”

“I see her twice a week in a structured environment,” Lemmon pointed out. “You see her every day, in your own home. It’s a slightly more revealing environment.”

It was true. Kat had temporarily moved into Jessie and Ryan’s Mid-Wilshire neighborhood house. They had taken her in after she’d suffered a mini-breakdown,

which was lucky to be “mini.” Kat had fallen apart after the hired killer who had kidnapped, tortured, and nearly murdered her escaped from custody right before she was to go on trial.

The killer, a former government assassin named Ash Pierce, was supposedly on the lam in Mexico or points further south. But that was no comfort to Kat, who feared Pierce would sneak back into the country to finish the job she’d started. Jessie didn’t think it was a completely outlandish concern and invited her to stay in Hannah’s old room for a while.

It wasn’t just a gesture. Jessie had dealt with multiple folks—fans, stalkers, and even a few killers—who tried to make things personal. As a result, she had used some of her independent wealth to turn her home into a veritable fortress.

“I can’t speak to how she’s doing emotionally,” Jessie said. “She doesn’t talk a ton about her feelings. I think she feels like she’s putting us out already by living with us and doesn’t want to burden us with the state of her psyche too. I’ve tried to tell her that I’ll talk anytime, but so far she hasn’t taken me up on it.”

“Do you know if she at least feels safe?” Lemmon asked.

“I know that she is safe,” Jessie answered. “As to whether she feels safe, that’s a question you’d have to ask her, Doc.”

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Jessie had barely pulled out of the parking lot of Lemmon's building when she got the call.

She was headed home on what was supposed to be her day off when she saw Captain Gaylene Parker's number on her caller ID. That didn't bode well.

"Hi, Captain," she said reluctantly.

"I can hear the enthusiasm in your voice, Hunt," Parker replied, exhibiting a hint of something she rarely displayed: a sense of humor.

"Sorry," Jessie said, "but I assume that when you call me on my day off, it's not to see if I'm watching a rom-com double feature."

"Afraid not," Parker confirmed. "I've got a case I need your help with."

"Captain, I'm literally the only member of the team not on duty today," Jessie said. "Can't someone else go?"

"The rest of the team is occupied, and your husband is still on desk duty," Parker told her. "Besides, I'd be asking for you even if they weren't all busy."

"Why?"

"Because Chief Decker asked me directly."

Roy Decker, the chief of the LAPD, used to have Parker's old position as captain of

downtown's Central Station, where Jessie and the rest of HSS worked. He was a huge advocate for Jessie, having seen her work up close. But that also meant that when a high-profile case was giving him trouble, he was quick to turn to her. There was no point in arguing if he'd put in the order.

"If everyone else is busy, how am I going to do this?" Jessie asked. "I'm not technically a cop. Any investigation requires a real-life detective."

"And you'll have one," Parker told her. "This is going to be a joint operation between the Los Angeles Police Department and the jurisdictional agency."

"Who is that?" Jessie asked.

"The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department's Homicide Bureau."

"Why do they have jurisdiction?"

"Because of where the crime took place—just off King Harbor in Redondo Beach. Apparently some rich guy named Daran Peterson was murdered there, on his sailboat from what I'm hearing. The body was brought to shore after it was found floating at sea. But the sheriff wants a top profiler on this, and your name came up. It seemed like a perfect opportunity to get some law enforcement synergy going. Your partner will be Sheriff's Department detective Aaron Riddell. He's meeting you at the South Bay Yacht Club. That's where the boat left from last night. Do you need directions?"

"No," Jessie said, "I've been down in that area on cases before."

"Alright," Parker replied. "Please keep me updated on developments. You know Decker's going to be wanting them, and he's going to come to me."

"Yes, Captain," Jessie said. "Can you please transfer me to Ryan?"

“Yes, and feel free to use him if you need help,” she said. “Your husband is driving everyone crazy by trying to get up in their business.”

“That’s just so you’ll put him in the field early,” Jessie confided.

“I know, but it’s not going to work. Hold on.”

A moment later, she heard the police station’s hold music. A few seconds after that, Ryan’s familiar voice came on the line.

Jessie wished she wasn’t driving so that she could have a FaceTime call and look at him. Even though things had been bumpy for them lately, the sight of his dark hair, warm brown eyes, and sweet smile, highlighted by impressive dimples, always made her feel a little better.

“What’s up, wife?” he asked, sounding more playful than in recent days. She decided to embrace it.

“Just got assigned a case, husband,” she answered. “How are you?”

“Still as stir crazy as yesterday,” he said. “Parker won’t let me do anything outside the office. She’s even insisting that I order my lunch here. She said she doesn’t want to risk me going to a restaurant, seeing some shoplifter, and trying to chase him down.”

“I’ve got to say that it’s a legitimate concern.”

“Et tu, Brute?” he chided, before asking, “How’s Janice?”

“Dr. Lemmon is doing fine,” she said, keeping it vague to avoid any conversation about potential parenting. “Maybe you should set up an appointment to discuss that

‘craziness’ you mentioned.”

“Stir craziness,” he reminded her.

“If you say so,” she teased. “I might actually have something that will help keep you busy.”

“What’s that?” he asked, with unexpected excitement.

“I just got assigned a potential murder case,” she said. “I was going to ask Jamil and Beth to gather some info on the victim. Maybe you could give them an assist.”

“Sure,” he said enthusiastically. “Who are you being paired with?”

"The crime seems to have occurred on a boat offshore, so it's the Sheriff's Department's jurisdiction," she explained. "Parker says that Chief Decker wants LAPD to make nice with them, so he's offering my services. My partner will be a detective named Aaron Riddell."

“Oh.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she demanded.

“It’s just that I’m vaguely familiar with Riddell,” Ryan said. “He has a reputation for being—caustic.”

“Wonderful,” Jessie groaned. “I’m already going to be out of my comfort zone on this one. And now you’re telling me I’m going to be working with a jerk?”

“I’ve never actually met him,” Ryan said, backtracking slightly. “Maybe the chatter is off base. Or maybe he’s mellowed.”

“All the more reason to have all my ducks in a row by the time I meet up with him,” Jessie said. “Can you get Jamil and Beth to pull whatever they can on the victim, Daran Peterson? I don’t have much on him other than that he’s dead and had a sailboat based out of Redondo, so I assume he was doing pretty well.”

“I’ll talk to them as soon as we hang up.”

“Are they busy?”

“They’re always busy,” Ryan said.

It wasn’t an exaggeration. The HSS research department was a small operation, comprised exclusively of research director Jamil Winslow and Beth Ryerson. Unlike the detectives in the unit, they never seemed to get a break. Luckily they were both only twenty-five with seemingly inexhaustible energy.

“Well, I’ll take whatever info they can give me.”

“Don’t forget that they’ll be getting a little help on this one from yours truly,” Ryan said.

“I appreciate it.”

“One more thing before I forget,” he said. “I nearly tripped on that box in the garage when I left this morning. Are you planning to do something with it soon?”

Ryan was referring to a bankers box filled with the personal effects of a young man named Mark Haddonfield.

“Yes,” she groaned. “I promise that I’ll go through it this weekend. I just haven’t had the urge to look at the personal effects of a serial killer who first tried to murder me,

and then after getting killed, gifted his personal possessions to me.”

“I understand,” Ryan said, “But maybe it’s better to just rip off the Band-aid. Besides, he must have had a reason to give you his stuff beyond just being obsessed with you.”

“You sure about that?” she asked.

“I’m just glad you’re dealing with the box, so I don’t break my leg the next time I stumble over it,” he replied. “Now say goodbye so I can go talk to the research gang.”

“Goodbye,” she said. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

After she hung up, Jessie couldn’t help but let her mind drift back to that box. Why had Haddonfield left it to her?

Mark Haddonfield was an unbalanced former college student who became obsessed with Jessie when she taught a seminar at UCLA and, when she didn’t recognize his genius and ask him to be her profiling protégé, committed a series of murders before ultimately trying to take her out too.

She managed to outmaneuver him. He was arrested and incarcerated, but not before he published an online manifesto calling on supporters to hurt those closest to her. She’d managed to get him to retract the manifesto by agreeing to a deal that allowed him to look over some of her cases and assist in analysis.

It was a small price to pay to keep her family and friends safe. And on the one case he looked at, he actually proved helpful. She’d consented to let him look at more after his murder trial was over, regardless of the outcome.

But on the day he was convicted and was being transported back to jail, Ash Pierce, who was also at the courthouse for a proceeding, launched her escape plan. In the process, she shot him through the mouth. And just like that, Mark Haddonfield was gone.

Or so Jessie thought. Now she had this box that had been given to her as if it was some kind of inheritance. She'd been putting off looking at the contents, mostly because she didn't want to face whatever ugliness was inside. Was there another screed against her like the one that had launched an army of incel acolytes?

She had no idea. What she did know was that on the day he died, Haddonfield had tried to get in touch with her. Unable to do that, he'd gotten hold of Hannah through a collect call and pleaded with her to convey a message to Jessie. His sister had dutifully done so. According to Hannah, he'd said: If you want to be independent, you have to go to the mattresses.

The only problem was that Jessie had no idea what it meant. Apparently Hannah had asked him to clarify it, wanting to know if it was some reference to the line from the movie, *The Godfather*. But he'd only repeated himself, refusing to offer any more clarity. And now he never would.

There had to be more to it than just that. She still had about twenty minutes before she got to Redondo Beach, so she decided to make the most of it.

"Call Dante Moore," she said into her phone.

Dante Moore was Administrator Moore, the man who ran Twin Towers Correctional Facility, where Haddonfield had been housed during his trial. She didn't know what it said about her life that she had his direct number.

"Moore here," he said, picking up on the first ring.

“Dante, it’s Jessie Hunt,” she said.

“I didn’t expect to hear from you anytime soon, Jessie,” he replied, before quipping, “I don’t think we’re currently holding anyone who has tried to kill you.”

“That’s actually why I’m calling,” she told him. “I have a question regarding one of the people who once did.”

"You'll have to be more specific than that, considering there have been a few."

“Mark Haddonfield,” she said. “I need you to let me know if anything new crops up with him.”

“Why would anything crop up?” Moore asked. “He’s dead.”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “He asked for some cryptic message to be passed along to me. He left me that godforsaken box of his personal effects. I know I’m probably grasping at straws here, but I feel like there’s another shoe that’s going to drop with him.”

“From beyond the grave?”

“With that guy, you never know,” she said. “Would you just let me know if you hear anything unusual, whether it be from an inmate, a guard—whoever?”

“Will do,” he said, seemingly unfazed by the request, before he had to get in a final dig. “And if you bump into his ghost, you be sure to let me know.”

She heard him chuckling as he hung up.

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Jessie's heart sank immediately.

Even from the back, Aaron Riddell didn't give off a very friendly energy.

After parking in the private lot for the South Bay Yacht Club, she'd walked into the main lobby. There was a large mirror in the entry vestibule off the main lobby, which allowed her half a second to check herself.

Because she hadn't been expecting to work today, she wasn't in her typical professional attire. Rather, she wore blue jeans and a casual, loose-fitting top under a light gray, zippered sweat top with a hoodie, all of which masked her athletic runner's build. Her brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Despite wearing almost zero makeup, she noticed that her green eyes still popped. Her white sneakers gave her an extra inch, bringing her to a full five foot eleven.

There were two men in the center of the lobby. One was a fastidious-looking fellow in his fifties wearing slacks, a dress shirt with a tie, and a vest. He had on wire-rimmed glasses. Jessie pegged him as the rep for the club.

Facing away from her was a very different-looking man. He was easily six-foot-four and 220 pounds. His bald head gleamed. He wore jeans and a sport coat, which had a slight, weapon-sized bulge protruding from the right side, another sign that this guy was a cop.

"Gentlemen," she said, not wanting to make any verbal assumptions about who was who.

The bald guy turned around and she saw a badge hooked to his belt, confirming her suspicion. She guessed that he was about forty, though the deep creases in his face made him look close to a decade older. His dark eyes were simultaneously stormy and penetrating. He was well-built, though less conventionally chiseled than Ryan, more like a block of granite.

“Are you Hunt?” he wanted to know, his tone sounding like he was already conducting an interrogation.

Jessie was skeptical that the guy didn’t know who she was. Even if he’d never heard of her exploits, he would have looked up who he was working with. The question felt like an attempt to assert some kind of dominance.

“You can call me Jessie,” she said, trying to create a good working vibe from the get-go. “Detective Aaron Riddell, I presume?”

“That’s right,” he said with a scowl. “You can call me Detective.”

“Okay then,” she said, pretending like his reaction was no big deal, “and who’s your friend here?”

“I’m Oliver Stanton,” the man said, “the executive director of the South Bay Yacht Club. I’ll be your primary point of contact as we work our way through this tragedy.”

“Good to meet you, Mr. Stanton, even under these unfortunate circumstances,” Jessie said warmly. “Anyone care to update me on what I might have missed?”

"The body's out back on the deck," Riddell said. "They fished Peterson out of the water about a mile offshore. He got tangled in the fishing line of a passing boat, or they might never have found him. There's a crime scene team checking him out now. I looked him over briefly but came back here to wait for you to find your way down

to join us."

"Well, I'm here now," Jessie said, trying not to bite at Riddell's passive-aggressive hint that she might have gotten lost along the way.

"Right, you want to check him out?"

"Sure," Jessie said.

"This way," he said, turning his back and heading for the exit to the harbor. "You'll find that the stab wounds—."

"I'm just going to stop you there, Detective," Jessie said quickly. "I usually prefer to come to my own conclusions while looking at the body before taking in other opinions. That way, those views don't color my perspective, and I don't start off with any preconceptions."

Riddell stared at her in disbelief, as if she'd just said she liked to conduct seances on victims or something.

"Whatever floats your boat," he said dismissively.

"Oh, I see what you did there," Oliver Stanton noted, falling into step beside them. "Very clever."

"I wasn't joking," Riddell informed him.

Jessie said nothing. She was about to look at a dead body, and she didn't want her impressions clouded by her increasing agitation with the man she'd been paired with. She needed her head clear.

Her phone rang and she glanced down. The call was from Jamil, HSS's head of research. She shouldn't have been surprised that he was already reaching out. Jamil was a full-fledged genius, 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. Having said that, his social skills could use a little work.

"That was quick," she said when she picked up.

"Hello, Ms. Hunt," Jamil said, polite as always. "Detective Hernandez said you were on your way to the scene, so Beth and I tried to expedite our investigation as much as possible for you."

"I appreciate that," Jessie said. "Where is Detective Hernandez? I assumed that he'd want to be in on this call."

"He did," volunteered Beth, Jamil's sole employee, "but someone we reached out to for information wasn't as forthcoming as we hoped so he's using his particular powers of persuasion to change their mind."

"Gotcha," Jessie said. "Hey, listen, I'm going to put you on speaker in a sec. I'm here with Detective Riddell of the L.A. Sheriff's Department's Homicide Bureau. We're partnering on this and I want to keep him looped in on everything you learn. Hold on."

"Yes, ma'am," Jamil said.

Jessie looked over at Riddell, who had a curious expression.

"I reached out to my unit's research department while I was on the way down here," she explained. "They're the best in the business. I wanted to see what they could find

out about Daran Peterson right off the bat so we could hit the ground running.”

“You don’t worry that their information will color your perspective and start you off with preconceptions?” he wanted to know, barely holding back a snarl.

Jessie smiled sweetly at him, refusing to let him bait her. Instead, she turned to Oliver Stanton.

“Would you mind giving us a little privacy, Mr. Stanton?” she asked. “We need to discuss some delicate matters.”

“Of course,” Stanton said. “I’ll just hurry ahead to make sure folks on the boat know you’re coming.”

She gave him a less saccharine smile than the one she’d just offered Riddell, then returned her attention to the research crew.

“Go ahead, guys,” she said, pushing the speakerphone button. “Detective Riddell is anxious to hear what you’ve discovered.”

“All right,” Jamil began, “Daran Peterson, age 29, was an executive vice-president of a menswear brand called Peterson Limited. It was started by his father thirty years ago.”

“I’ve heard of it,” Riddell said. “Some of the preeners in the department are big fans.”

“Preeners?” Jessie repeated.

“You know, the kinds of guys who are more interested in looking good than getting the job done.”

“Unlike the regular guys, who wear jeans to work?” she asked, unable to help but poke at him just a little bit.

“Exactly,” he said, unfazed. “I see you’re wearing jeans too.”

“Well, I’m no preener,” she told him before turning her attention back to the researcher. “Go on, Jamil.”

“From what we can tell, Peterson never had a job that wasn’t at his dad’s company,” Jamil continued. “It’s afforded him a pretty nice lifestyle. The sailboat. A condo on the sand in Manhattan Beach. A fancy-looking green Lotus. We’re estimating his net worth at around \$34 million.”

“That’s not all,” Beth added. “It looks like he wasn’t exactly a ‘nose to the grindstone’ type of dude. Lots of travel that doesn’t seem connected to the job, tons of partying. He’s a bachelor and seems to be making the most of it. It looks like womanizing is actually his primary gig.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Riddell challenged.

There was a long pause on the line. Jessie could picture Beth, an attractive six-foot-tall former volleyball player who had probably dealt with her fair share of Daran Petersons in her life, trying to keep cool.

“It could be a problem if that womanizing wasn’t consensual, which is what Detective Hernandez was looking into,” Beth finally said. “Speaking of, he just hung up the other line. Wait one second.”

In the brief moment before Ryan came on the line, Riddell noted, “sounds like your research gal is a bit hypersensitive.”

“That ‘research gal’ could knock your head right off your shoulders with a well-placed volleyball spike. I wouldn’t piss her off.”

“Hey,” Ryan said, coming on the line, “Sorry to keep you waiting but I was just talking to the manager of a nightclub that Peterson liked to frequent called Glass Hut. Apparently, they got a restraining order against the guy.”

“Why?” Jessie asked.

“That’s the reason for the delay,” Ryan said. “The guy was real squirrely until I put the screws to him. But once he caved, he was pretty forthcoming. Apparently Peterson hit on multiple female patrons with what the manager called ‘relentless fervor and intensity.’ They warned him repeatedly that they were getting complaints about his aggressiveness, especially when he’d had a lot to drink. They let it slide for a while because of his family business. But when one woman threatened to sue the club for creating an unsafe environment, they decided to take action. They told him he wasn’t welcome anymore. When he said he’d be coming anyway, they got the restraining order. According to the club manager, their place wasn’t the only one where this was an issue. I’m trying to get more on that.”

“Great, thanks,” Jessie said. “Please keep me posted. We’re approaching the body, so I have to run.”

“Okay, by the way, how bad is Riddell?”

“The jury’s still out,” Jessie said quickly, before Ryan could add anything else. “But he’s on this call so I’ll save my take until later. Gotta go.”

She hung up and turned to the detective, who looked like he wanted to say something obnoxious. But she short-circuited that.

“I assume the body’s over there?” she asked Stanton quickly, nodding toward the edge of the dock, where the crowd of crime scene techs stood.

He nodded back without speaking. The techs, who had turned around now, stepped back to make a path for her. She walked over and paused, closing her eyes and allowing herself a moment to clear her head before looking at the man. When she opened them, she found Daran Peterson lying on his back. There was a plastic tarp under him so that he wasn’t lying directly on the wooden dock.

He was wearing a black, short-sleeved Polo-style shirt and casual pants. His doughy face was completely white, and his dark, depleted hair was damp. His eyes were closed. There were no obvious signs of violence, though she knew he’d been stabbed.

“Did you already take photos, or do we need to roll him over?” she asked no one in particular.

“We have photos,” said one of the techs, a youngish guy holding an equipment box. “But we can roll him if you like. It won’t disturb any evidence at this point.”

“Go ahead then,” she said.

Two of the techs did as she requested, slowly rolling Peterson onto his side so that she could see his back. One of them slowly lifted the shirt so she could get a better view. Jessie counted at least a half dozen entry wounds, maybe double that, though it was hard to be sure because the skin was so mangled.

Even though there were real signs that Daran Peterson wasn’t the most sympathetic victim of all time, Jessie couldn’t but feel some measure of compassion for the guy. Bleeding out as you wait to be dumped in the cold Pacific waters didn’t sound like the greatest way to go.

“How many penetrations?” she asked.

“We count ten,” the youngish tech said, “but the medical examiner will have to get him back to the lab to be sure.”

“Where is the M.E.?” she asked.

“Bathroom break,” the tech said.

“I’m done now,” someone said from behind them. Jessie turned around to see a smallish Asian man with a neatly trimmed beard and gloves on his hands. He was chewing a big wad of gum. “I’m Dr. Tran.”

“Jessie Hunt,” she replied. “So you agree with the estimate of ten wounds?”

“That’s about right,” he said between chomps. “But he was likely dead after the third or fourth one.”

“You didn’t say that earlier,” Riddell said, sounding put out.

“I thought it was obvious,” Tran said. “But I keep forgetting that what’s obvious to me isn’t so to everyone. Sorry.”

“Well, it looks like whoever did this was either very angry with Daran Peterson or wanted to give us that impression,” Jessie noted.

“Why do you say that?” the youngish tech asked.

Jessie thought that was obvious too but didn’t say so.

“Because otherwise, they would have stopped stabbing when he stopped moving,”

she answered before turning to Oliver Stanton. "Where's the boat again?"

"The motorsailer is over there," he corrected with a touch of pretension as he pointed out to the water. "It's the one about three hundred yards out of the harbor being tugged in. They should have it to the dock in a few minutes."

"Great," Riddell said, expressing real enthusiasm for the first time. "Let's go meet it. Maybe something on board can tell us who turned Peterson into a human pin cushion."

Though she didn't love how flippant the detective was, she had to admit that she harbored the same hope.

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Hannah Dorsey could tell he was going to talk to her even before he got close.

Her mid-morning Brain Dysfunction and Repair course had just come to a close and she was packing up her laptop when the guy stopped nervously in front of her chair. At first he didn't speak.

"You're blocking me," she told him, not in the mood to be accommodating.

"Sorry," he said, taking a step back. "I wasn't sure how best to do this."

"What's this?" Hannah asked, eyebrows raised skeptically.

She was used to guys hitting on her, even in class. She wasn't arrogant, but she knew that her slender but curvy five-foot-nine frame, blonde hair, and flashing green eyes—the same shade as her sister Jessie's—were a magnet for college boys.

But something told her that wasn't what this one was up to. She couldn't put her finger on why but was projecting a different kind of nervous that didn't feel date-y in nature.

She knew who the guy was. His name was Dallas something. The last name escaped her. They'd been in this class together for almost a month now, but he'd never made any attempt to talk to her before. Usually, he just did his work, maybe asked an occasional question of the professor, or answered one when called on. He seemed smart enough, though he didn't speak with any regularity, so she couldn't be sure.

"I know we don't know each other," he said, "but I was hoping you could help me

out with an assignment.”

Hannah stood up and threw her backpack over her shoulder. In her seven months as a student at UC Irvine, she'd learned to be cautious when it came to any kinds of requests for help, especially from those of the opposite sex. Not every guy who made one was a scumbag potential assaulter, but at least one had been and that was one too many for her taste.

“You don't know how to do an assignment?” she asked with an arched eyebrow, not wanting to be outright rude but brushing him back a little.

“I do, but it just, well, you probably didn't notice but I wasn't here on Monday,” he said.

“You're right. I didn't.”

"Fair enough," he continued, looking at his shoes more than her, "but I was out sick, and I asked Professor Wallace for the work before class today. I glanced at it, and I'm a little lost. I just figured that someone who was here that day might be able to coach me through the rough parts until I got my bearings."

“Why me?” Hannah asked as she started for the door. He fell into step beside her. She noted that he was a good four inches taller than her, and she was five foot ten. She also noted, despite her best efforts, that he was muscular, with wavy back hair and blue eyes.

“Because you clearly know this stuff,” he replied. “You've never given an answer that Wallace didn't like. She loves your questions. She clearly loves you . So I thought, who better to get me up to speed than the girl the professor respects most?”

He'd gotten less nervous as he explained himself and was actually looking her in the

eye now. Hannah chose to ignore the fact that those big blue eyes were awfully doe-like and that his sheepish smile oozed charm. She didn't need any of that.

"What exactly are you asking of me?" she wanted to know as they wandered through the hall to the front door of the building.

"Maybe ten minutes of your time to review this stuff sometime between now and the next class. It'd be better if it was today or tomorrow, so I have time to finish the assignment before class on Friday."

The guy seemed sincere enough, but Hannah knew better than to make decisions based on how people seemed. She was inclined to help him out, but not until she could do a little checking to make sure he was a regular student and not some psycho-killer in waiting. That ruled out today.

Once they reached the steps outside the building, she pulled out her phone and pretended to study her schedule for the next couple days. It wasn't necessary. She knew everything on her agenda without looking, but this guy didn't need to know that.

"I'm full up today," she said, "but I could meet you for ten minutes before lunch tomorrow. I'll be at the Green Room Café next to the Campus Art Gallery at 11:45."

She wanted any meeting to be in a public place with lots of people around. One could never be too careful, a lesson she'd learned the hard way. Besides, that was where she was meeting Finn tomorrow at noon to help him with his baby Psych class. She could kill two birds with that stone.

"That would be great," he said. "I really appreciate it."

He was just starting down the stairs when she called after him.

“What’s your name, by the way?”

“You don’t know my name?” he said, surprised.

“Why would I?”

He looked slightly offended, as if he was used to coeds knowing his name without him having to say it. Of course, she kind of did, but that wasn’t something she cared to share.

“I’m Dallas Henry,” he said. “And you’re Ms. Dorsey.”

“How did you know that?” she asked, her eyes narrowing.

“Because that’s how Professor Wallace always refers to you,” he reminded her. “Excellent answer, Ms. Dorsey!”

"Oh, right," she said. "Well, outside of class, I usually go by Hannah."

“Nice to officially meet you,” he said, tipping an imaginary hat before turning and heading down the stairs.

She watched him go, taking note of the fact that his jeans perfectly hugged his muscled lower half. His top half looked pretty good too. When she got the chance, she’d do some online sleuthing to see if he was what he seemed.

That was the type of sleuthing Hannah preferred these days. She was on hiatus from the more formal kind. Somehow, over the course of the school year, she’d gotten roped into helping several students with issues that they didn’t feel comfortable taking to campus police.

She'd helped out her roommate, Lizzie Dempsey, who was being anonymously harassed, as well as a basketball player who was falsely accused of cheating on a test. Most recently, she found a missing fraternity pledge, who'd gotten lost and disoriented after suffering an epileptic seizure during a hazing incident.

But after a dude who falsely claimed that another student was stalking him ended up cornering her in a library study room, she'd been much more cautious about helping out. It helped that her older sister, Jessie, and her husband, Ryan, had both strongly requested that she pause that kind of stuff. She didn't want to worry them. Besides, while she'd breezed through the fall and winter quarters, this spring one had proven more challenging. She didn't have time to play campus detective.

She barely had time for the unpaid tutoring she'd agreed to. As she made her way down the stairs, she borderline regretted that not only had she committed to this mini-session with Dallas Henry, but she was also helping Finn. That would be Finn Anderton, the cute but problematic boy she met last fall. After inappropriately accusing him of being her roommate's harasser, they'd mended fences, become friendly, then friends, and then maybe something more.

But when she'd helped Finn search for the pledge in his fraternity, she'd found him as concerned with protecting the frat's reputation as finding the kid. Since then, she'd taken a step back, not cutting the guy out entirely, but curtailing any romance potential.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she saw the devil himself. Finn was walking toward her, and he had a frown on his face. She doubted it was because he'd been hard at work on his baby Psych homework.

"What's up?" she asked when he got close.

"I knew you were getting out of class, so I wanted to see if you wanted company for a

mid-morning coffee run?”

“I’m actually running a little late so I’ll skip the coffee,” she told him, “but you can walk me halfway to my next class if you want.”

“Sure,” he replied and joined her on the path that cut across the quad.

They were quiet for a few seconds, but Hannah could tell he was itching to say something. She wasn't sure why, but there was something about the tension he carried in his posture as he moved that suggested he was holding something back. He finally let it out halfway across the quad.

“Who was that?” he asked.

“Who was who?” she countered, playing dumb to see how he reacted.

“That guy you were talking to on the steps,” he said, doing his best to keep his voice even. “I didn’t recognize him.”

“Some guy from my Brain Dysfunction and Repair class,” she answered noncommittally.

“He seemed friendly,” Finn noted, pushing his blond hair out of his gray eyes, which looked uncharacteristically stormy.

“I guess,” she said. She owed him nothing.

“You’re not going to tell me his name?”

“It’s not really your business, is it Finn?” she replied spikily. “You almost sound jealous. But that can’t be the case, because we agreed that we’re just friends.”

“I’m not jealous,” he said way too defensively. “I just hope you haven’t forgotten the lesson about taking strange guys at face value.”

“You mean when that guy tried to trap me in a study room to assault me and I had to teach him a lesson?” she mused. “No, I haven’t forgotten. But are you forgetting that every new male I meet is a strange guy at first. This one is. Even you were.”

“You knew all about me the first time you approached me, remember,” he shot back, “because you thought I was terrorizing Lizzie.”

“Apparently I didn’t know everything about you,” she needled without specifically referencing his slavish protection of his fraternity. It looked like he was about to take the bait and defend himself, but she was too annoyed to let him go there. “Anyway, don’t you think I can handle myself? Do you really still consider me some damsel in distress who just can’t help myself from falling for this guy?”

He stopped walking.

“I have news for you, Hannah. I never considered you a damsel in distress.”

“Thanks,” she said irritably. “And for the record, this non-damsel can make it the rest of the way to class on her own.”

She spun on her heel and strode off, leaving him there to stew in the mess he’d created.

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Setting aside the fact that a murder had been committed on it, Jessie thought this was a really nice boat. Make that motorsailer.

As she boarded, she noted that it wasn't just some basic weekend warrior vessel. She was no expert on boats, but she estimated that the thing was at least 45 feet long, with dark wood paneling and extensive carved flourishes that seemed designed for show more than utility. The boat's name was *Her Majesty*, which, like the vessel itself, seemed a bit much. She and Riddell had been wandering around the thing for several minutes separately before reconvening near the stairs leading to the cabin, which Stanton told her was called the companionway.

“Initial thoughts?” she asked the detective, hoping that by deferring to his opinion first, he might prove more collaborative than he’d been so far.

“Well, for one thing, our killer didn’t seem all that concerned with cleaning up,” Riddell noted, pointing at the giant pool of blood on the deck behind them. “My initial take is that Peterson brought some girl out here and got aggressive with her. She panicked, grabbed a knife, and did him in. Then she bailed. Maybe she tried to swim for it. I wouldn’t be surprised if she drowned halfway back.”

There was a lot of supposition in his theory, only a little of which she thought had much merit. But she tried to be diplomatic in her response.

“I definitely agree with some of that,” she replied.

“Which part?” he pressed, borderline defensive.

“That our killer did him in with a knife.”

“That leaves a lot that you didn’t agree with,” he noted. “You don’t even think it was a woman?”

She shrugged noncommittally.

“Based on what we know about Peterson’s history, I think it’s a good bet, but I don’t want to say it’s a lock,” she said. “But let’s assume it was a ‘she’ for now, I’m not totally convinced about the panic or drowning parts.”

“Why not?”

“For one thing, there was only one knife missing from the collection of four in the galley,” she said. “That suggests she had the foresight to get rid of the murder weapon.”

“But that doesn’t mean she didn’t panic,” Riddell pointed out. “She could have freaked out after the stabbing and just thrown the knife in the ocean on instinct.”

“That’s very possible,” Jessie conceded, “but let me ask you: was she also freaked out when she got rid of just one champagne glass?”

“What are you talking about?” Riddell demanded.

“There are slots for four glasses below,” Jessie said. “Two are still there. One is out here on the deck. Where’s the fourth?”

Riddell looked at the mostly empty glass resting on a small, secured table.

“Maybe it rolled off the deck,” he said.

They both looked at the protective railing that extended a foot above the deck. She knew he was thinking the same thing as her: the seas would have to be pretty rough for that to have happened, which hadn't been the case yesterday, and the remaining champagne glass was undisturbed on the table. How could one glass tumble off the boat and the other be intact? But she let that go, as there was a larger point to make.

"Maybe," she said, "or maybe she dumped it, just like the knife, to avoid leaving any fingerprints or DNA."

Riddell considered the idea silently for a moment.

"There were two plates sitting in the sink down below," he noted. "We can have them checked for those things."

"Definitely," she agreed. "I assume the crime scene unit will check the whole boat. But I'm not optimistic that they'll find much."

"Why not?" he pushed, clearly irritated by her hesitancy. "Just because of two missing galley items that can be reasonably explained away?"

She walked him through it.

"The missing knife and glass could just be dumb luck for our killer," she conceded, "or they could suggest that this person—likely a woman—was careful. Plus, there's what you said earlier."

She was throwing Riddell a bone, who looked like he desperately needed one in order to stay civil.

"What I said?"

"Yes, about the killer not being too concerned about leaving a mess," she said, pointing at the pool of blood. "She could have cleaned it up to hide that the murder was committed here, at least for a while. But she didn't seem interested in that. This is just a hunch, but it feels like our murderer was trying to send a message. It feels like this might have been planned in advance, which is why I doubt she drowned."

"Explain that," he said, interested enough to forget to be surly.

"Well, if this was planned," she replied, "then our killer would have anticipated having to swim back to shore. In which case, they would probably be pretty good at it."

Riddell nodded, apparently satisfied with the logic behind her theory.

"We'll have the yacht club security cameras checked to see if we can catch anyone getting on the boat with Peterson. If so, it shouldn't be that big a leap to identify her."

Jessie didn't respond to that. Riddell noticed.

"You disagree?" he challenged.

"I'm just not as confident as you," she replied. "If whoever did this was so careful on the boat, I'd be surprised if they were careless on the dock."

"You seem to be making a lot of assumptions about what kind of killer we're dealing with," Riddell said. He wasn't quite confrontational in tone, but he was clearly a little irked by her methods.

"No," she pushed back. "I'm just going where the evidence takes me. And using what that evidence suggests about the person we're after. Plus there's one huge fact we didn't even mention yet that makes me feel like we're on the right track."

“What?”

She pointed at the blood-stained deck again.

“Panicking and stabbing someone you’re scared of makes sense if there are a couple of wounds. But not upwards of a dozen, and all in the back. That feels intentional. It feels like payback.”

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Kat Gentry did her best to ignore the soft crying going on only feet from her.

She needed to wait until the right time to say something and that wasn't now. So she turned her attention to a different task: getting used to her new office.

The frustration she felt adjusting to the smaller space and less ideal location was still preferable to the alternative. After all, if she'd stayed at her old office, then she'd be leaving herself vulnerable to an unexpected visit from the hitwoman who'd tortured and nearly killed her.

As Kat spent this early afternoon moving the remaining hard copy files from the bankers box into the cabinet behind her desk, she pretended not to notice what was going on behind her. She took her time alphabetizing the files, while giving space and time to the client sitting across her desk, staring at the photos spread out before her. It might take a while for the woman to process what she was looking at.

In the meantime, Kat tried to put a positive spin on the situation. For example, Ash Pierce, the former government assassin who'd escaped from custody a week and a half ago, knew exactly where the old office was. But she was unaware of this one, and that was by very careful design. Kat didn't want her showing up unexpectedly to pick up with the torture or worse.

That was why she had avoided using her name on the lease. With Jessie's help, she'd created a shell company and anonymously hired a rental agent to get this space, which was located in a slightly grimmer part of downtown than the old office. That was okay. Her detective agency didn't deal in corporate espionage. She mostly handled insurance fraud and infidelity cases, the sort of stuff that didn't require the

investigator to work out of a gleaming tower.

The upside of this more gritty base of operations was that, because of the safety concerns, there were multiple layers of building security. They included chain link fencing with barbed wire at the top around the whole place, an armed security guard, and key pass entry requirements to access the facility, the elevators and stairs, as well as each unit. It wasn't perfect, but it was better than the polite doorman at her old office, who only occasionally required people to sign in.

She'd also bought a new car, which was actually quite old. A gray 2000 Mitsubishi Mirage, it was nothing special to look at, which was exactly what she was after. More importantly, it didn't have a GPS locator that Pierce could hack. And since she'd used cash to make the purchase from a private seller, it was largely untraceable.

Of course, none of those precautions would have mattered if Kat was still living at her old apartment. But she wasn't. While she hunted for a new place, she was currently staying at Jessie's. That wasn't a perfect solution either, as Pierce knew about it. But that didn't mean she could get in.

Because Jessie had been stalked by her fair share of vengeful killers over the years, she'd turned her home into a suburban citadel. The house, on a tree-lined street in the Mid-Wilshire district, looked nondescript from the outside. But it had had multiple layers of security that included alarms, high-tech locking systems, and a safe room.

If that wasn't enough, Jessie had added facial recognition cameras to the ones she already owned, which were situated at six different locations on the roof. She'd also requested that the LAPD add similar cameras at both ends of her residential street, which had been approved. All of them were tasked to provide alerts any time a person was identified in the area who met even 75% of matching criteria to Ash Pierce.

Considering that the woman was a master of disguise, Kat had worried that even that

bar of recognition was too high to generate an alert. But Jamil Winslow, HSS's expert on such things, had assured her that unless Pierce underwent massive facial reconstructive surgery, which would take months of recovery, her bone structure was still distinctive enough to be flagged. Kat chose to trust him on that.

But her trust didn't extend to her commute to work. Until she found a new apartment, she followed a complicated procedure each morning to get to the office. First, she would get a ride from either Jessie, Ryan or via a rideshare, which she had drop her off at seemingly random, but actually pre-determined locations—often busy farmers markets, malls, or metro stations.

She would have another rideshare waiting for her there, and after maneuvering through the crowds, she would get in that vehicle. If she wasn't confident that she'd been evasive enough while moving through the public location, she'd have that car take her to a second public place and do the same thing. Occasionally, she'd make a third stop. Whether she went to one, two, or three places, she'd eventually have that last car take her to the paid garage where she kept the junky old Mirage. Only then would she drive to the office to start her day.

The process often added a half hour to forty-five minutes to her morning commute, but it was well worth it for the peace of mind. And all the effort it required took her mind off losing Mitch, at least for a little while.

Though they never said it, it was clear that both Jessie and Ryan thought this whole precautionary routine might be overkill. Only one time since Pierce escaped did they mention that all border patrol locations knew to be on the lookout for her. Or that they all had dozens of pictures of her, showing what she might look like with different disguises. Or that they all had the same facial recognition technology the LAPD was using.

Neither Jessie nor Ryan repeated any of that because they knew what she knew: that

no system was foolproof. Ash Pierce had broken out of custody twice and escaped the country too. For her, breaking back in would be a comparative breeze.

But Kat would be waiting if she did. And as a former Army Ranger—with the IED scars on her face to prove it—she felt confident that she was prepared for the challenge. She was determined not to become Pierce’s victim again.

The thought reminded her of another victim of sorts, the one who was still poring over the photos on her desk. It had been long enough. She should probably check in with her.

“Hey Angela,” she gently said to the woman, “how are you doing?”

Her client, Angela McCumber, looked up at her. Her eyes were wet, but she wasn't crying anymore. In fact, she looked pissed. Kat couldn't blame her. She had just learned that what she suspected was true: her husband was having an affair with his secretary.

“How do you think I’m doing?” she asked bitterly. “The man I devoted the last twenty-six years of my life to is diddling some girl who’s the same age as our daughter. He’s disgusting.”

“I agree,” Kat said. “And to be frank with you, I haven’t even included the most egregious images. I didn’t think it was necessary to prove the point.”

Angela, a 48-year-old wife and mother of three who’d quit business school to support her husband while he got his advanced degree, stared back at her with damp, steely eyes.

“I want to see everything,” she said. “the more appalling the better. It’ll strengthen my position in the divorce. Calvin’s firm deals with a lot of faith-based corporations.

If this stuff got out, he'd be ruined professionally. I'm going to squeeze that bastard for every penny I can get, and then some."

"Okay then," Kat said, glad to see the woman's spine growing before her eyes, "I think you're going to have all the ammunition you need."

"Thanks to you, Kat," Angela said. "And don't think I don't appreciate it. In fact, I'm going to double your fee, along with a 10% bonus kicker. How does that sound?"

"It sounds good," Kat admitted.

She could use the money. Since Pierce's escape, she'd been so focused on ensuring her security that she hadn't been able to take on many cases. And certainly not ones like this, that involved detailed surveillance. Jessie had been floating her while she locked down a new office, car, and home. She'd finally be able to repay her.

And there was another benefit, too. With this bonus payment, she wouldn't have to scramble for a new case for a few weeks. That meant she could use the downtime for another job.

Rather than wait for the professional hitwoman to find her, she planned to take the hunt to Pierce.

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Jessie stared at the screen and pretended not to look surprised.

They were in the security office of the South Bay Yacht Club, studying footage from yesterday. It didn't take long to find what they were looking for.

At 4:49 P.M. on yesterday's timestamp, which was about 23 hours ago, Daran Peterson parked his car in the club's parking lot. With a bag in hand, he ambled his way along the dock in the direction of his boat. He made a return trip to his car for the last of his things and was walking across the lot when he bumped into a young woman.

It looked for all the world like a causal, unexpected encounter. But based on what had occurred on the boat, Jessie had her doubts. The woman, from what she could tell, was quite fetching. The video footage was a little grainy, but there was no denying the hourglass frame, or how her tan skin popped against her powder-blue teeny bikini.

She was blonde, but as Jessie had expected, not much else could be gleaned about her identity. She wore a cap with the brim down low, along with large sunglasses. She was barefoot and her only accessory was a large, beige canvas-looking beach bag with a rolled up blue towel sticking out of it. There was no distinguishing logo on the bag.

"I'll have our research folks look at this footage," she said, "but I'm not confident that they'll be able to get anything close to an identifying hit on her."

"It looks like she was coming back from a day at the beach," Riddell noted.

“Or at least that’s what she wanted Peterson to think,” Jessie suggested. “She could have been waiting like that for hours until he showed up. One thing seems clear: they didn’t appear to know each other before that meeting. Their slightly awkward interaction—especially his—suggests this was a first meeting.”

After talking to Peterson for a moment, the young woman walked off screen for a few minutes, then returned without the bag, but still wearing the cap and sunglasses. Then, the two of them fell into step together as they walked to his boat. At no point during the entire process did she remove the cap. It could have been a coincidence, but Jessie doubted it.

“Where would she have been walking when she left the screen?” Jessie asked Oliver Stanton, who was standing behind the security guard who was manning the security station panel.

“There’s a public parking lot just across the greenspace separating it from the club’s lot,” he said. “You can park there for up to six hours if you want.”

“Does it take payments with credit cards or phones?” Riddell asked.

“It does, but it also accepts coins,” Stanton said.

“How do you want to bet this girl paid?” Jessie said more than asked.

Riddell didn't respond to that. Instead, he focused on Stanton.

"I want to talk to the staff for the club," he said. "I know Peterson parked his own car, but maybe the valet noticed something about this girl when she was in the lot. And that security guard you have out front might have seen something without realizing it."

Jessie thought those were reasonable avenues to pursue, but she was more interested in going another way.

“While you do that,” she said, “I’m going to have Mr. Stanton here provide me with a list of Daran Peterson’s closest friends at the club. I want to learn a little more about the man than we can get from numbers and reports. What about this guy would make that young lady want to turn his back into ground beef?”

An hour later, Jessie and Riddell walked into the main clubhouse lounge, equipped with the basics on some of Peterson’s best buds.

Riddell had given up on the staff a while ago. Both the valet and the security guard had recalled the "blonde hottie in the blue bikini," but neither of them could describe her beyond that. And neither had been close enough to hear her conversation with Peterson. While he hit that dead end, Jessie was provided with a list of the man's friends by Stanton.

“Where is everyone?” she asked the club’s executive director as she took in the empty room. “I was hoping to talk to some of Peterson’s buddies here, where they’d be comfortable and more open.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Stanton said, his face turning red. “I thought it would be inappropriate to continue business as usual when one of our members had just passed away, especially under such violent circumstances. So I closed the club down for the rest of the day. Members can still access their vessels of course, but all club activities have been suspended until further notice.”

Jessie sighed and looked at the time. It was just after 5 P.M. Under normal circumstances, she'd just push through the evening. But without the friendly confines

of the club to justify chatting up the members, the process would be much more challenging.

She didn't want to call Peterson's friends into Central Station, where she worked, for interviews. That was downtown, over an hour's drive from Redondo Beach at this time of night. And she didn't want to conduct questioning at the Sheriff's station, where she feared Riddell would try to dominate things. There was still research work they could do, but it was probably better to wait until tomorrow and start fresh on the questioning.

"Mr. Stanton," she said, "I understand the delicacy of the situation, but we'd prefer it if, after tonight, you re-open the club. We don't want to be too disruptive to people's lives, and we can pursue our investigation while you conduct normal business."

None of that was true. She didn't care about disrupting these people's lives. But she was sure she'd have a much better chance of getting answers if Peterson's friends were talking about him while sipping their second scotch in their familiar clubhouse rather than in a sterile interrogation room. Stanton didn't need to know any of this.

"Of course, Ms. Hunt," Stanton said apologetically. "I'll send out an e-mail tonight to that effect."

"Thank you," she replied, smiling warmly to show there were no hard feelings. She needed Stanton as an asset and not an impediment.

"In that case, I'm calling it a night," Riddell said. "No point in dawdling around here without a lead."

"You don't want to review the background info on Peterson's friends?" Jessie asked, taken aback.

“Why?” he asked flatly.

It took her a second to find the right words in response.

“So we can—you know—be better prepared when we talk to them tomorrow?” She failed at keeping the disdain out of her voice.

“You can send me a copy of what you have, and I’ll look it over tonight,” he said dismissively. “But I’m not going to spend my night poring over documents when the real action comes tomorrow.”

Jessie replied before she could stop the words from coming out of her mouth.

“You have heard of the concept that the more time that passes, the harder it becomes to solve crimes, right?” she asked, the contempt thick in her tone.

"Listen," he said, noting her disregard but evidently untroubled by it. He was apparently used to it. "I don't know how things work over at HSS, but here at the Sheriff's Department, we don't twist ourselves in knots unless there's an obvious reason. And while I'm super appreciative of all the help the LAPD is providing, this case is still in my jurisdiction, so my rules apply. And I'm going home."

Then he turned and walked off without another word, leaving Jessie standing pathetically next to Oliver Stanton. She felt frustration rise in her chest and tried to check it before it turned to full-on fury. She found herself wanting to pull a Daran Peterson on the guy. If there had been a knife present, she'd have been tempted to jam it into Riddell's back a few times. Instead, she turned to Stanton and offered a thin smile.

“Thanks for all your help,” she said. “We’ll see you in the morning.”

He nodded politely and she headed for the exit, trying not think about how—if she got to her car fast enough—she might be able to run over Riddell before he reached his.

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Her nerves were jangling.

Even after all her planning, she could still feel her hands shaking slightly as she walked through the bar. It was frustrating. After all, the detailed planning was supposed to prevent her from feeling this way. She'd told herself that the more organized she was, the calmer she would be in these situations.

But in retrospect, she realized she'd been kidding herself. Unless she was a total sociopath—which she definitely wasn't—then of course coordinating the details of a murder would unsettle her. It had happened with Daran Peterson, even though he hadn't been able to tell until it was too late. And it was happening again now.

Luckily, unlike with Peterson, this time she didn't have to be "on." That would come later. Right now, as she maneuvered through the crowd at Naja's Place, the raucous bar on the Redondo Beach pier's boardwalk, she was wearing jeans and a hoodie that hung over her cap, which was not the same one she wore with Peterson yesterday.

She slid onto a barstool next to the person she was looking for but made sure to turn her body away from him. She didn't want to "meet" him until the time was right. Right now, she just wanted to listen.

He was talking to another guy who was a bit older than him. She had to wait a few minutes as they chatted about some sports team that she didn't know or care about. But eventually they moved on to the topic that was of interest to her. He started talking about his sailboat and how he intended to take it out later this evening.

She smiled silently to herself. That was what she needed to know. The rest was just a

matter of preparation. She glanced down at her hands and noted that they had stopped shaking.

She knew what she had to do. And though she was still scared, some small part of her was actually looking forward to it.

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Jessie opened the car windows to fight off the exhaustion.

Between Ryan's recovery from being poisoned a month ago and her own struggles with sleep—a result of her concerns about her increasingly uncontrollable urges—she found it hard to keep her eyes open on the drive home.

After two minutes of that, she gave up. The noise and exhaust fumes were almost as bad as the fight to stay awake. She closed the windows and decided to try something else.

“Call Dr. Janice Lemmon,” she said loudly.

A moment later the call connected and Lemmon answered.

“Talking to you twice in the same day,” the psychiatrist said. “To what do I owe the honor?”

“I just wanted to chat after a hard day at the office,” Jessie said.

She knew that after-hours calls with one's psychiatrist were usually verboten. But the decade plus-relationship between the two women—and the horrifying challenges they'd faced together—had long ago led the doctor to abandon those restrictions.

“Are you having that hard a day?” Lemmon asked, her tone losing its playfulness.

“It hasn't been the greatest,” Jessie said. “I already haven't been getting the best sleep. Then, right after our session this morning, I got called in on a case. But the

murder took place off the coast on a boat, so the Sheriff's Department has jurisdiction. And the detective I was paired with is a real piece of work."

"What does that mean?"

"He's rude, dismissive, and kind of lazy," Jessie explained. "For a stretch there, I was more pissed off at him than whoever stabbed our victim about a dozen times."

"That doesn't feel like an appropriate reaction," Lemmon said, her tone detached.

"Yeah, I know," Jessie said. "That's what I'm saying. I'm having inappropriate reactions, Doc. I'm thinking that I might want to test out that medication you gave me the sample of. What do you think?"

"Where are you now?" Lemmon asked.

"Driving home," Jessie answered. "I should be there in about fifteen minutes."

"I have reservations," Lemmon said, "especially since it sounds like you'll be picking up this case again tomorrow, correct?"

"Yes."

"The medication can have side effects in some people," Lemmon told her. "For the first few days there can be significant drowsiness, until your body adjusts."

Jessie understood that the psychiatrist had to warn her, but they both knew that she'd taken her fair share of strong medications in the past, often prescribed by Lemmon, and she almost never had a reaction to them.

"Look, it's still only 5:52," she said. "I doubt it'll have any effect. But even if it does,

if I take it soon after I get home, it should have worn off by the morning, right? And then I can see how my interactions with this jerk go. If his crap rolls right off me, we know it's working. If I still want to cut him into little pieces, maybe not so much."

"These kinds of meds don't typically work like a light switch, Jessie," Lemmon said. "You know that. It usually takes a little while to build up the desired brain chemistry reaction."

"Well, it can't cause any reaction until I start taking it," Jessie countered. "So the way I see it, the sooner the better. Maybe it's a blessing that my partner is so lazy. A lot of times, I'm working through the night on a case. Now I actually have the whole evening and overnight to let this stuff start to work its magic. Who knows when this opportunity will come again?"

"Jessie," Lemmon replied, in that extra-composed style that she adopted when she wanted to make a point categorically clear, "I want it on the record that I think this is a bad idea. I understand that you are worried about the urges you've been having and that they could resurface at any time. But this feels rushed. I recommend you get a good night's sleep, and we reconvene tomorrow."

Jessie exited the freeway and allowed her body to unclench a little. She had made good time and was only ten minutes from home now.

"All right, Doc," she said resignedly, "we'll try it your way."

"Thank you," Lemmon said. "Check in with me tomorrow and we'll come up with an action plan that works for you."

"Okay," Jessie said. "Talk tomorrow."

She hung up and lowered the windows again. Now that she was off the freeway, the

noise and smells weren't so unpleasant. She thought about how much she respected Dr. Janice Lemmon, who had helped her since she was a college student a decade ago. She'd helped her navigate the aftermath of a first marriage to a sociopath who had tried to kill her. And that was just the tip of the iceberg. Lemmon had been a lifesaver more times than she could count.

But she wasn't the one who felt like she was in a cage of her own making, designed to keep her from ripping out the hearts of those she deemed unworthy. Jessie was the one who faced that constant struggle. And she was sick of it. So tonight, the psychiatrist was on the losing end of things.

Jessie would be taking that pill the moment she got home.

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At first, Taye Boyce thought he was seeing things.

The sun had set over the Santa Monica Bay and in the dim light, about half a mile out from Redondo Beach's King Harbor, he saw what looked like a small boat about four hundred yards away. There seemed to be someone standing up in the tiny vessel, waving their arms. He grabbed his binoculars to get a better look.

Sure enough, he saw someone—a woman, probably in her twenties, desperately moving her arms back and forth to get his attention. She had it.

The girl was hot. She had flowing black hair that cascaded down to her ass and wore a “barely there” bikini that revealed nearly all of her attributes. He immediately steered the boat in her direction. As it headed her way, he darted down into the cabin for a moment to give himself a once-over. Since he hadn't expected to have any interaction tonight, he hadn't paid much attention to his appearance.

Glancing in the head's mirror, he took stock. His blond hair was a little flyaway because of the wind, but it wasn't too bad. In fact, he thought it was kind of sexy and left it as it was. He had a five 'o' clock shadow but liked it too. His polo shirt was a little wrinkled, so he tucked it into his billowy boat trousers.

Satisfied, he hurried back up to the deck and found that he'd made good time. He reached her dinghy less than a minute later and was pleased to discover that she was as impressive close up as she had been from a distance.

“You okay?” he called out.

“Everything except my ego,” the girl called back. “I ran out of gas. I’ve been stuck out here for the last hour. Thank goodness you came by. I was worried that with it getting dark, I’d be stuck out here all night.”

“Don’t feel bad,” Taye told her. “It’s happened to all of us at one time or another.”

“That helps a little,” she said, still looking sheepish. “Any chance I could come onboard and ask you to tug me back to the harbor?”

Taye couldn’t help but smile. He was happy to assist. Maybe she’d offer him some kind of reward for his gallantry.

“Not a problem,” he said. “I’ll pull up next to you and toss you a rope. Sound good?”

“Thanks,” she said.

A few minutes later she was on the deck with him with her small boat secured to his.

“I’m Monica,” she said, extending her hand.

“Taye,” he replied, shaking it. “Nice to meet you.”

“I’m sorry to mess up your evening,” she said, pushing the hair out of her brown eyes.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, peering more closely at her. She looked vaguely familiar to him. “Have we met before?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Weird,” he said. “You look like someone I know, but I can’t place who.”

“I get that a lot,” she told him.

"I'll bet," he said. "Hey, listen, I can take you back to shore now if you really want. But that pretty much ends my evening too. I was about to open a bottle of wine and kick back for a stretch. If you're not in a rush, can I offer you glass before we head back? That way, the trip isn't a total waste."

Monica looked briefly hesitant before seeming to change her mind.

“That would be nice,” she said.

Great,” he said, walking over to the small table with the wine chiller holding the bottle of Chablis he’d been chilling since he got on board. He grabbed the corkscrew and popped the cork. Then he poured a glass.

“Oh, I just realized I only have one glass up here,” he said. “You take this one and I’ll run down and grab one for myself.”

“Okay,” Monica said. “While you’re down there, do you think you might have a jacket I could borrow? I didn’t expect to be out here after dark, so I didn’t bring anything and it’s starting to get a little brisk.”

“Sure thing,” he said, hurrying down the steps. He snagged a windbreaker from the closet, then another glass from the galley, before heading back up. Monica was standing by the table with the wine bottle. She put her glass down so she could take the jacket.

Thanks,” she said with a flirtatious smile.

“Of course,” he said, “although if I’m being honest, it’s going to be a bummer when you cover up.”

Her face turned hard as she stared at him with those brown eyes, and he wondered if he'd made a mistake by being so bold. But then her expression softened.

“That’s sweet,” she said.

He reached out to give her the windbreaker, and she brought her hand up to take it. He noticed she was holding something in her hand. It flashed in the moonlight.

He only realized that it was the wine corkscrew as she jammed it into his neck. Stunned and in pain, he reached up to stop her. Putting his hands to his throat, he felt the warmth as blood poured over them.

Before he could even try to remove the thing, Monica yanked it out and the flow of blood turned into a spray, covering her and much of the deck. He knew this was bad, mostly because, even as panic gripped him, he felt himself getting weak-kneed.

He toppled forward onto the deck. As the blood from his neck splattered on the deck and shot back up into his face, he was surprised by the thought that came to the forefront of his brain.

“This is going to be so hard to clean up.”

But he wouldn’t have to worry about that.

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Jessie yanked the knife out of the back of the man's skull.

It had gone in easier than she'd expected, with a satisfying squish. Maybe she'd just plunged it into the exact right spot. She waited for the man to fall to the ground. But Detective Aaron Riddell was a big guy, and it took a moment.

Then his body began to careen backward. She stepped out of the way just in time. He landed with a thud. But when she looked down at his blank face, she was horrified to find that she was staring at Ryan. She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. There was only silence.

She could hear someone shouting her name from a great distance away, but it was too late for them to do anything. Her husband was dead. Even as she desperately tried to call out for help, she heard her own name again. This time it sounded closer.

And then, without her knowing how they'd snuck up on her, someone was beside her, shaking her shoulder. She heard herself gasp as her eyes popped open.

It took her a second to process what was going on. She seemed to be lying on her right side in bed, but she couldn't be sure. Her vision was hazy, and her mind felt dull.

"Jessie," the voice said urgently once again, "wake up."

She recognized it as her husband's.

"Ryan?"

“You were having a nightmare,” he said from behind her in the bed.

“Ryan?” she repeated, trying to wrap her head around his words.

"Babe, you have a call," he said. "Your phone has been ringing for a while, but you didn't clock it. Are you okay?"

“I’m a little woozy,” she said. Her mouth felt like it had marbles in it.

The phone began ringing again.

“Can you get it?” she asked.

“Really?” he said, surprised. “Okay.”

He reached over her shoulder and grabbed it off her nightstand.

“Jessie Hunt’s phone,” he said.

She heard a male voice on the other end of the line. His tone was rough and only spoke briefly. When he was done, Ryan replied.

“This is her husband, Detective Ryan Hernandez.”

The man on the other spoke for a few more seconds.

“Hold on,” Ryan said, before whispering in her ear. “It’s Riddell.”

“What time is it?” she wanted to know.

“About 5:25,” he said. “Are you going to talk to him?”

“I’m still a little foggy,” she told him.

“Do you think this is because of the pill you took last night?”

“I definitely do,” she said.

“Are you able to have a conversation with the guy?” he asked, worried.

“What does he want?”

“He didn’t say, but from his tone and the early hour, I’m guessing there’s been a development in your case.”

“Put the phone to my ear,” she requested. Once he did, she spoke, trying to sound clear-headed. “This is Hunt. What’s up?”

“You took your sweet time,” Riddell said sharply. Hearing his voice, she had a vision of jamming the knife in his skull for real.

“Why are you calling me at 5:25 A.M., Detective,” she demanded, hoping her tone was appropriately authoritative.

Apparently it was, because his answer was straightforward.

“There’s been another murder,” he said. “A body was found on a boat drifting off the coast near El Segundo. But the boat’s slip is registered out of King Harbor. That’s where they’re towing it.”

“All right,” she said, rolling over onto her back. “It’s going to take me a bit to get squared away. I’ll meet you down at the harbor as soon as I can.”

“No need,” he replied tersely. “I’m on my way to pick you up. I’ll be there in ten minutes. Meet me out front.”

It took her another moment to realize that he’d hung up.

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Despite Jessie's best efforts, she'd fallen asleep in the car.

"Hunt," Riddell barked, "we're here."

Her eyes snapped open to find that they were pulling into the yacht club parking lot. The sun was just starting to come up. She glanced at the clock on Riddell's dashboard. It read 6:06 A.M. She was surprised he'd let her sleep the whole way here.

She sat up, trying to force her brain to uncloud. Unfortunately, it wasn't working. She didn't feel that much more alert than when she'd been ripped from her nightmare earlier.

"What do we know?" she asked, not only because she wanted the information but because it would give her more time to clear her head while he talked.

"Not much more than before," he said as he parked. "They were bringing the boat back down here from where they found it. I assume they're back by now. It was another sailboat. The victim was male. That's all I was told. But I see the medical examiner and crime scene unit folks are here already, so hopefully we can get some answers."

Through sticky eyes, Jessie took note of the M.E. and CSU vans, also parked in the lot. Riddell got out of the driver's seat, and she slowly did the same, praying that the detective would attribute her deliberate movement to the nap she'd just taken and not the medication that had her synapses misfiring.

“Shall we go check it out?” she asked.

He nodded, and she let him lead the way. Considering that she was having trouble blinking the muck and sleep out of her eyes, she couldn't clearly determine where they were going and kept her focus on the man in front of her. He was walking too fast for her taste, but unsure if he was rushing or she was too slow, she said nothing.

She took a deep breath of the salt air, hoping it would empty out the cobwebs. They were about to be studying a crime scene and a murder victim. She needed to be in better shape for that than she was right now. Unfortunately, she suspected she only had a couple of minutes to force the change in clarity. She wasn't optimistic.

It didn't even take that long to get there. Less than sixty seconds later, Riddell suddenly stopped moving. She almost bumped into the back of him but managed to avoid a collision by stepping to the left at the last moment.

She grabbed a dock post to steady herself as she surveyed the scene. There were already multiple people on the boat, which was a little smaller than Peterson's. She counted at least four CSU techs, as well as Dr. Tran, the M.E. from yesterday. For the first time, she noticed Oliver Stanton standing on the dock near Riddell.

"Who's the dead guy?" Riddell asked the yacht club's executive director, without a trace of empathy. Jessie would have mentally chided him for it, but if the victim was anything like Daran Peterson, she might have trouble finding much herself.

“His name is Taye Boyce,” Stanton replied, his voice shaky. “He's one of our members, has been for a half dozen years. This is his cruising sailboat.”

“What can you tell us about him?” Jessie asked, doing her best to sound alert.

“I know that he worked in finance and that he does very well for himself,” Stanton

said. “He’s single. I’m not sure of his exact age but I believe he’s in his early thirties, a little older than his friend, Mr. Peterson.

“They were friends?” Riddell asked sharply.

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Stanton jumped at the forcefulness of the detective’s question.

“Yes, Mr. Boyce and Mr. Peterson were good friends.”

“That seems relevant,” Jessie said, aware that she was stating the obvious.

“You think?” Riddell replied acidly, apparently agreeing, before adding, “Are you ready to go onboard or do you want to cling to the dock for a while longer?”

Jessie felt the weight of her weapon on her hip and longed to relieve the pressure by pulling it out and shooting her temporary partner in the chest. She imagined his shocked face as he fell backward into the water, blood darkening the waves as they lapped against the dock.

“Sure,” she said, offering a saccharine smile as she forced down her desire to say much more. “I’ll join you in a second. I just want to reach out to my research team to have them start looking into Boyce.”

Riddell scowled but didn’t object as he turned and stepped onto the short gangway to access the boat. She pulled out her phone and sent a quick message to Jamil, asking for anything they could gather on Taye Boyce.

The second after she sent the text, it occurred to her that she could have sent it to Ryan instead. Still deskbound, he would have leapt at the opportunity to jumpstart the

research into the victim. But she cut herself some slack as her brain still wasn't in full gear yet.

She carefully made her way onboard. Normally she preferred to study the crime scene more generally before examining the victim, but in this case they appeared to be one in the same. Boyce was lying face down on the deck.

A giant pool of blood, now coagulating, surrounded him, with most of it collected near his upper half. Jessie guessed that for there to be so much blood, the injury was to his neck. It looked like the liquid had been dumped out of him.

There was broken glass mixed in amid the blood, mostly on his left side. To his right, a windbreaker rested limply on the deck, also soaked in blood. A few feet in front of him, a bottle of white wine sat in a chiller. The ice had all melted. That suggested that he'd put it in a while ago.

Jessie was about to silently compliment herself on thinking clearly for several consecutive seconds when her thoughts were interrupted by Dr. Tran.

"Shall we turn him over?" he asked. "I suspect that the cause of death will be easier to determine if we do."

Jessie looked over at Riddell, who, to her consternation, nodded without even looking at her. She let it slide when she noticed that Tran was still waiting for her go-ahead.

"Please," she said.

With the assistance of a CSU tech, the medical examiner rolled Boyce onto the plastic sheeting that had been laid out next to his body. Once they stepped aside, Jessie moved closer to take in the man.

His features were hard to discern because of the congealed blood covering his face, but his hair, matted with the viscous liquid, was blond. He wore a polo shirt and casual pants, along with expensive-looking sneakers. He seemed to be in pretty good shape.

But Boyce's most notable attribute was the giant gash in his throat midway between his jaw and clavicle, right around where the jugular vein was located. Even for a brutal neck wound, this one was messy.

"Another stabbing, obviously," Riddell muttered.

"Yes," Dr. Tran agreed, "but this isn't a normal knife wound. Look at the mangled skin at the edges of the puncture."

Jessie had noticed that as well. She had a fleeting thought about what might have caused it, but the idea floated away before she could lock it down. She took a step back to try to unfuzz her mind and see if she could recapture it.

She turned her attention from Boyce's body to the table with the wine bottle. She noticed that something was missing and scanned the deck near the table but found nothing. There was no cork, nor a corkscrew. She turned back to Tran.

"Could the killer have used a corkscrew as the murder weapon, like one used to open a wine bottle?"

The medical examiner glanced at the bottle on the table, then returned his attention to the body, leaning in closer.

"Don't hold me to this," he said. "I'll need to get a better look back at the lab, but based on initial inspection, it certainly could be."

“I think we can rule out him tripping and accidentally stabbing himself with a corkscrew,” Riddell said.

“Especially since it’s nowhere to be found,” Jessie agreed. “My guess is that whoever did this tossed it over the side after they were done.”

“That makes sense,” Riddell conceded, surprising her by not arguing the point.

“There’s only one glass out here,” she continued, “which he was apparently holding when he was stabbed. That would explain why it’s in pieces now. But if I had to bet, there was another glass at one point. If we have CSU check the galley, I think we’ll find a missing slot for another one, just like on Daran Peterson’s boat.”

Everyone was quiet for a moment. Of course, it was Riddell who eventually broke the silence.

“Two friends from the same club killed on their boats on consecutive nights,” he mused. “Maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea to call in the profiler from Homicide Special Section.”

“Why do you say that?” Jessie asked.

“Because this case has all the makings of a serial killer,” he replied. “You love those, right?”

Riddell was wrong about that. She didn’t love serial killer cases. But she was no stranger to them, which should help with these murders. That is, if she could ever get her head right.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:48 am

Kat was pretty pleased with herself.

With the money she'd been paid to bust Angela McCumber's cheating husband, she could afford to take several days off work and focus on her top priority: finding Ash Pierce.

That's exactly what she'd been doing in her office all morning. Tracing the woman's whereabouts was a challenge. Not at first, of course. There was video footage of Pierce crossing the border at the San Ysidro land port of entry separating San Diego from Tijuana. Even with the disguise she wore, facial recognition was able to identify her as she simply walked across the pedestrian bridge and disappeared into the city of over two million people.

That's when things got challenging. The first problem was that video cameras were less ubiquitous in Tijuana than north of the border and getting access to the footage was a bureaucratic nightmare anyway, even for the LAPD and L.A. Sheriff's Department. Considering that several officers from both agencies were killed in Pierce's escape, they had a vested interest in finding the woman too. But the gears moved slowly.

Kat eventually decided that she might have more success if she stopped looking for footage and tried to think like Pierce. What would the former Marines Special Operations element leader, CIA assassin, and current hitwoman do to evade capture? If Kat were in her shoes, she'd try to get out of the city to a less populated area, where she could regroup before going to a country without an extradition treaty with the U.S.

According to Kat's research, the Central and South American countries least likely to extradite Pierce, or anyone for that matter, included Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Cuba. While Nicaragua was technically the closest to Tijuana, its political climate was volatile, which might complicate efforts to keep a low profile.

The next best bet seemed to be Ecuador. It was on the west coast, just like Mexico's state of Baja California, where Tijuana was located. That meant it was more easily accessible than some of the other options. And it was comparatively stable. That didn't mean it was a sure thing as Pierce's destination. But starting there made sense.

Since it was too risky to rent a car or book a flight from Tijuana, which would leave a digital trail, Pierce would likely take a bus or hitch a ride south to a location where she could travel by sea. The former would attract less attention and could be done using cash. So Kat reviewed the bus routes that could most easily get the woman where she wanted to go and allow her to return to the U.S. if she chose to.

As it turned out, there were buses that regularly made the 22-hour trip from Tijuana to La Paz, near the southern tip of Baja. From there, Pierce could catch all manner of boats across the Pacific Ocean, skirting the Galapagos Islands before landing in the Ecuadorian port city of Guayaquil.

After making that determination, Kat started scouring manifests of vessels that had made that journey in the last week and a half, hoping for anything that might jump out. Women traveling alone. Women traveling on passports from the U.S. or other English-speaking countries. The truth was that Pierce had the experience and skill set to secure a fake passport from just about anywhere, but Kat had to start somewhere.

After a solid hour of poring over names and corresponding nationality information, she stood up to stretch. As her brain unclenched, an unwanted memory popped into it.

She had a flash of the showdown with Pierce in the Los Angeles County Courthouse

garage ten days ago. It still felt like it was ten minutes ago. She recalled how she'd noticed Pierce acting oddly just before her escape and how she'd briefly considered warning the courtroom bailiff.

Ultimately, she chose not to. At the time, she told herself it was because she doubted anyone would believe her. But now, with the benefit of hindsight, she couldn't help but wonder if part of her had hoped that Pierce would try to escape, so that she could be the one to put her down.

If that was her subconscious goal, she'd failed miserably. When she and Jessie had weapons drawn on Pierce in that parking garage, she'd done just about everything wrong. She'd been agitated, borderline panicky. That is, when she wasn't being needlessly confrontational.

Pierce was holding an officer hostage with a gun to his head. Yet Kat had still taunted the hitwoman, telling her that the other serial killer in the garage at the time—Mark Haddonfield—was better at his "job" than she was. Hearing that, Pierce had fired a single shot at Haddonfield, sending the bullet straight through his mouth and killing him instantly.

Mark Haddonfield had murdered over half a dozen people and had tried to do the same to both Jessie and Hannah at various points. He was also ultimately responsible for the death of Kat's fiancé, Mitch Connor, a Sheriff's deputy who had dived in front of a bullet intended for her. She had no affection for Haddonfield, to put it mildly. But she couldn't shake the feeling that she had baited Pierce into killing him. She didn't like that feeling.

Standing in her office, she physically shook her head to try to force the thought out, but it was replaced by an even more unpleasant one. She thought back to how, down in the garage, she'd told Jessie that she had a shot at Pierce. But her best friend had warned her off out of concern that she might hit the officer being held hostage

instead. Admittedly, her hands had been shaking at the time.

But as a former Army Ranger, she had confidence that she could have hit her target if she'd been given the opportunity. Jessie took that chance away. And moments later Pierce was gone, now who knows where. Was Pierce's escape actually Jessie's fault?

"No!" Kat said aloud, even though she was alone in her office.

That suggestion was both unhealthy and a bridge too far. Jessie had been protecting an LAPD officer, one with a weeks-old baby. And now she was protecting Kat, letting her stay at her home and helping her secure a new office, apartment and vehicle through back channels that would hide her identity and location should Pierce come looking. To countenance the notion that Jessie was in any way responsible for Pierce going free was not only unconstructive, but it was also an insulting betrayal.

Kat forced her brain to turn elsewhere, specifically back to the hunt for Pierce. She had a working theory about where the woman might have gone. And if she was right—if she could find her—then maybe she could finally take the fight to the woman who had ruined and nearly ended her life.

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Jessie worried that she was missing something important.

Her head still hadn't completely cleared, and it was now several hours since she'd woken up. She simultaneously worried when that would finally happen and silently chastised herself for taking the medication in the first place. She'd been so intent on controlling her violent urges that she'd let that desperation trump her good judgment, and Dr. Lemmon's. Now she was paying the price. She could only hope that potential future victims of this killer wouldn't as well.

As she and Riddell waited in Oliver Stanton's yacht club office, she tried to focus. They were here for a reason. Supposedly any minute, two mutual friends of Daran Peterson and Taye Boyce were set to arrive at the yacht club.

Riddell was agitated and impatient, but Jessie was happy for the brief respite, hoping that by the time the men showed up, she'd be back to her normal self. She certainly hadn't been that way an hour earlier when they'd pressed Stanton about the friendship between the two men.

"Were these guys just causal friends or were they besties?" Riddell had asked after the three of them returned to the clubhouse from the boat where the CSU was finishing their work.

"They were friends who were all part of the same social circle," Stanton had explained.

"How many people are we talking about?" Riddell had demanded.

“It’s not an official group or anything,” Oliver said, sounding put out by Riddell’s aggressive tone. “But I’d say there are six of them that typically hang out together.”

“We’ll need all their names, Mr. Stanton,” Jessie had told him, trying not to sound as domineering as Riddell.

“Is that really necessary?”

She jumped in with her answer before her partner could berate the guy.

“I’m afraid it is,” she explained. “We need to find out if these murders are connected. Were two random members of the club killed independent of each other? Or did their friendship have something to do with it? Either way, talking to their friends will give us insight that we can’t get from just looking at video footage or going over their biographical profiles. We need their names so we can ask them to come in.”

Stanton had given them the list just after 8 A.M. It was now almost nine, and no one had arrived. Riddell was flat out pissed.

"We should just go to their offices and interrogate them there," he grouched. "See how these rich, pretty boys like that."

Jessie understood that instinct. In fact, she was intrigued by the idea of putting these guys in their place too. But the whole point of having them come to the club was that they’d feel comfortable and hopefully be more forthcoming than if they were questioned at their offices or down at a police station.

“Let’s give it a few more minutes,” she suggested. “We can always go to them if we need to, but I’d rather not start off confrontational. Let’s build to that.”

Riddell opened his mouth, clearly about to register a different take, when Jessie’s

phone rang.

“It’s Jamil, my head of research. Let’s see what he has for us,” she said before turning to Stanton. “Do you mind giving us a moment?”

Stanton nodded and scurried out of his own office. Jessie turned her attention to Jamil, whom she’d tasked him with gathering all he could on Taye Boyce. With several hours to do a deep dive, she expected a lot.

“What have you got for us, Jamil?” she asked, “You’re on speaker with me and Detective Riddell.”

“Unfortunately, Ms. Hunt,” he began, “we haven’t uncovered as much as I would have hoped by now.”

“Whatever you’ve discovered is more than we know here, so fire away.”

“All right,” he said. “Taye Boyce worked for a corporate bank based out of Chicago called Midway Finance. Their L.A. offices are in El Segundo.”

Jessie nodded to herself. El Segundo was only about five miles up the coast from Redondo Beach, making after-work visits to the beach club an easy drive.

“What exactly did he do for them?” Riddell wanted to know.

“He was in their mergers and acquisitions group,” Beth said, speaking for the first time. “And it looked like he was doing pretty well for himself. He was made a vice-president six months ago. His salary was bumped up to \$1.5 million. With bonuses, he cleared over \$4 million last year. All this for a guy who just turned thirty.”

"What is his personal situation?" Jessie asked.

"He lives in a beachfront condo in Manhattan Beach," Beth replied. "According to his social media, he was dating a corporate lawyer from Santa Monica for about a year, until last summer. But since then, he seems to have been living the single life. From what we can tell, he mostly worked, traveled for work, and hung out on the sailboat that he bought three years ago."

"Any criminal record?" Riddell wanted to know.

"Nothing that we can find so far," Jamil said, sounding deflated. "But Detective Hernandez said that he was going to talk to a buddy he knew down at the courthouse. He mentioned seeing something odd in the file but didn't want to say more until he was sure it was something real."

"He didn't give you any more than that?" Jessie pressed.

"I'm afraid not, Ms. Hunt," Jamil said, with a hint of frustration. "He was quite guarded about it."

"You sound upset," Jessie said.

"Jamil is just mad at himself," Beth said. "He thinks that he should have been able to pick up on whatever it was that Detective Hernandez noticed. I told him that's why the man is a detective. But he's pouting anyway."

"I'm not pouting," Jamil said, clearly pouting.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Oliver Stanton said, poking his head into his own office. "But two of the gentlemen from the friend group have arrived."

"Jamil, we have to go," Jessie said. "But please have Ryan reach out when he has something for us."

"Yes, ma'am," the researcher promised.

Jessie hung up and turned to Riddell.

"How do you want to handle this?" she asked. "We can question them as a pair or break them up."

"Let's separate them," Riddell said. "That way they can't look to each other to create consensus answers."

That was clearly the logical choice. In fact, she was embarrassed that she'd even asked the question, something she never would have done if her faculties were in full effect. The truth was that she was a little worried that talking to one of these guys solo, she might miss something important. But since there was no way to bring that up without losing all credibility, she nodded in agreement.

"Pick whoever you want," she said. "I'll take the other one."

Riddell chose Archie Crittendon, a giant curly-haired dude who looked like a linebacker gone to seed. Jessie wasn't sure if the detective picked him because he wanted to go mano a mano with the big guy or out of some chivalrous desire not to make her do so. Her money was on the former.

That left her with Jackson Dwyer, who was far less physically imposing than his friend. Jessie, at 5'10", was a good three inches taller than him. He was on the frail side, with balding brown hair and reddish skin that suggested he didn't use enough sunblock on his boat.

They each took their interviewee to separate conference rooms. Riddell chose the smaller of the two, possibly to make Crittendon feel claustrophobic. Jessie didn't know if she was giving the detective too much credit. But whether it was an

intentional choice or happenstance, it was a good move.

That left her with the bigger conference room. She hoped that she could work it to her advantage, perhaps by making Dwyer feel dwarfed by his surroundings and the situation.

“This is about Daran, right?” he said once she closed the door and had him take a seat.

Apparently he wasn’t yet ware of the death of his other friend. She decided to use that if she could and answered his question with one of her own.

“Can you think of any reason why someone would have wanted to kill Daran?” she asked.

“No way,” he insisted. “Daran was a good guy. He just kind of went with the flow. I can’t imagine anyone having an issue with him, much less one that would make them want to kill him.”

“How did you become friends?” Jessie asked.

“Well, we were both members of the club and have a lot of enthusiasm for being on the water. So there’s that. Plus, we both worked in our father’s companies, so we had that connection.”

“What do you do, Mr. Dwyer?” she asked, even though she already knew the basics on him.

“My family handles a lot of commercial real estate, primarily in Torrance,” he explained. “My dad started the business about thirty-five years ago and I joined up right out of college.”

“How long have you and Daran been friends?”

“Maybe five years,” he said.

“And how long have you been friends with Taye Boyce?”

“Not as long,” he said. “He joined the club about three years ago and we kind of became chummy after a few months. Why?”

“Because he was murdered last night,” she said flatly. “Can you shed any light on that?”

She stopped talking and watched his reaction. He looked appropriately stunned. Normally, she'd trust that her conclusion about his response was genuine. But with the medication still in her system and clouding her mind, she couldn't be sure that she was reading him right. Was he truly stunned about Boyce's death, or was this the practiced reaction of someone who knew he was going to be asked that question?

“Taye is dead?” he asked disbelieving.

“He is,” she answered, not giving him time to sit with the information. “Why do you think someone would have done that?”

“I have no idea,” he said, his voice rising in something close to panic.

“He and Daran were buddies,” she noted. “Did they piss someone off? Get in a barfight with some bikers? Make a pass at the girlfriend of a dude with an anger management problem?” She didn't mention that they strongly suspected a woman of these crimes.

Dwyer put his head in his hands. Jessie didn't love that. She couldn't see his facial

expression, which, even in her diminished capacity right now, could prove insightful.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled, barely audible. “They’re just regular guys. I don’t know why anyone would want to hurt either of them.”

“Look at me, Mr. Dwyer,” she said.

He lifted his head, and she saw that his eyes were red. Whether that was due to being upset or simply rubbing them with his palms, she didn't know. She decided to put a little pressure on him and maybe put some fear in him, too, even if it wasn't based on any proof.

"I don't know why they were killed," she told him. "But I do know that two members of your yacht club friend group are dead now. Who's to say if their deaths are just about the two of them or something larger? If the latter is the case, then you might be at risk too. So, if there's anything you're not sharing that might be relevant to this investigation, now's the time to come clean. I can help you now but not so much once you're dead."

He stared at her open-mouthed. After blinking a few times, he gulped hard. That seemed to steady him a little bit.

“I don’t know why they were killed,” he said, sitting up straighter as his voice grew cold. “Maybe someone just doesn’t like young, rich guys. Maybe some psycho thinks that our vessels are ruining the bay. I’ve heard that one before. It could be anything. But I do know that if this does have something to do with all of us, then it's your job to protect us. So maybe you should spend less time interrogating me and more time out there hunting this person down. I expect that this situation will be handled promptly, and I'm quite sure my father will feel the same way."

“Is that really how you want to approach this situation, Mr. Dwyer?” Jessie asked.

“Because being combative with the people who are trying to help you seems like a bad move.”

"Well, it's the move I'm making," he said, standing up. "And the other move I'm making is to call my lawyer. So you can address any further questions to him. In the meantime, unless I'm under arrest, I'm leaving."

Then he headed for the door. Jessie wanted to say something, but her brain offered no suggestions. All she could do was watch him storm out. Somehow, a petty, whiny daddy's boy had outmaneuvered her.

She really needed her mind back at full strength, and fast.

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“So he just walked out?” Riddell demanded.

Jessie had just shared (a version of) the conversation she'd had with Jackson Dwyer and he sounded as annoyed as she'd felt. On the plus side, at least she hadn't wanted to kill Dwyer for the way he acted. Maybe that was the meds, or maybe he was just too pathetic to generate that kind of emotion.

“Yes,” she repeated. “There wasn’t much I could do under the circumstances. Did you have more luck?”

"Even less," he conceded. "Crittendon was belligerent the whole time, and all his answers were non-responsive. I only got about three questions in before he demanded to speak to his lawyer. I told him that this was just an interview, not an interrogation. But he basically clammed up after that, so I cut him loose."

Jessie was about to comment on how odd she found the reactions of both men when Riddell continued.

"There's more. While you were with Dwyer, I checked my messages. I got a voicemail from Robert Chandler and a text from Joel Cisco," he said, referring to the other two men that Oliver Stanton had told them were in the friend group.

“That doesn’t sound promising,” Jessie said.

"Because it's not," he replied. "Both of them said essentially the same thing. They're devastated over the loss of their friends and direct any questions to their lawyers. So if, we want to talk to them, we're going to have to jump through some hoops first."

Jessie posed the question that was percolating in her head.

“Do you find it as strange as I do that these guys seem so blasé about the murders of their friends?” she asked. “Or that they haven’t asked for protection? Or even how the case is going? If I belonged to a club where two of my friends had been killed on consecutive nights, I’d be pretty scared.”

“I’d love to ask them about that if we ever get the chance,” Riddell said.

Jessie was about to agree when her phone buzzed. It was a text from Ryan: I have info on your victims when you’re ready. She held it out to Riddell.

“I’m ready now,” he said.

She called right then.

“Hey,” she said when he picked up. “I’m here with Detective Riddell. Please tell me you’ve got something good, because we’re hitting a wall here.”

“I might,” he replied. “When I was looking over Taye Boyce’s records, I couldn’t find anything criminal, but I did note that he had filed and then retracted a restraining order.”

“Is that what Jamil was upset that he missed?” Jessie asked.

“Yes,” Ryan said, “but unless he knew what to look for, there was no way to catch it, as I told him. The only indication that it had ever been in the system at all was an extra blank space in the record. Only years of experience told me that the extra space wasn’t just a formatting error but a gap where something had been deleted. He’s still annoyed with himself, but less so. I guarantee he’ll never miss anything like that again.”

“So what was this restraining order about?” Riddell asked, uninterested in the emotional well-being of HSS’s head of research.

“Right,” Ryan said in a tone that only she could tell indicated that he didn’t love the detective’s brusqueness. “So I talked to a friend at the courthouse, and it turns out that Boyce filed a restraining order against a woman named Samantha Collins. There’s no way to access it without a court order and even then the contents might have been scrubbed.”

“Do you think we should pursue a court order to get at it?” Jessie asked.

“It might end up being a wild goose chase,” Ryan allowed, “besides we may already have what we need.”

“Why do you say that?” Riddell pressed.

“Because once I had Collins’s name, we were able to cross-reference her against Boyce and found something very interesting. There was a financial settlement between them about a year ago.”

“She paid him?” Jessie confirmed.

"No, the other way around," Ryan said. "The thing is sealed, so there's no way to know the terms. But regardless of the particulars, I found it interesting that he filed a restraining order against her but then ended up paying her a settlement."

“That is odd,” Jessie muttered. She felt like there was an obvious next question to ask Ryan, but she couldn’t think of it. He helped her out anyway.

“So after that, I had Jamil and Beth do a little more searching,” he said. “And what did they find? Boyce has paid out at least two other settlements in the last five years.

The terms of those are sealed as well, including the names.”

“Sounds like a pattern to me,” Riddell said. “Why wasn’t Collins’s name sealed too?”

“Not sure on that,” Ryan said, “but it is an interesting distinction.”

“So we have harassment allegations and a restraining order filed by nightclubs against Daran Peterson,” Riddell said. “And now we have multiple secret settlements involving Taye Boyce. It’s starting to look even more like these guys aren’t exactly Boy Scouts. I wonder what we’d find if we added their friends to the search.”

“Give us the names and we’ll start looking,” Ryan said.

“How about a trade?” Jessie offered. “We’ll give you that if you send us everything you have on Samantha Collins, including her address.”

“Twist my arm,” Ryan replied playfully.

Jessie smiled and barely stifled a giggle.

“Jeez,” Riddell grumbled. “Why don’t you two get a room?”

Jessie, who was starting to lose patience with the man, couldn’t help but respond.

“We plan to later on,” she assured him.

He scowled, which made her happy, as did something else. If she was getting pissed at Riddell again, that might mean the medication was finally starting to wear off. She hoped that was the case.

She needed to be at full power when they talked to Samantha Collins. The woman

was their only good lead right now.

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“So you get it now?” Hannah asked.

"I think so," Dallas told her as he leaned in closer to scrutinize the textbook. "Just give me a second to go over it on my own."

They were sitting at a small table at the Green Room Café on the UCI campus, where, for the last five minutes, she'd been reviewing what he missed in class the other day. He was a quick learner, and it had taken only half of the ten minutes she'd promised to give him to understand the concepts.

She stayed quiet while he looked over the book and the notes he'd taken while she was explaining things. As he studied the material, she studied him. Unlike yesterday, when he'd shown up to class in a t-shirt and jeans, today he was wearing a collared shirt and casual slacks. It was almost like he'd dressed up for the occasion. Or at least dressed up as much as a college sophomore does.

His dark wavy black hair was combed properly, and he'd shaved since yesterday. She'd also noticed that he seemed a little more nervous than he'd been then. Initially, she thought it was because he was worried he wouldn't understand the material and would look stupid. But that clearly wasn't the case. He got it just fine, which made her think it was something else.

When she'd first arrived at the table at 11:45, his cheeks had gotten a little pink. The same thing had happened again when she told him he'd nailed a concept. Was he just shy or was it something about her that had him fumbling a bit? Despite her reservations, she had to acknowledge that it was charming.

And she did have reservations. Which is why she'd spent a decent chunk of yesterday afternoon doing a background search on Dallas Henry. After her bad experience with the student who claimed to need her help and then tried to assault her in a library study room, no one got the benefit of the doubt anymore.

Having said that, while the guy wasn't squeaky clean, he wasn't a felon either. Dallas Henry had grown up in Bakersfield, in Central California. That's where he'd gone to community college for the last year and a half, getting impeccable grades, before transferring to UC Irvine for the spring quarter.

Prior to that, in high school, he had a mixed record. Hannah knew that because she'd hacked into the school's database and accessed everything in his student record. His first few years were mediocre, and he'd had a few disciplinary issues, specifically a couple of fights with other students and an allegation of once being high on campus, although that was never proven.

His problems weren't hugely shocking once she uncovered the timing of his issues. They correlated closely to his parents' divorce and his father's subsequent death in a car accident, one in which he was apparently drunk. That sequence of events would have upended anyone's equilibrium.

He appeared to right the academic ship around in the middle of his junior year, getting straight A's from that point forward. But it was apparently too little too late to get him into a top-tier school right off the bat, which explained going the community college route to start off. She was curious to ask him what had turned everything around for him, but that would have obviously revealed that she'd been checking up on him. Couldn't have that.

She also noted that he came from a working-class family. His father, before his death, was an electrician, and his mother was a teller at a local bank. When she remarried, it was to the bank manager. Dallas had worked multiple retail jobs throughout high

school and was currently in the work-study program at UCI, where he was a part-time staffer in the main library.

Other than the two fights and the scuttled weed allegation, he seemed pretty clean-cut. But clean cut didn't mean safe, which is why she'd also scoured his social media presence for anything alarming. He didn't have much of one, which she found slightly odd for someone his age. Then again, she was only a year younger than him, and she kept a low profile online too.

Of course, in her case, it was because she'd had multiple interactions with stalkers and murderers. He just seemed uninterested. Maybe the personal tragedies he'd faced in his own life had diminished his interest in exploring online drama.

Because she wasn't about to take any chances, she was also able to access the portal for his health records. Sometimes her time working for Kat's detective agency really paid off. In this case, it didn't show much.

He had an emergency inhaler for mild asthma, and he'd undergone an emergency appendectomy when he was fourteen. Regarding her primary concern, that he might have had treatment for some mental health issue, his file was clean. She would still proceed with caution, but he'd at least passed her initial test for casual personal interaction.

"What?" he asked.

"Huh?" she replied, confused.

"You've kind of been staring at me for the last twenty seconds," he told her. "Do I have something on my face?"

"Oh, no, sorry," she said, feeling her own cheeks turn slightly pink. "I was just lost in

thought. I didn't realize I was staring."

"Uh huh," he replied, seemingly unconvinced. "So I think I'm going to be okay with this material now. Thanks for helping me out."

"I don't think you really needed all that much help, to be honest."

"Maybe it seems that way now," he said. "But I wasn't sure, and it's always nice to get a sanity check, you know?"

"I do like the occasional sanity check," she agreed, though she meant something very different than him. "And I'm glad we could knock this out quick because I'm supposed to meet up with my friend in a minute."

"Is that your way of telling me that it's time to clear out?" he asked.

"Kind of," she admitted. "But I didn't want to be outright rude."

"I wouldn't call it rude," he said with a grin as he packed up his stuff, "just blunt bordering on harsh."

"Really?" she asked, now genuinely embarrassed.

"Nah, I'm just teasing," he said, standing up and throwing his backpack over his shoulder. "I'll get out of your hair now. Thanks for taking the time."

"That's okay."

"Speaking of time," he said, looking aggressively at the floor instead of her, "when you have a little more of it, would you like to get some coffee with me?"

And there it was. She'd suspected this might be coming but didn't want to be presumptuous. He was cute, and she was flattered. But it wasn't going to happen. She tried to be a little more diplomatic with this response than the last one.

“That’s very sweet,” she said, “but I’m not really getting coffee with people right now. I’m taking some Hannah time.”

“Got it,” he said, sounding a little disappointed but not hurt. “Well, thanks again for the help. And if you ever decide you’re back in the market for shared caffeine experiences, let me know.”

“I will,” she told him, before adding, “see you in class.”

“For sure,” he replied and headed off. As Hannah watched him go, she silently appreciated how the interaction, which could have gotten awkward, ended without drama. That was a point in his favor. Not that she was keeping score.

He left the café, and her eyes fell on the table near the door. To her surprise, Finn was sitting at it, glaring at her. He got up and walked over, his eyes stormy and his brow furrowed.

“Everything okay, Finn?” she asked, sensing that the very drama she’d just avoided might now be headed her way.

"Everything's fine," he said, though it clearly wasn't. "I was just coming in for our Baby Psych meetup when I saw that you were otherwise engaged. So not wanting to disturb you, I just decided to wait over there until you were done."

“You weren’t disturbing me,” she said, not going to be made to feel guilty. “Our meeting was scheduled for noon and it’s currently 11:56 so you’re actually early.”

“Well, I’m glad I didn’t cause a conflict,” he said, either not knowing or not caring that he sounded like a pouty child.

“Finn, I have a class in about a half hour,” she said wearily. “Do you want help with your psychology class or not?”

“I do,” he said, sitting down and pulling out his textbook. But even as he did that, she could tell that he wasn’t letting go of his agitation. After a few seconds, he couldn’t hold it in anymore. “You know that guy is new here and that no one really knows him.”

“Have you been checking up on the random dude from my Brain Dysfunction and Repair class?” she asked, equal parts amused and annoyed.

“I just don’t want you to get blind-sided again,” he told her.

“After having known me for seven months now, what gave you the impression that I can’t take care of myself?”

“Nothing, obviously,” he said carefully at the rebuke, “I just worry.”

She put both her palms flat on the table to emphasize her forthcoming point.

“Look, if I start hanging out with Dallas, I’ll do the research on him to make sure he’s not a problem, but whatever I do or don’t do, it’s not your concern.”

She felt no obligation to tell Finn that she’d already done a ton of research. It wasn’t his business.

“You can’t control how I feel,” he said. “If I’m concerned, then I’m concerned.”

“You can feel however you want,” she replied, “but sharing that feeling with me is a different story. This is the second time in as many days that I’m having to remind you that we agreed to just be friends for now. Are you able to handle that or not?”

“I was just looking out for you,” he grumbled under his breath.

“I don’t need a caretaker, Finn,” she reiterated. “Now are you going to be able to get past this?”

“I could ask you the same question,” he shot back.

“What do you mean?”

“Are you ever going to get past the stuff that came between us?”

Hannah sighed.

“By ‘stuff,’ do you mean how we were looking for a missing pledge from your fraternity and when I wanted to involve the authorities, you suddenly became more concerned for your frat’s reputation than your pledge’s welfare? Is that the ‘stuff’ you’re referring to? Because if it is, then my honest answer is that I’m still working through how I feel about all that.”

“I’ve apologized for it a million times,” he said. “It wasn’t what I was intending to do.”

“You apologizing doesn’t mean I’m going to magically view you the way I did before that happened. It takes time. And you’re not giving me any. Here’s a little tip: the behavior that you’re exhibiting right now is counterproductive. Now I’ve agreed to help with your class. For the last time, do you want that help or not?”

He looked at her, and she could tell that he was actually weighing his answer to that question. She'd assumed it would be a default "yes." After all, he currently had a "C" in the class, which was supposed to be an easy "A" for non-majors. Over the course of the next five seconds, his expression morphed from pouty to agitated to seething. He stood up.

"I'll figure it out on my own," he said.

She shook her head in disappointment.

"This isn't a good look for you, Finn."

"You're making a mistake with this guy," he scolded. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Then, to make his point, he kicked the leg of the table before storming off. Hannah watched him march out of the café. She'd been slightly surprised by his response but after that wore off, she noted that he'd proven her point—clean cut guys could be jerks.

And sometimes far worse.

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Jessie's eyes snapped open.

It took her a moment to process her situation. She was in the passenger seat of Detective Riddell's car, and he was shaking her shoulder.

"We're here," he said. "And by the way, you sure do take a lot of naps."

She didn't respond to that. What was she going to say—I foolishly took a medication to help me control my violent urges and it's made me sleepy and mentally foggy all day—she doubted that would help much. Instead, she looked out the window

"Here" was Samantha Collins's neighborhood, Gardena. While still in the South Bay part of Los Angeles, the community wasn't adjacent to the ocean like Redondo Beach was. It was about five miles inland and more of a working and middle-class community than the neighborhoods where the yacht club boys lived.

"Is that her address?" she asked Riddell, nodding at the apartment complex that he'd parked in front of.

"According to your HHS research geniuses, it is," he said.

Jessie didn't comment on the fact that Jamil at least was actually a genius. Instead, she looked at the text message she'd received from the young man while she was sleeping.

"It looks like my geniuses sent some background info on Samantha Collins," she said. "You interested in hearing it before we go introduce ourselves?"

He nodded. She clicked on the message.

“So, Collins is 24 years old,” she said. “She’s lived at this address for a little over a year. Before that, she lived at the southern end of Redondo Beach.”

“I’ve got to wonder why she moved from such a nice area to one that’s less desirable,” he said.

"We may have a reason," Jessie told him. "She currently works as a server at a family-style restaurant in Torrance. But prior to that, she was a dancer at a gentlemen's club in Inglewood called The Southland Strip. I guess that once she switched gigs, the rent became harder to pay."

“How much do you want to bet this settlement has something to do with her time on the pole?” Riddell mused.

Jessie silently noted that the detective’s question had a lascivious tone that she didn’t love.

“Do you think that Boyce got too handsy for her taste?” she asked.

“These girls are used to getting groped,” he replied. “For him to pay her off, it must be something more than that.”

Jessie couldn't disagree with his logic. Now, it was time to find out if he was right.

“This is what she looks like, by the way,” she said, holding out an image of Collins’s driver’s license photo. Collins had short dark hair, big green eyes, and pale skin. Even in a DMV photo, she was strikingly beautiful.

“I bet she looked even hotter in her stripper makeup,” Riddell cracked.

Jessie didn't bother to respond to that one. This guy was beyond help.

"Let's go say 'hi,'" she said, getting out of the passenger seat. She took several quick breaths, bordering on hyperventilating, in the hopes of getting extra oxygen to her brain and clearing up the sluggishness that still persisted. It seemed to help a bit.

Riddell joined her, and they made their way up the path to the apartment complex gate. Metal fencing ran along the entire exterior of the two-story building. Riddell used the key in the Knox Box, the secure lockbox attached to the wall next to gate code panel. The box was intended for police and emergency personnel to access buildings quickly and without having to announce themselves.

Once inside, he led the way as they headed to unit 114. The poorly named Gardena Gardens was a motel-style complex where all the units were accessed from the outside. They passed a sad-looking pool that had more leaves than water in it and came to a stop in front of Collins's door.

Once they arrived, Riddell undid the holster for his sidearm. Though Jessie considered the detective to be rash and ill-tempered, in this instance she didn't think he was off base. They were virtually certain that their killer was female, and it appeared that Collins had an unpleasant history with Taye Boyce, if not with Daran Peterson. Taking extra precautions seemed reasonable.

"You ready?" Riddell asked as he stood to the left of the door and held his fist in front of it.

Jessie stepped to the right of the door, undid the holster on her own gun, and nodded. Riddell rapped on the door and barked loudly.

"Samantha Collins, this is the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department. We need to speak with you. Please open the door."

Jessie was surprised. She'd expected him to knock normally in the hopes of starting this interaction on the right foot. But apparently, Riddell wanted to escalate things from the very start. The unexpected adrenaline jolt that came from the realization helped dissipate whatever remaining brain fog she had.

They waited ten seconds without hearing anything. Then there was a loud thump that Jessie couldn't identify. For half a second, she thought it might be the sound of a body hitting the ground. But then a more likely culprit popped into her head. If she had to guess, that was the sound of a window being slammed open. She looked over at Riddell, about to share her theory. But he spoke first.

"That sounded like someone in distress to me," he said, not even trying to be convincing. "I think we've got exigent circumstances here and need to breach."

It was clear that he didn't buy his own assertion but felt he had to officially make it out loud before smashing open the apartment door. Without even looking over to see if she would object, he grabbed his gun and barked a second time.

"Ma'am, we're concerned that you are in danger. We are entering the domicile. Put your hands above your head for your own safety!"

Jessie reluctantly unholstered her own weapon too. They were committed now. Riddell silently counted down from three, then reared back and kicked at the flimsy door near the handle. The frame cracked briefly before popping open. Riddell entered first. Jessie followed, scanning the living room for any movement. There was none.

Riddell stepped around a half wall into the kitchen. Jessie glanced down a short hallway to what looked like the bedroom.

"Moving to the back," she whispered, shuffling forward. She took quick note that the place was somehow both spartan and messy at the same time. There was hardly any

furniture, just a loveseat with an end table. The walls were bare. Either Samantha Collins didn't have many possessions, or she couldn't afford to keep what she used to have.

Jessie reached a door in the hallway that she assumed was for the bathroom. It was open, but the room was dark. She stayed in the hall as she felt around for the light switch. Finding it, she flicked it on, then knelt down and kicked the door open. The bathroom was empty.

"Passing you on the right," Riddell said, "Kitchen was clear."

He proceeded ahead of her to the bedroom at the end of the hall and didn't even bother trying the handle. He used the same technique as before, kicking it open. This one was even more brittle than the front door and the lower hinges snapped off entirely when the thing slammed open.

Riddell rolled in and popped up onto his knees. Jessie stayed by the broken door and looked around. There was no one there, but the back window was wide open. Riddell headed that way.

Jessie was about to warn him to check the closet first but gave up on the idea and decided to just do it herself. It had a sliding, mirrored door that was half open already. She crouched and peeked in. Nothing.

"She's headed down the alley," Riddell said. "I'm going after her."

Jessie looked over. He was already clambering up on the bed and straddling the window. Jessie rushed over. By the time, she was on the bed looking out, he'd already dropped to the ground and started running after a young woman, who was halfway down the alley. There was no way that Jessie, still unsure if she was fully recovered from the medication's effects, was going to follow suit.

“Toss me your keys,” she ordered. “I’m going to get the car.”

He stopped for half a second to fish them out of his pocket, then threw them back to her.

“Don’t crash it,” he warned before giving chase again.

Jessie didn't have the energy to offer a comeback. Instead, she simply hopped off the bed and darted back through the apartment. As she sprinted through the apartment complex courtyard back to the street, she tried to guess where Collins would go next.

Jessie wasn't super familiar with the Gardena area, but she had noticed that this residential street, 154 th Court, intersected with a larger one, Crenshaw Boulevard, which was lined with businesses. That's the direction that Collins had run. If Jessie could get there before the woman, maybe she could find her before she disappeared into a store, and they lost her.

She jumped into the driver's seat, started the car, and hit the gas. She reached the intersection with Crenshaw in a matter of seconds and turned right toward the alleyway that ran parallel to 154 th Court.

It took her a moment to locate Collins. But after a quick, fruitless scan of the right side of the road, she glanced left and saw her. The woman had already crossed the street and was scurrying along the sidewalk on that side. Riddell was nowhere in sight.

Jessie punched the accelerator, shooting past several cars in front of her before cutting across traffic and coming to a stop on the sidewalk, blocking Collin's path. The woman came to a sudden halt just in front of her. For the first time, Jessie got a good look at her.

Samantha Collins, even dressed in just a t-shirt and yoga pants and wearing no makeup, was an attractive woman. Her raven-colored hair extended down to her elbows. Her porcelain skin seemed to glimmer in the early afternoon light, as did her terrified eyes. She'd left her apartment in such a hurry that she was barefoot.

Seeing Jessie pull up in front of her, she spun her head around, looking for someplace to escape, and darted through the closest door. Jessie got out and gave chase. She glanced through the glass door of the establishment and, seeing Samantha running toward the back, pushed it open.

She was in a hair salon. About a dozen women—some stylists, some customers—stared open-mouthed at her and her weapon. Only one young woman, sitting under a dryer with earbuds in and her eyes closed, was oblivious to the proceedings. Jessie ignored all of them as she rushed after Collins.

A door toward the rear was open. Jessie, feeling winded, slowed down slightly as she approached it, not wanting to get taken by surprise. She poked her head around the corner to find that she was looking at a small business office. Its back door was open.

She rushed over and noted a broom standing against the wall near the door. An idea came to her, and she snagged it as she reached the door. She peered outside and saw Collins about ten feet ahead of her, once again running down an alley.

Jessie wasn't about to chase her much more. Instead, she switched her weapon to her left hand and grasped the broom over her head like a javelin. Then she flung the thing toward Collins's legs. Her aim was true, and the wooden pole landed in between them as Collins took a big stride. Her rear foot clipped it and she went down, landing hard on her front. Jessie jogged after the woman, keeping her weapon at her side.

"Stay down," she ordered raspily. "I'm an armed law enforcement officer. Any sudden moves would be a bad choice."

Collins, groaning softly, didn't look like she had any intention of moving.

"Slowly put your hands behind your back," Jessie instructed.

The woman did as she was told. Jessie was just starting get out her cuffs when she heard a voice behind her.

"You want me to take over?"

She glanced back to find Riddell emerging from the door of the salon. Apparently, he hadn't been as far behind the action as she thought.

"Be my guest," she told him, hoping she didn't sound completely breathless. "You're the cop."

He stepped forward, and she happily retreated. As Riddell knelt down to cuff Samantha Collins and began reading her rights, Jessie moved back to the salon doorway and leaned into the office so she couldn't be seen.

Then she silently retched. Nothing came out, but that didn't make her feel any better. She was wiped out. But in large part due to an adrenaline shot, she was definitely thinking clearly now.

She swore to herself that she would never take that pill again, even if it meant she lost control and killed someone. The way it had messed up her thinking and stamina, she was lucky she hadn't encountered someone who could have taken her out.

Better them—whoever "them" was—than her.

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They used the hair salon's back office as an interrogation room.

Jessie didn't say as much, but she didn't want to conduct an interview back at the Sheriff's station, where she'd have little control. And she could see that Riddell was too impatient to go anywhere. So, after getting the reluctant consent of the salon owner, they agreed to do it here.

They sat Collins down in the owner's swiveling desk chair and cuffed her right hand to the armrest. Riddell was champing at the bit, but before he started in, Jessie pulled him aside.

"I know she ran from us," she whispered, "but she wasn't aggressive. Let's at least start this on simmer before we take it to boil, okay?"

"What do you mean by that?" Riddell growled.

"Give me a minute to calm her down," Jessie explained. "If she's our killer, we'll get there. But if not, she could be a valuable information source. Let's not turn her into a crying heap of tears until we have to."

Riddell didn't look happy, but she could tell that he saw some merit in her suggested strategy.

"Fine," he muttered, "but if she starts playing games with us, I'm going to amp it up real quick."

"Fair enough," Jessie said, though she didn't really think it was. She turned her

attention back to Collins, whose t-shirt was grimy from where she'd fallen. The tops of her toes were also raw from scraping on the alleyway gravel. She was wincing as she held her left hand to her chest.

“Detective Riddell is going to call for an ambulance so EMTs can you check you out, Samantha,” she said, nodding at Riddell to do that, before adding,” is it okay if I call you Samantha?”

The woman nodded faintly. As the detective reluctantly pulled out his phone and stepped to the corner of the room, Jessie noted that Collins seemed to be whimpering.

"Okay, Samantha, my name is Jessie Hunt," she began. "I'm a criminal profiler with the LAPD. This is Detective Riddell. You may remember that he already identified himself at your apartment. But while we wait for the EMTs to arrive, we wanted to ask you some questions, which is all we ever wanted to do anyway. Keeping in mind the rights that Detective Riddell explained to you earlier, are you willing to speak with us?"

Collins took a deep, wheezy breath. Jessie worried that she might be about to ream them out. Instead, when she replied, speaking to them for the first time, her voice was quiet.

“Are you really cops?”

Jessie was surprised at the question but answered it anyway.

"We're both law enforcement," Jessie reiterated, pulling out her ID and showing it. "Detective Riddell is a cop. I'm not, but I work for the Los Angeles Police Department. Why do you ask that?"

Riddell came back over and nodded to indicate that the ambulance was on the way.

"Because people have been following me," Collins said through gritted teeth. "They show up every few weeks and make themselves known. They give off a very threatening energy. I thought you were part of that."

"We're not," Riddell said, though his tone wasn't all that reassuring.

"Why do you think that you're being followed, Samantha?" Jessie asked.

The woman didn't answer. In fact, she seemed afraid to. Jessie decided to try a different tack.

"Okay, let's back up a little. How well do you know a man named Taye Boyce?"

At the question, Samantha's eyes nearly popped out of her head.

"That's who's having me followed," she seethed. "And that's why I ran when you banged on my door. I didn't think you were for real. I assumed you worked for him and meant me harm. If you don't, then how do you know about me?"

Jessie looked over at Riddell. It felt to her like they'd reached a key juncture. They didn't yet know whether they were talking to a criminal or some kind of victim. But in order to get anything useful from Samantha Collins, it was clear that they were going to have to be more forthcoming.

If Collins was their killer, revealing Boyce's death could provide an incriminating reaction. If she wasn't involved, then knowing the real reason they were here might make her more likely to open up.

If Ryan had been with her, he'd have understood what her look meant. But the detective's expression indicated that he didn't know what she was trying to convey. She decided to make a command decision.

“Taye Boyce is dead,” she said flatly.

Collins’s eyes got even wider than before. It could have been an act, but Jessie, trusting that her cognitive abilities were back to pre-medication levels, thought the woman’s surprise seemed sincere.

“What?” she said with a grimace, though Jessie wasn’t sure if that was because of the news or the discomfort she was in.

"He was murdered," she replied, choosing not to look at her partner to see his reaction to her revelation. "We're investigating it, and you came up because of a situation involving a restraining order he filed against you."

“You see!” Samantha said, her voice rising in anger as she rubbed at her chest, “That’s the crap I’ve been dealing with!”

“What crap?” Riddell demanded.

“Look, I’m sorry to hear that he was killed,” she began before seeming to change her mind, “but he was not a good guy. He filed a restraining order against me a year ago because he had people at the courthouse who tipped him off that I was about to file one against him. He was just trying to confuse things.”

“Explain that,” Jessie requested.

“Am I allowed to do that?” Samantha asked. “I reached a settlement with him that doesn’t let me to talk about what happened.”

“He’s dead and this is a criminal investigation,” Riddell told her. “You can talk.”

Hearing those words seemed to calm Samantha down a little. After taking a couple of

pained breaths, she launched in.

“I work as a restaurant server now, but I used to be an exotic dancer. Boyce came into my club one night with some of his buddies. He spent a lot of money. At one point he invited me and a few other girls to come hang out on his boat. It sounded cool so a few nights later we did.”

“What happened?” Jessie asked, prying without trying to sound like she was.

“It was fun,” Samantha said. “One huge party on a boat.”

“Did anything happen between you two?” Jessie pressed.

A brief wave of guilt crossed Samantha’s face as she answered.

“Yeah, we had sex in his cabin bedroom down below deck.”

“You were a willing participant?” Jessie wanted to know.

“Yes,” she answered. “It was kind of rough, but I was generally cool with it.”

“Were you paid?” Riddell asked.

Samantha’s eyes turned to slits and her face went red. Then, without warning, she leapt up and tried to take a swing at the detective.

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Riddell stumbled back, just barely avoiding the woman's open palm, and slammed into a filing cabinet behind him.

"What are you doing?" Jessie demanded, too stunned to physically react.

"I'm not a hooker!" Samantha blurted, looking offended.

"Okay, okay," Jessie said, stepping between her and Riddell, who had recovered and was moving forward angrily. "Detective Riddell is sorry for the insinuation, but you need to sit back down, Samantha."

Collins, wincing in discomfort, retreated to the chair. Riddell, clearly still seething, reluctantly stopped his advance. Jessie thought she was going to have to re-set the whole conversation. But before she tried, Collins quietly muttered a response.

"I mean, he was clearly rich, and I guess part of me was hoping that it might become a regular thing and that he'd give me some nice gifts or something. But I never asked for anything, and I was not paid."

"Okay, Samantha," Jessie said soothingly, trying to get things back on track. "So how did the situation go from you being generally cool with things to restraining orders and financial settlements?"

Samantha took a cue from Jessie's demeanor and calmed down a little.

"We hooked up a few times after that, same basic situation," she said. "But other than being pretty free with liquor and drugs, he wasn't very generous. And he was a real

jerk. He wanted me to do it with his buddies while he watched. He wanted to tape stuff. And he was just really nasty sometimes. He'd talk down to me. After a while, I thought—why am I hooking up with this guy? He's not very nice to me. He's rich but doesn't spread it around. He like to get rougher than I want in bed. And he keeps asking me to do things I'm not comfortable with. So I ended it."

"And was that the end of it?" Jessie asked, even though she was sure it wasn't.

"Not by a long shot," Samantha said with a snort. "Taye wasn't happy that I cut him off. He kept coming to the club, asking me to meet up again. Then he started demanding it. He was relentless. At one point I had to ask club security to keep him out because he wouldn't leave me alone. It made it hard to get other guys to do privates or even just sit with me. One time, he got in when there was a new guard at the door. You know what he said to me?"

Both Jessie and Riddell shook their heads.

"He threatened to get me fired," she said. "He said he'd go to the manager and say that I was performing oral sex on customers in the VIP room. He also said he'd anonymously go to the police commission, which regulates adult entertainment clubs, and make the same claims. That was the final straw. I told him that I was going to get a restraining order against him. I had even started looking for a lawyer to help me out when I got served with one of my own. And by the way, even before that happened, the club ended up firing me anyway. They said I was too much of a hassle. So all of a sudden, my finances got tight."

"You didn't try to go to a different club?" Jessie asked.

She shook her head.

"It wasn't worth it," she said. "I knew that he'd find me eventually. And then he'd

either start the whole routine again, or if he was feeling extra petty, claim I was in violation of the restraining order and get me arrested when I was the one at work. I figured that even though the money wasn't as good, I'd be better off as a restaurant server, which is what I did before I started dancing. I picked a family style restaurant, because then he'd be the one out of place. Plus, I could always just refuse to serve him. Then he'd have to go out of his way to cause trouble. It's one thing to come on to someone at a loud strip club where all the girls are in G-strings. But it comes across different when people are having brunch after church."

"So how did you get things turned around?" Riddell asked warily, apparently sensing that if he was too aggressive, she might lose it again. For the first time during the questioning, he actually sounded sympathetic to her.

"The lawyer I got was a shark," Samantha explained, seeming willing to move past their dust-up. "It was kind of an accident. I just took the recommendation of another girl at the club. This guy met with me. When he found out who Taye was, that he had money and worked for some big-time bank or something, he turned the tables. He said he would go to the bank with the allegations of harassment and the stuff about wanting to tape rough sex. He might have even implied that I had video footage of Taye pressuring me, which I didn't. He thought of all kinds of things that I never would have. After that, Taye caved pretty quick."

"You got a settlement check?" Jessie confirmed.

"Kind of," Samantha said. "The settlement was for \$300,000. But my lawyer took a third right off the top. He got all his money upfront, but Taye's lawyer negotiated it so that my portion was paid out over five years—\$40,000 a year. And after taxes, it's even lower than that. And that's not all."

"What else?" Jessie asked, partly because she genuinely wanted to know, but also because she sensed that this was the first time that Samantha Collins had been able to

get any of this off her chest.

“There was a non-disclosure clause in the settlement that said I couldn’t mention where I got the money or even that I had gotten it, other than to my lawyer and accountant,” she explained. “I think that’s why people would keep showing up and following me. It only started after the settlement agreement. I think Taye was having people check on whether I’d violated the terms so that the money could be snatched back. I think he may have even had these people seem threatening on purpose in the hope that I would tell someone because I was scared and then lose the money.”

“Wow,” Jessie said. “That’s a pretty raw deal all around.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, clearly happy that someone sympathized with her plight. “Looking back, I’m still amazed that I got anything. My lawyer’s threats to go to the bank probably helped, but I think the real reason that Taye eventually caved was that I might not have been the only one.”

“What does that mean?” Riddell asked.

Samantha shrugged, then stopped herself. Apparently, the movement was too uncomfortable with her chest injury.

“Just the way he talked,” she said. “It sounded like he’d done some of the same things with other girls: the rough stuff, the pressure to be with his buddies—all that. I think he didn’t want his dirty laundry aired.”

Things began to click into place for Jessie. Jamil had mentioned that Boyce had agreed to at least two other settlements in the last half decade. Even though those agreements were sealed, one could make a few assumptions about the nature of them.

She looked over at Riddell and could tell that he was thinking the same thing she was:

if Samantha Collins's claims were correct, then it seemed that Boyce and his friends had a history of treating women badly. And by extension, they'd likely have made a lot of female enemies. Maybe one of them was pushed too far.

Of course, that 'one' could still be Samantha. Jessie could hear the ambulance siren in the distance and decided that they couldn't put this last part off anymore.

"We need to ask you, Samantha—where were you the last two nights?"

The woman's face fell. She'd clearly begun to assume that someone was finally on her side. Now she realized that she wasn't out of the woods yet.

"You think I killed him?" she said, sounding almost hurt.

"We need to eliminate you as a suspect," Jessie acknowledged. "You can see why you might be on the list. But if you can give us your whereabouts the last two evenings, then there shouldn't be a problem."

Samantha nodded, flinching slightly at the pain even that movement caused.

"I get it," she said. "But why the last two nights?"

"Because Boyce wasn't the only one killed," Riddell allowed.

"Who else?" Samantha demanded, seemingly stunned at the revelation.

"A man named Daran Peterson," Jessie answered.

"I know who he is. He was a real jerk too," Samantha conceded, not seeming to grasp that the admission made her a more likely suspect.

“All the more reason to give us an alibi that proves you didn’t kill either of them,” Jessie noted.

“Fine,” she said, squinting as she tried to recall. “Last night I was working. I even closed up. I don’t know when these guys were killed, but I was at the restaurant from 2:30 until 11. On Tuesday, I worked the day shift. I got home a little after 4 P.M. and stayed in. I binged a show I like.”

“Alone?” Riddell asked.

“Yes.”

The sirens were getting louder. Jessie’s earlier hope that they had the killer in custody had started to fade the second she first started talking to Samantha Collins. Now it was almost completely gone. They’d have to check with her co-workers and access her streaming data to be sure, but she was confident that the woman in front of them was a victim, not a perpetrator.

The expression on Riddell’s face as he uncuffed Collins from the chair suggested that he thought they’d wasted their time here. But Jessie felt differently.

It seemed clear that Taye Boyce, Daran Peterson, and the rest of their yacht boy friends had a proclivity for sexual aggression at the least and perhaps worse. If she could find a common thread in their actions, maybe it would lead to another suspect.

Jessie had a sense of who she was looking for now: someone who had chosen not to count on a shark of a lawyer to get retribution. Someone who decided to get it herself.

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She was dressed as a brunette now.

As difficult as this undertaking had been so far, she found that switching wig colors each time allowed her to embrace her responsibilities more easily. Each new hair color afforded her the chance to change personas as well.

Of course this time the light brown wig wasn't so much for show as it was for security. With increased awareness of her recent 'activities,' she feared that Robert Chandler, the next man on her list, would be hyper-cautious and not allow some random chick onto his yacht. The chances that he'd believe a cover story with her as a hapless gal drifting on the water or as a seductress who really wanted to hook up with him were minimal at this point.

But that was okay. She had no intention of trying to trick Chandler. Rather, this time around, she planned to use a more straightforward approach. She would board his boat under the cover of darkness.

The wig was just a precaution in case Chandler wasn't alone or had security cameras onboard. This way, she could still protect her identity to a degree. It might not even be necessary, as she would be decked out in a wetsuit that would cover everything but her face. But she didn't want to take any unnecessary risks, as this man was not the last on her list.

All her preparation had led to this moment. She had worked with a personal trainer to sculpt her body into the most appealingly curvy possible version of herself. She had paid a professional Hollywood makeup artist to teach her how to best maximize her facial assets in order to better woo her targets.

And most importantly, she'd become an even stronger swimmer. She'd been on the team in high school, but this was different. It was one thing to race in the 400-meter freestyle at a local meet. For this mission, she needed to be able to swim as much as two miles out in open, potentially choppy water, and then return after her task was completed.

That was why she'd swum almost every day in the buildup to this endeavor, almost always in the ocean. She could do five miles in heavy waves without feeling overtaxed. She was sure she could handle the calm waters that she'd face tonight.

She checked her watch. It had an app that allowed her to monitor the tracker she'd already surreptitiously placed on Chandler's boat. The vessel was still where it had been for the last half hour. She knew exactly where to go.

So far, all the hard work and training of the last six months had paid off. She wasn't about to let justice slip through her fingers now. Some might call it vengeance. But not her. A debt had to be paid. And it would be paid in blood.

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As Jessie and Riddell sat in a conference room at the yacht club, she tried to hide her frustration.

They had been on a conference call with Ryan, Jamil, and Beth for the last hour and with each passing minute, her patience had ebbed. It wasn't that the HSS research team hadn't done a credible job. In fact, they might have been too good at their work.

"I'm going to step out to get a little air," she announced to the group. Riddell looked like he wanted to do the same thing, but she'd beaten him to the punch. He'd have to wait until she got back.

After she left the conference room, she walked over to a giant window overlooking the harbor and stared out at the boats, hoping that the change of scenery would lead to some brilliant epiphany. None came, so she mentally reviewed what they'd learned.

Perhaps her biggest frustration was that all four of the remaining members of the yacht club social circle they were interested in had lawyered up. None would be coming in for questioning without some serious pressure, maybe even a formal arrest. Since none of them were currently accused of a crime, that wasn't an option.

There were some more positive developments. Samantha Collins had shed some light on the possible origin of Taye Boyce's additional legal settlements. It wasn't outrageous to surmise that they were due to attempts to use the same pressure tactics with other women that he did with her, potentially involving his yacht buddies. So Jessie had asked Jamil and Beth, with Ryan's help, to see what they could dig up. It turned out to be a lot.

The settlements themselves led nowhere. They were sealed so the details of what they were for and with whom, were unavailable. That wasn't a shock. After all, if not for the restraining order that Boyce had filed against Samantha Collins, they'd still be in the dark about her settlement and the nature of her allegations.

But the search had opened the floodgates. It turned out that all six informal members of the yacht buddies group had unsavory histories. In addition to Boyce and Peterson's records, both Archie Crittendon and Jackson Dwyer, the two friends they'd spoken to this morning, had multiple drunk and disorderly incidents. The two members who had refused to meet with them at all— Chandler and Joel Cisco—were even worse.

Chandler had all the drunk and disorderly stuff as the other two, but he was also once charged with assaulting a woman on a date when she decided to leave halfway through dinner. The woman claimed that he'd repeatedly attempted to touch her crotch area under the table. She balked and left. But according to the police report, he'd grabbed her hair in an attempt to stop her from leaving. The aggravated assault charge was eventually negotiated down to simple assault. He got a fine and three months' probation.

Joel Cisco was a real winner too. In addition to similar drunk and disorderly incidents, he'd been busted twice for solicitation. In one instance, he'd only been arrested because he refused to pay the sex worker and she'd called the cops on him, apparently willing to risk a prostitution charge herself in order to get him too. In something of a pattern, his lawyer was able to get those charges reduced as well, so that his entire sentence consisted of a month-long sexual harassment training course, which he was able to do online.

The problem was that in none of those instances did the same woman come up more than once. Jessie had hoped that if a name popped up on more than one occasion, with more than one guy, they'd be able to draw a connection that could offer a new

lead.

But each charge was a dead end. And as unpleasant as they all were, none of them seemed to rise to the level that would explain a person committing murder as some kind of retribution. They were missing something.

“Hey,” Riddell called from the open door of the conference room, “your little buddy Jamil found something.”

She hurried back to the room and closed the door behind her.

“What’s up, Jamil?” she asked.

“We’ve been spending all this time trying to find a common link among women these guys have had issues with,” he said excitedly. “But we never checked men.”

“You think that these guys were sexually harassing men too?” Jessie asked. Maybe she’d been narrow-casting too much, but the thought had never even occurred to her.

“I don’t know about sexually,” he cautioned. “But I did find a man who filed a harassment suit against all the guys we’ve been looking at. He retracted it only a day later, which makes me suspect that he got paid off too. But I figured you might want to speak with him.”

“Sure,” Jessie said. “Who is it?”

“His name is Mark Dawson,” Jamil replied. “He used to work at the yacht club until nine months ago.”

“That’s good,” Riddell noted giddily. “He’ll probably know where all the bodies are buried.”

“Where can we find him?” Jessie asked.

“You won’t have to go far,” Jamil said. “He works at a hotel just off King Harbor. Depending on how energetic you’re feeling, it’s walking distance.”

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They drove.

Ten minutes after they wrapped their call with the research team, Jessie was striding through the lobby of The Upper Deck, a boutique hotel located less than a mile from the South Bay Yacht Club. She was already at the front desk by the time Riddell caught up to her.

“We’re supposed to be partners, Hunt,” he muttered. “Maybe don’t leave me to park the car while you get a jump on the questioning.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I’m just excited to have a new lead.”

"Well, don't get your panties in a bunch over it yet," he said. "We don't know that it will lead anywhere."

She stopped in her tracks and wheeled around to face him. Captain Parker had ordered her to work with the Sheriff’s Department at the behest of Chief Decker. Despite her discomfort with the idea, she’d done it because of her respect for Decker and because it was the job she’d been assigned. But she could only put up with so much.

“Detective Riddell,” she said slowly. “I don’t know if you were raised in a barn or an outhouse or what. But keep that retrograde talk to yourself. It’s not winning you any points with me. In fact, it makes you come across like these yacht club guys. That badge doesn’t give you permission to be a chauvinistic bastard.”

“Don’t be so sensitive,” he chided. “I was only joking around.”

“Jokes are supposed to be funny, asshole,” she noted sharply, “and yours aren’t. Now I was brought in to your jurisdiction to help with what now looks to be serial killer case. I’m happy to beg off and let you explain to your sheriff and my chief why the top criminal profiler in L.A. dumped your sorry ass. Is that what you want to happen?”

The expression of astonishment on his face was priceless. If it wouldn’t have ruined the moment she would have taken a picture.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, sounding more wounded than apologetic.

"Just try to be a professional," she said. "That way, we can catch this killer and part ways forever. Can you do that for me?"

He opened his mouth, but she didn't wait for his reply, turning back to the front desk agent, a petite blonde whose jaw was hanging open. Apparently, she'd heard the whole thing. Jessie didn't care.

“I’m looking for Mark Dawson,” she said.

“Um, okay,” the young woman replied timidly. “Mark is working the restaurant today. I saw him on the terrace a few minutes ago.”

“Which way?” Jessie asked.

The desk agent pointed off to her left. Jessie looked through the floor-to-ceiling window and saw people seated outside.

“Thank you,” she said and headed in that direction. Riddell followed.

Jamil had sent them several photos of Dawson, including his driver’s license and a

few social media screenshots, so they knew what to look for. They passed through the interior of the restaurant and stepped out onto the veranda.

Jessie spotted the guy immediately. He was taking the order of an older couple at a table overlooking the water. From the basic biographical info that Jamil had provided, they knew that he was 24 and was also an aspiring actor. Jessie wasn't surprised.

Tall and good-looking, with dark hair and tanned skin, he had the vibe of a guy who enjoyed engaging with the public and putting on a show. She wanted to march right over but waited until he was done with the couple so as not to draw too much attention. When he left the table, she picked up the pace and caught him just as he was walking inside again.

"Mark Dawson?" she said, tapping him on the shoulder.

The young man turned around with a smile.

"That's me," he said.

"Hi, I'm Jessie Hunt with the LAPD. This is Detective Riddell with the Sheriff's Department. Can we speak with you privately for a minute?"

The variety of expressions that crossed his face over the next three seconds was astounding. He went from enthusiastic to confused to scared almost too quickly to process. He finally settled on grim determination as he replied.

"I'm working my shift right now," he whispered. "I have guests who are waiting for their food."

"I'm sure they'll understand if there's a five-minute delay," Jessie told him.

“You’d be surprised,” Dawson countered, his eyes darting everywhere but at her. “They pay a lot to come here, and they expect a certain level of service. I could get fired if someone complains.”

“Listen, kid,” Riddell growled. “If you have law enforcement show up to talk with you at work, it’s obviously a big deal. Stop being such a pain and come out to the lobby with us for a few minutes. Then you can get back to serving the geriatric set.”

Dawson again looked around the restaurant as if his manager might be about to charge over and ream him out.

“What’s this about?” he asked quietly.

“We can talk about it in more detail elsewhere,” Jessie said, suspicious that Dawson might already have a clue why they were here. “But it involves the deaths of several members of the yacht club where you used to work.”

At those words, the young guy’s jawline clenched tightly. He looked down at his guest check and quickly scribbled something on it. Then he looked back up at them.

“I have no interest in speaking with you,” he said forcefully. When he spoke, his voice was loud and clear, like he was making an announcement to everyone in earshot. “Please stop harassing me and leave my place of business.”

Then he angrily ripped the piece of paper from the guest check, crumbled it up, and tossed it at Jessie. She was about to give him a piece of her mind when she noticed that his eyes were completely at odds with the rest of his demeanor. On the surface, he appeared aggrieved. But his eyes were pleading. She sensed that he was trying to tell her something without speaking.

Riddell stepped forward. He looked like he wanted to deck the kid. But before he said

or did anything else, Jessie grabbed his forearm.

“That’s okay, Detective,” she said in an equally boisterous tone, “we don’t need this punk anyway. Let’s go.”

Riddell looked at her like she was crazy.

“Are you kidding me?” he demanded.

Fearing that he would say something to make things worse, she squeezed his arm as hard as she could.

“Trust me,” she muttered. “We should go.”

The detective still seemed befuddled, but after the dressing down she’d given him a few minutes ago, he apparently decided not to push back.

“Fine,” he said, and after giving Dawson an extra scowl, he stomped toward the front door.

Before following him, Jessie bent down and picked up the crumpled piece of paper that Dawson had tossed at her.

“You shouldn’t litter,” she told him before following Riddell out.

The detective was waiting for her in the lobby.

“Are you really going to let that little pissant tell us off like that?”

“Follow me,” she said walking past him.

She left the lobby and went outside, heading straight for the car.

“Any plan to explain what just happened back there?” he wanted to know.

“In the car,” she said.

Once they were both in the vehicle with the doors closed, she opened her fist to show him the crumpled guest check. She unfurled it and read out loud what Dawson had scribbled.

“It says: Burnout Beach, 8 p.m.” she told him, before asking, “Where’s Burnout Beach?”

“It’s a couple of miles south of here, at the southern tip of Redondo,” he answered, his whole body slackening as he realized that the guy wasn’t as objectionable as he thought.

“Well, it seems like Dawson wants to have a chat there,” Jessie noted. “You know this area much better than I do. Why would he pick that place at that time?”

Riddell thought about it for a second.

“You have to take a steep path down from Miramar Park to get to that part of the beach,” he said. “It’s not clearly visible from up above and at that hour. And the sun will have set so it will be almost impossible to see what’s happening on the beach. It seems like Dawson doesn’t want anyone to know he’s talking to us.”

Jessie smiled at that.

“That means he’s got something worth hearing.”

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Jessie tried not to jump to conclusions.

For a half hour now, she'd been sitting on a bench next to the Strand walking and biking path, which touched Burnout Beach. She glanced at her phone. It was 8:15, and the sun had completely set over ten minutes ago. Why wasn't Dawson here?

She zipped up her jacket. Even though it wasn't that cold, the ocean wind down here was biting. Riddell, standing about seventy-five yards away, was better off. He was leaning against the wall of a beach restroom that afforded him at least some protection from the wind.

Jessie was starting to give up hope when someone biking on the Strand came to a stop not far from her. She was about to tell them to move on, not wanting to spook Dawson, when she realized that's exactly who it was.

He was wearing a helmet and, inexplicably, sunglasses at night. He got off the bike and appeared to fiddle with one of the pedals. Jessie glanced over at Riddell and gave him a half-wave to indicate that he should come over.

"Don't look at me while we talk," Dawson said anxiously, his back turned away from her.

"Okay," Jessie agreed, "just give my partner a second to come over."

As Riddell approached, Jessie stood up and walked a few steps toward him.

"Come over here, honey," she said. "You've got to see how moonlight glints off the

crashing waves.”

As unpleasant as the prospect was, she reached out to take the detective’s hand, then pulled him close, wrapping his arm around her waist as she leaned in close to him.

"Dawson's on the bike," she said quietly, as if she was whispering a sweet nothing in her lover's ear. "He's still squirrely, so don't acknowledge him. Let's just admire the ocean like a lovestruck couple."

“If you wanted to get me close to you like this,” Riddell said. “You could have just asked instead of coming up with this elaborate scenario.”

“If you try anything,” she murmured back, “I will break your fingers and dislocate your kneecap, got it?”

“Yes, love,” he replied.

She was glad that her brain—and her bite—were back at full strength again. Now, if she could just get through this case without killing anyone, including her partner, she'd be set.

“So why all the cloak and dagger stuff, Mark?” she asked Dawson while she continued to look straight ahead.

"Because those guys from the yacht club have eyes everywhere," he said as he switched his attention to the other pedal. "I can't prove it, but I'm pretty sure they had an investigator sneak into my apartment to check my laptop once. They're paranoid."

“Is this because of the harassment suit you filed?” Jessie asked.

Even though she wasn’t looking directly at him, she could see the guy stiffen out of

the corner of her eye.

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that you found out about that,” he said. “And the answer is yes. I think they’re worried about me breaking the NDA they had me sign as part of the settlement we reached.”

“What are they so worried about you revealing?” Riddell asked, as if the NDA didn’t exist.

“Before I tell you anything,” Dawson said, bending over to study one of the spokes on the bike’s front tire, “I need to know that you’ll have my back.”

“Don’t worry,” Jessie assured him. “That NDA won’t hold up if you’re revealing details of impropriety on their part.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” Dawson said, sounding mildly offended. “my days of keeping my mouth shut for those bastards are over. I just want to make sure that I won’t get arrested for anything I tell you.”

“You’ll be fine,” Riddell said way too quickly.

Jessie grimaced at that. They weren't Dawson's lawyers and, as such, were under no obligation to give him accurate legal advice. But depending on what he said, Jessie needed this guy to be willing to say the same things in court. Deceiving him now risked alienating him and making him clam up.

“Actually, Mark,” she said. “Your legal culpability depends on what you’ve done. If you participated in a crime, we can’t promise that you’ll get out of this unscathed. It depends on how serious your actions were. What I can promise is that your assistance in solving two murders could mitigate whatever consequences you’d have to pay. In that situation, we’d definitely go to bat for you.”

Dawson was quiet, seeming to weigh what she'd said.

Under his breath, Riddell muttered, "you're taking a big chance being straight with the kid."

She didn't respond, instead keeping her focus on Dawson, who was still silent. Finally, the young man sighed.

"I'm going to trust you," he said, "because you're Jessie Hunt. I've seen what you've done to help people, and I don't think you'd screw over someone trying to do the right thing."

"I try not to," she said.

Dawson looked around. Jessie did the same. There were a few lonely people walking on the Strand and a couple of stragglers packing up stuff on the sand near the water. None of them was within a hundred yards of the three of them. Dawson must have taken comfort in that because he stopped fiddling with the bike and sat down on the bench where Jessie had waited for him to arrive. He was directly behind her and Riddell now. They continued to look away from him, staring at the ocean as if they were a couple besotted by love and nature.

"I worked at the club for about two years," Dawson said, launching right in. "I really loved it. I did everything from dock maintenance to working in the restaurant. About a year ago, I got switched up so that I did a lot of serving in the bar and eventually bartending. That's where I encountered the yacht bros—that's what I called them—up close. They were a bunch of rich, entitled jerks, but they tipped pretty well, so I pretended to be cool with them."

"Until?" Jessie prodded.

"Until they requested that I work bartending some parties of theirs," he explained. "They'd have these blowouts on their boats, and they wanted to have a bartender on board. They asked me and even though I didn't enjoy their company, I'd say yes. The money was good, and saying no could alienate them, which would hurt me back at the club bar."

"So what happened on the boats?" Jessie asked, doing her best to keep her tone from sounding too aggressive while still pressing.

"I wasn't totally aware of what was going on, at least not at first," Dawson explained. "They'd always bring these girls onboard to party with them. Sometimes they were locals, girls I recognized from around town. In those cases, the guys were pretty well-behaved. But sometimes they would bring girls I'd never seen before, who weren't from around here. Those nights would get especially wild. Lots of drinking. Sometimes drugs too. And though I didn't see it, a bunch of sexual encounters."

"How do you know that?" Riddell asked.

"I could hear them," Dawson said. "Plus a lot of times, the girls were mostly undressed when they going down to the cabins. Sometimes they were too drunk to walk, and the guys carried them. In a few cases, I think they were roofied."

"Did any of the girls ever tell you that?" Riddell wanted to know.

"No. It was just odd how quickly they zonked out sometimes," he admitted. "But one time I ran into one of the party girls at an audition. She was a wannabe actress, and she was trying out for the part of a beach bunny on a crappy show that I was trying to land a role on too. She recognized me and ran out of the building crying. I followed her and asked what was wrong. She said that there was no way that I would catch her saying anything. I didn't know what she was talking about and told her that. She wanted to know if I was working for the yacht bros, spying on her. I told her the

truth, that I just worked some of their parties. She must have believed me because that's when she told me—she woke up the morning after one of the boat parties and had all kinds of bruising, you know, down there. She said she didn't remember anything that happened but that the guy she'd been with threatened her.”

“Threatened her how?” Riddell asked.

“He told her that he had all her information—family, job, apartment. In fact, he listed them off from his phone. Then he said that if she breathed a word about that night, he'd destroy her: get her fired and kicked out of her place, have people post on social media that she was a whore, generally ruin her life. She thought I was working for him to check up on her.”

Jessie felt a familiar rush flow through her body. She knew it well. It was the return of her desire to exact vengeance on a perpetrator. She swallowed hard, trying to gulp down the rising fury.

One thing was clear to her. If the medication she'd taken ever had any effect at all on her impulse control, it had worn off. And she realized she was glad.

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Jessie gritted her teeth.

The only thing that kept her from balling her hands into fists and audibly growling was the fact that Detective Aaron Riddell had his arm wrapped around her waist and would likely notice the change in her demeanor.

“Which guy was this?” Jessie asked slowly, doing her best to sound like she was merely curious and not envisioning who she’d like to gut like a fish.

“Robbie Chandler,” he answered immediately. “He was one of the worst of them.”

“One of?” Jessie repeated.

“Yeah, he and Joel Cisco were the ringleaders as far as I could tell.”

“And you think that these guys made the same kinds of threats against other women who partied with them?” she wanted to know.

“Yeah, when I thought back on those mornings after the parties, a lot of the girls were really quiet. Not just like ‘hangover’ quiet. Like they were scared. They usually bolted off the boats the second we reached the dock. When I put it together, I thought about going to the cops.”

“But you didn’t,” Riddell said.

"No," Dawson said, his voice thick with guilt. "My big brave move was to decline the next time they asked me to bartend for them. I guess I must have had some attitude

when I said it because later that night, a few of them cornered me in the bathroom. That's when they threatened me. They said they better not hear about me spreading rumors about them. If there was a whiff of that, they'd sue me, get me fired. The same sorts of threats that girl said they made to her. They even hinted that they'd have me beaten up. I said I didn't know what they were talking about, that I just couldn't work overnight parties anymore because I was busy with a lot of morning auditions."

"Did that work?" Jessie asked.

"Not really," he said. "They started harassing me. They'd do little things like bump into me when I was at urinal to make a mess. But they'd also tell other club members that I was a bad bartender, that I'd short them on alcohol in the drinks I mixed. My car got keyed in the staff parking area. Eventually my boss told me that he was going to have to let me go, that there was too much bad word of mouth about me."

"Who was that?" Jessie asked.

"Oliver Stanton," he said.

Jessie looked at Riddell. It seemed that Mr. Stanton had been holding out on them. He'd never mentioned a word about the kind of pressure campaign the yacht bros engaged in.

"Anyway," Dawson continued, "after I got fired, I decided to grow a pair. I filed a harassment suit against them and a wrongful termination suit against the yacht club."

"How did that go?" Riddell asked.

"They both came back to me within 24 hours," he answered. "The club doubled my severance pay, and Stanton wrote a letter of reference saying that I was only let go because of budget cuts; that I was great employee. The yacht bros gave me a payout

of a \$100K, if I signed an NDA. It was more money than I'd ever had my hands on, so I signed it. Of course, it wasn't everything I thought it would be. My lawyer took a big cut. I had to pay taxes. And the money comes in installments over three years. When all is said and done, I'll see less than half of that total."

"Can I ask you something?" Jessie said, turning around to look at him. "After all that, why do you still work less than a mile from that club and those guys? Why not move?"

He stared at her like the question was ridiculous.

"I grew up here. I went to the local high school. I know just about everyone in this town. This is my home. Why should I leave?"

"Maybe for a fresh start?" she offered.

He shook his head.

"It hasn't been a problem until now. I've minded my business, and they've minded theirs. It's like that thing that enemy governments do when they don't want to go to war."

"You mean détente?" she suggested.

"Yeah, that," he said. "But the détente is over now."

"Why now?" Riddell asked.

"Because I can't sleep," he said. "I keep having nightmares about what those women went through. And I've been drinking too much—I think to block it all out. I've been wanting to come clean for a while now but didn't have the courage. I was scared of

those guys and of what might happen to my career if I spoke up. So when you came into the restaurant earlier, I thought ‘this is the universe giving me a second chance to set things right no matter what the consequences.’ That’s why I’m here.”

“All right,” Jessie said. “We’re going to need you to make a formal statement. Now that we have claims of potential crimes committed by these guys, maybe we can finally force them to come in and talk.”

“That would be nice,” Riddell agreed. “It’s be great to bust these guys while getting some clue as to who they think might be killing them.”

Dawson grunted at that.

“What?” Jessie said.

“I’m happy to help bring these guys down,” he answered. “But to be honest, I kind of hope you don’t catch whoever’s picking them off. These guys should be in jail. And if that can’t happen, dead is just as good.”

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Oliver Stanton wasn't happy to be here.

As he leaned against the deck railing of Robert Chandler's yacht, about a half mile off the coast, he asked himself for the umpteenth time how he'd gotten here. It was well after 9 P.M. Usually by this time of night he'd had dinner and was settling in with a good book, some tea, and his cat, Montecore.

But Chandler hadn't really given him much of a choice. He'd insisted on having a private conversation and claimed that the only place that he felt truly safe was on his yacht. Oliver found that ironic, considering that two of his friends had died on their boats in the last two nights.

"Those guys were idiots," he had countered before they set sail. "From that video you showed me, it's obvious that Daran got distracted by some girl posing as a bimbo. And if I know Taye—or knew him—he probably got suckered by the same trick. I'm not letting any skank onto my vessel, no matter how hot she is, until this case is solved."

Oliver didn't comment on the fact that Chandler didn't seem especially broken up over his buddies' deaths. That wouldn't have been well received. Nor did he mention the other reason he suspected that Chandler had brought him out here on the water. He knew Oliver couldn't swim.

By bringing him out into the middle of the Pacific Ocean, he was intentionally trying to make Oliver feel vulnerable and maybe worry just a little bit that he might be tossed overboard if he wasn't forthcoming. What Chandler didn't seem to get was that Oliver had no interest in keeping things from him.

The police hadn't asked him to do so, and there was no reason that the friend of two murdered club members couldn't reasonably ask about the status of the case. Of course, there was more to it than that, and they both knew it.

But neither of them spoke about that as Oliver relayed everything he knew about the investigation. When he was done, Chandler sat quietly, sipping a beer from the six-pack that he'd brought on board.

"Do you think these detectives are going to catch whoever this is?" he finally asked.

"I have no idea," Oliver admitted. "They don't update me on all their leads, but I know they've been frustrated by some dead ends. They definitely believe that whoever is doing this is connected to your...social circle. If it was just Detective Riddell pursuing the case, I'd be more skeptical that they could solve it. He's a neanderthal. But that Jessie Hunt is a sharp one. I can see why she's become a minor celebrity. She doesn't miss a thing."

What about that actor punk, Dawson?" Chandler wondered. "They should look into him. Maybe he got pissed that he got fired because of us."

"I don't think so," Oliver said confidently.

"How can you be so sure?"

"For one thing, that was nine months ago," he said. "If he was going to do this, wouldn't he have done it right after he was let go, when he was at his angriest? Secondly, Hunt and Riddell seem quite sure that this was the work of a female. I suppose it could be multiple people working together, but not him. I popped into the Upper Deck last night and he was there around the time that they think Mr. Boyce was killed. So that gives him an alibi."

"Well, who do you think it is then?" Chandler demanded, clearly frustrated.

The truth was that the way Chandler treated people, there were more potential suspects than Oliver could count, but just as he did with the investigators, he kept that opinion to himself.

"I just manage the club," he said, sounding as ineffectual as possible. "I wouldn't have the first clue. But what I do know is that I desperately have to use the head. Do you mind?"

Chandler scowled.

"Go ahead," he muttered, waving at the companionway with his beer bottle.

Oliver didn't need to be told twice. He rushed down, and after some fiddling with the door handle, just managed to make it in time. After he was done and had finished washing his hands, he reached for the door handle again and this time, yanked hard. Just as he did, he heard something up on deck. It sounded like perhaps a bottle had broken. He didn't think Chandler was that drunk but who knew with that man.

He exited the head and made his way up the stairs. As he reached the last step, he heard another sound that he couldn't place. It sounded like something between gasping and gurgling.

He reached the deck and looked around to ask Chandler what was up. The sight before him made his entire body freeze up. Robert Chandler was lying on his back on the deck of his yacht. His hands were desperately flailing at something jammed into his neck.

It took a moment for Oliver's brain to process that it appeared to be a broken beer bottle. Blood was spraying out of the open wound around the bottle, dousing the

boat's white sails in red. Within a matter of seconds, Chandler's hands went limp, flopping to the wooden deck. Around the same time, the spray of blood turned into something more like lava, slowly oozing out of the wound.

It was only then that Oliver noticed that there was someone else onboard. Standing a few feet away was a woman wearing a black wetsuit. Oliver knew he was looking at a female because of the form-fitting nature of the suit. Almost every part of her was covered, save for her hands and a small portion of her face.

Though he couldn't see her clearly in the moonlight, he noted that she was staring down at her victim with a blank expression. Then she turned to face him directly. Fear shot through him as he wondered if he was next.

The light from the cabin below lit her face and he could now see her clearly. Suddenly his fear combined with another unexpected emotion: confusion. He recognized the woman he was staring at. But what twisted his brain in knots was the fact that, as far as he knew, the woman looking back at him was dead.

She tilted her head at him curiously, then raised a single finger to her lips.

"Shh," she whispered quietly before smiling at him.

Then, without a word, the ghost turned and dove into the ocean.

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Jessie didn't love this place.

But after managing to avoid it up until now, she was finally in the local Sheriff's station. It only made sense to take Mark Dawson here to get his formal statement. So even though she felt out of her element, she didn't put up a fight when Riddell insisted they come here.

Dawson had just put the finishing touches on his statement. It was essentially the same as what he'd told them on the beach, just with more detail. There was one new addition, however—his alibi.

When they were at the beach, Dawson had told them that he'd be fine if the killer of the yacht club bros was never found. At that moment, he shined a light on his own potential as a suspect in the murders.

The idea had already occurred to her, but his words put it front and center. She didn't mention it at the time partly because she was nearly certain their killer was the female in the yacht club security video, but primarily because she didn't want to say anything that might make Dawson reconsider coming in and coming clean.

To her surprise, Riddell had managed to exercise some restraint as well and held off on immediately peppering the young man with questions about his whereabouts the last two nights. It turned out to be a good decision. After they'd addressed everything else with Dawson, Jessie broached the subject as casually as possible.

"Last night I was working my shift at the restaurant until 11 p.m.," he said in answer to the question, happy to offer proof that he wasn't their killer. "The night before that,

I was at a bar with some friends, watching the L.A. Kings hockey game. I got home after midnight."

Both alibis were easily verifiable, and Dawson quickly began sharing the contact information for the folks who could do so. He was a few minutes into it when a Sheriff's deputy poked her head in.

"Ms. Hunt," she said quietly, "you have a call from your captain. She says she's been trying to reach you. It sounds urgent."

"Can you finish this up while I take that call?" Jessie asked Riddell.

He nodded, and she stepped out. She'd put her phone on silent so as not to distract Dawson from his description of events. Captain Parker must have called then. The deputy led her to the phone, and Jessie picked up.

"Hi, Captain," she said. "What's wrong?"

"Hunt," Parker replied. "I heard through the grapevine that you have a suspect in custody. Is that correct?"

"No," Jessie said, startled at the suggestion. "I don't know where you got that, but it's not accurate."

"A friend of mine at that station told me that you've had a man in interrogation for nearly an hour," Parker said.

"That's true," Jessie said, "but he's not a suspect. In fact, he just provided us with his alibi for both nights. He actually gave us information that widens the pool of potential suspects. Apparently, these victims and their friends aren't just individually awful. They have an alleged history of possibly drugging and assaulting multiple women at

parties on their boats."

"That's not great news, Hunt," Parker said, sounding deflated. "I don't know how closely you've been paying attention to the media of late."

"Not at all in the last few hours," Jessie conceded.

"Well the press recently made the connection between our two victims—that they're both members of this yacht club. The late local news has started reporting on it. There are vans from several stations camped out there now. This thing is about to turn into a circus."

"I hadn't heard any of that," Jessie said.

"Well, in light of what you just told me, as unpleasant as it may be, I think it's time we put the remaining members of this boys' club under police protection, don't you?"

"I do," Jessie agreed. "But I'm hoping we can do more than that. Now that we have allegations of possible criminal activity on their part, I think that we can insist that they come in for interviews. If they refuse, we have grounds to arrest them. I know that might ruffle some feathers, but I think we're past worrying about that at this point. Then they're safe in police custody, and maybe we can finally get some answers."

"You want to arrest the potential targets of a serial killer?" Parker said, sounding equal parts troubled and intrigued.

"Yes, Captain," Jessie said. "It's for their own good, after all. And if we turn the screws on them a little about these claims of impropriety, maybe they'll provide the names of women who might want to come after them."

“But that would mean implicating themselves in crimes,” Parker countered. “Do you really think they would do that, no matter how scared they are?”

“Probably not,” Jessie conceded, “especially with their attorneys there too. But maybe there’s a middle ground. They could still assert that all these encounters were consensual while giving the names of women who might have ‘misinterpreted’ the encounters. We could frame it that way to get their buy-in. Then hopefully, once we catch this person, we can circle back around and see about charging these guys with what has been alleged.”

Parker was quiet for a moment.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll read in Chief Decker, and he’ll get the Sheriff on board. But as distasteful as it is, right now I want to you to keep your eye on the prize: catching a murderer before they take out another victim. That’s why we have to get these guys off the street ASAP. The last thing we need is one of them to get killed when it was preventable.”

“I understand, Captain,” Jessie said. “And maybe now that we have a witness, we’ll have more luck.”

“From your lips,” Parker said.

“Right, Jessie agreed. “And please let me know as soon as we can start sending out those arrest warrants. The sooner that happens, the sooner we can keep these guys safe and finally start to get our arms around who might be behind this.”

“I’ll keep you posted,” Parker said, then hung up without another word.

Jessie turned around to find Riddell walking her way.

“I had a deputy take over getting the contact names for Dawson’s alibi,” he said. “I figured that whatever was going on out here would be more interesting.”

Jessie wasn’t sure where to start. Should she tell him about the media frenzy that was already starting to occur? About Captain Parker’s insistence that they put the yacht club bros under protection? Or about her plan to kill two birds with one stone by arresting the men to keep them safe while interrogating them about the misdeeds that may have led to someone hunting them down? Before she picked any option, a deputy called out to Riddell from a nearby desk.

“A call just came in,” he said. “Some guy on a yacht in the bay said he just saw someone kill another guy.”

Jessie and Riddell exchanged looks. Even without having the details, she knew he was thinking the same thing as her. They were too late. Another yacht club bro had been murdered.

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By the time Jessie and Riddell arrived at the club, the yacht was just pulling in.

Jessie mentally reviewed what she knew so far. They'd learned a little on the short drive over, but it was enough to get the basics. Robert Chandler had been murdered on his yacht. Oliver Stanton was the man who'd called it in. Apparently, he didn't know how to pilot the vessel or swim, so the Coast Guard had been called in to help. That was all anyone knew so far.

Jessie used the rest of the drive to fill Riddell in on the plan that she'd proposed to Parker. She thought he might object to her making a command decision without his input, especially one that could impact his relationships in the tight-knit beach community where he worked. But to his credit, the detective seemed onboard, even enthused about it.

"I'm tired of getting the run-around," he said. "If this is what gets these punks into the station to finally answer some questions, I'm all for it."

Jessie silently shook her head at the contradiction of a man sitting beside her. She found Aaron Riddell to be generally objectionable. But she did admire one thing about him: he didn't back down from a fight, even against the rich and powerful. He was about to pull into the club parking lot when Jessie remembered the news vans that Parker had mentioned.

"Park on the street," she said quickly. "We don't want to get swarmed by the media when we arrive."

"Are you serious?" he said. "They care about the murders, not the people

investigating them.”

It was all Jessie could do not to offer a sarcastic comeback. Riddell might never have been accosted by a reporter at a crime scene, but that was a typical day for her.

“I don’t want to sound arrogant here,” she said diplomatically, “but when they find out I’m involved, they’ll care. I’ve had so many high-profile cases in the last few years that when they see me, it’s like ratings catnip for them. They know the case is a big deal. There will be a feeding frenzy of coverage. The less we play into that, the better chance we have of solving this thing.”

“Okay,” Riddell said with a shrug as he parked down the block from the club. He was clearly still skeptical.

“And if you have a baseball cap, put it on when we walk over,” she recommended. “You don’t want them recognizing you.”

“What about you?” he asked.

“I always come prepared,” she said, holding up the small backpack she’d brought with her for just such occasions. It had a cap and a windbreaker with a hoodie.

They got out and walked past the vans lining the street, then took the long way around to avoid the entrance to the club, where a phalanx of reporters and camera crews were set up. An officer near the access gate to the dock stiffened up as they approached until Riddell pulled up the brim of his cap. The officer clearly knew him and opened the gate without a fuss.

They reached the slip for Chandler’s boat, Wave Warrior, just as it was being tied off. They boarded it and showed their IDs to one of the Coast Guard officers who’d brought it in.

“Has Stanton said anything?” Riddell asked.

“Not much,” the officer replied. “And what he has said doesn’t make much sense. We think he either did this or is in shock.”

“What do you mean, it doesn’t make sense?” Riddell pressed.

“He says a ghost killed the victim before jumping into the water.”

Jessie hadn't been expecting that one, and from Riddell's expression, neither had he.

“Where is he now?” she asked.

“He’s down below,” the officer said. “We cuffed him to a table as a precaution. Do you want to see him?”

“In a moment,” Jessie said. “Let’s take a look at the victim beforehand.”

The officer pointed at the cockpit.

“He’s on the other side of that,” he said. “We left him just as we found him.”

“Good,” Riddell said. “And let’s keep it that way until CSU and the medical examiner arrive.”

They walked over to get a better view. As they did, Jessie noted a trail of blood, which had pooled in a small indentation in the deck. They followed it to where Robert Chandler lay. His black hair was clumpy with blood, as if he’d rubbed tons of gel into it and forgot to use a brush afterward. His face looked like someone had spraypainted it with the red stuff. His brown eyes were frozen wide with shock.

Jessie tried to generate some empathy for the man but found it difficult. Based on what she knew about him, it sounded like the world might be better without him in it. She tried to shake that thought from her head, remembering that Chandler was technically the victim here.

A half-empty beer bottle rested on its side near his feet. He was on his back with bloodied hands at his sides. Jessie gathered they were that way because he'd tried to grab the bottom of the jagged, blood-slicked beer bottle that was currently jammed in his neck.

She moved closer and saw that the top third of the bottle was missing, likely a result of being smashed on one of the boat's hard surfaces. Her suspicion was reinforced by the sight of pieces of glass just a few feet from his head. On the deck nearby was a cardboard six-pack carrier with four untouched bottles still in it.

"Do you think there's any chance that Stanton did this?" Riddell asked quietly.

"I'd be stunned," Jessie replied. "This murder doesn't feel like a one-off to me. We should be safe and have CSU check him out to see if he has any blood splatter residue on him. There's no way that whoever did this didn't get covered in blood. And we can double-check his alibis for the previous nights, but that parking lot security footage with Daran Peterson and the blonde was pretty definitive to me. That was a woman carefully trying to hide her identity hours before the man she was with was found dead. But that doesn't mean we have to let Stanton in on that. Shall we go have a word with him?"

"Nothing would make me happier," Riddell said.

They took the stairs down to the cabin, where they found Oliver Stanton seated on a cushioned bench. His right wrist was cuffed to a leg of a table bolted to the floor.

“Thank god,” he exclaimed when he saw them. “I’ve been trying to get these gentlemen to listen to me, but they’re uninterested.”

“You were found on a boat with a dead body,” Riddell said unsympathetically. “Can you blame them?”

“I told them what happened,” he insisted, “but they didn’t believe me.”

“That a ghost killed Chandler?” Riddell scoffed. “That’s the best you can do?”

It was one thing not to let Stanton know they didn’t view him as a suspect, but it was a far different one to alienate him as a potential witness. And to Jessie, it felt like Riddell was veering in that direction. She was about to try to change the dynamic, but Stanton beat her to the punch.

“Well, Detective,” he said huffily, “with that kind of attitude, I can tell that you’re not interested in the truth either. So for my own protection, I don’t think I’ll be saying anything else at this time.”

Then he dramatically turned his head away from them. Riddell, a grimace on his face, started to step forward when Jessie held up her hand with a “stop” signal. He looked at her, annoyed. She motioned for him to follow her back up the steps. Reluctantly, he did. Once up top again, she spoke to him in a whisper.

“This guy is about half a second from demanding a lawyer,” she said. “Neither of us believes he did this. And I know that scaring the truth out of him feels like a no-brainer. But maybe let me try a different tack first.”

“Okay,” he said. “You take the first go at him and I’ll ease in after that.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I think the well is poisoned for you. Let me talk to

him alone. I'll record the whole thing so you won't miss out. But we can't afford to wait several hours while we get permission from his lawyer to talk to him. We need info now and—sorry to be harsh—the way that went, you're not getting it from him. Let me try solo and see what happens."

Riddell was clearly torn. This was his case too and the idea of handing over questioning of a potential witness to some chick who wasn't even a detective obviously wasn't sitting well with him. But he wasn't an idiot. He had to know that what she said was true. He'd pushed too hard, too fast. Stanton wasn't going to open up to him.

"Fine," he muttered, "but make sure you record every word."

"I promise," she said.

Then she headed back down the stairs, hoping they hadn't already blown their best chance to find a killer.

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“I need you to look at me, Mr. Stanton,” she said.

She was sitting at small end of the “L” shaped cushioned bench that wrapped around the table the man was cuffed to. Her phone, resting on the table between them, was recording.

“Why should I?” he demanded poutily, still pointedly looking away from her.

“Because we’re trying to solve a series of murders, and it sounds like you might have been a witness to one of them,” she said simply.

“How do I know you’re not going to mock me like your partner did? Or worse, accuse me of being involved? Maybe I should invoke my right to counsel.”

"You could do that," she said, hoping the desperation she felt wasn't leaking into her voice. "But you should consider all the consequences of that decision. It might make us view you as something more suspicious than just a witness. And if a witness is all you are, why would you want to create that misimpression with the people investigating this case? Do you want us to view you as a person of interest, Mr. Stanton? I know that I don't want that."

“That sounds like a threat, Ms. Hunt,” he said, finally turning to look at her.

“It’s not,” she said. “I’m just telling you how this typically works. I don’t like it, but it’s the reality. Plus, you requesting a lawyer has other drawbacks.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m just going to be straight with you, Oliver,” she said, invoking his first name for the first time. “This is three murders in three nights. Nobody is safe right now. And if you get an attorney, we can’t talk to you, at least not until a whole bunch of legal wrangling takes place. That’s valuable time we lose when we could be hunting for this killer. You could be inadvertently helping them. Now, of course, it’s your right to have an attorney. If you want one, I’ll call Detective Riddell down here right now. He’ll read you your rights, and you can invoke your right to counsel right after. But if you didn’t kill Robert Chandler—and I don’t think you did—then your best bet is to come clean. Tell me what you saw. It could save lives.”

His body, which had been stiff as a board when she started, had gradually softened as she spoke. By the end, his shoulders had slumped in resignation.

"I want to, but I'm afraid," he said.

“Why?”

“Because I’m ashamed,” he muttered.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“What I have to tell you will paint me in a terrible light,” he said quietly. “I’m worried that it might actually put me in legal jeopardy. Can you assure me that isn’t a concern?”

“Oliver, I’m so anxious to solve this case that I’d love to make that assurance,” she said, “but that wouldn’t be true. If you committed a crime, you might be at legal risk, depending on the nature of it.”

“Then how can you possibly expect me to be forthcoming?” he pleaded.

“Because there are two things I can assure you of,” she said gravely. “The first is that if you provide information that leads to the capture of whoever’s doing this, it could go a long way to mitigating any punishment you might face for potential crimes. You might even get immunity if your help was significant enough.”

“You think that’s likely?” he asked hopefully.

“I think it’s possible,” she clarified. “But there’s another side to that coin. If you clam up and there’s another murder, one that your information could have prevented, then you could be viewed as an accessory to that murder. My bosses want this case solved, and if they can’t catch the person responsible, you better believe some of the blame is going to land at the feet of the person who let it happen when they could have stopped it. My recommendation is to just tell the truth and trust that the system will take note of that.”

“But I don’t trust the system,” he said flatly.

Jessie sighed. It might be time to bring in Riddell. She doubted that his heavy-handed tactics would work any better than hers, but she was out of options.

“But,” Stanton added, “I do trust you , Ms. Hunt. And I believe that if you know I acted in good faith, you wouldn’t let them throw me to the wolves. So I’ll put my trust in you and tell you what I know.”

“Thank you,” she said.

He began by explaining what he’d seen tonight, how he’d gone below deck to go to the bathroom, only to hear strange noises and go back up top, where he found Chandler near death, with the bottle jammed in his throat.

“And then you saw what you say was a—ghost commit the murder?” she said

carefully.

“I didn’t actually see the stabbing,” he corrected. “Only the aftermath. The ghost was a woman. She was wearing a wetsuit. When she saw me, she looked straight at me, put her finger to her lips to shush me, and smiled at me. Then she dived into the water.”

“Did you recognize her?” she asked, not commenting on the oddity of a ghost in a wetsuit.

His face scrunched up in anguish.

“I will answer that, but you have to let me get there in my own time.”

She fought down the urge to tell him they didn’t have time.

“Okay, Oliver, I understand” she replied, forcing a sympathetic smile to her face, before adding, “while we’re at it, I’d also love to know why you were on Chandler’s yacht in the first place.”

“I can explain that too,” he assured her. “It’s all part of the same story.”

“Please go ahead,” she said, doing her best not to look at her phone to check the time.

He closed his eyes as if the memory of what he was about to say was too painful to share while being watched. Then he launched in.

"Three years ago, these members, casually referred to as the yacht club bros by others, were partying at the club bar. It was a Monday night, and there was almost no one else there. Our normal bartender had the night off, so I was working the bar. The bros had a young woman with them, a very attractive brunette, probably in her early

twenties if I had to guess. I didn't get her name. She was a little tipsy when the evening started. But by the time the bar closed a few hours later, she was decidedly drunk. Everyone else, save for me, was long gone. The group decided to take the party onto one of their boats. So the whole bunch of them—all six—left with this young woman.”

“Whose boat did they take?” Jessie asked.

“Mr. Cisco’s,” he answered, “Joel Cisco.”

“Okay, sorry, go on,” she said.

“My apartment complex was being tented for termites at the time, so rather than get a hotel for those three nights, I had decided to just crash in my office to save some money. The couch in there pulls out into a bed. Around three in the morning, I heard some voices. I left my office and saw the members. They had returned and were shuffling by the front of the club toward their cars. They all looked very somber. I noticed that the young woman wasn’t with them.”

At that last comment, Jessie felt a shiver run through her body. She could see where this story was headed, and she didn’t like it. But she kept quiet, not wanting to say anything to stop Stanton from continuing.

“I didn’t think a ton about it,” he went on. “But a few nights later they were back in the bar, this time with a couple of different women. I ran into Mr. Chandler and Mr. Cisco in the restroom and casually asked if the young woman from the other evening would also be joining them tonight. Their reaction was severe.”

He stopped for a moment as if girding himself to say what he knew had to come next. After a few seconds, he resumed.

“Mr. Chandler slammed me up against the restroom wall without warning, pinning me there,” he said with a wince of recollection. “While I was trapped, Mr. Cisco leaned in close to me. He said there hadn’t been any woman there the other night and if I ever said anything different, they’d hire someone to, and this is a direct quote, ‘cut me open and choke me to death with my own intestines.’ Needless to say, I kept my mouth shut.”

“Why didn’t you leave the job after a threat like that?” Jessie asked.

He shook his head as if shocked that she didn’t understand.

“For one, I hadn’t heard anything about this girl on the news, and believe me, I’d been paying attention. So I assumed that whatever happened couldn’t have been that bad,” he said. “I tried to tell myself that these members just lost their heads for a minute and overreacted.”

She thought he might attempt to leave it there, but then he continued in a quieter voice.

“But that was just self-delusion,” he admitted. “The truth is that I worried that they would see me leaving as a sign that I couldn’t be trusted and that they might do something to me. And while I’m not proud of it, there was another reason.”

He stopped talking again. Jessie said nothing, allowing him the space to build up his courage.

“After that incident in the restroom,” he finally said, “all six of them regularly overtipped me. It was lavish. Every time one of them left the club, he’d slip me a hundred dollars, sometimes two. On the Christmas after it happened, my collective holiday tip from the six of them was \$6000. They basically paid me off not to ask questions. And since I didn’t officially know about any wrongdoing, I took the

money and kept quiet.”

“And it stayed like that for three years?” Jessie said.

"Yes, until this week," he said. "Then Mr. Peterson was killed, followed by Mr. Boyce. That's why I was on this yacht. Mr. Chandler was suspicious and demanded I come out here and tell him everything about your investigation. I did, of course. It's not like I had any special information. But the subtext was clear. I was sure that he wanted to know if their deaths had anything to do with that night. And I'm positive that he was about to ask me that directly just before he died."

“Which brings us to the ghost,” Jessie said.

“Yes,” he said, casting his eyes down at the table in front of him.

“Who was she, Oliver?” she asked, though she already had a strong suspicion.

He looked up.

“I only saw her face for a few seconds,” he whispered, “but I swear it was her—the girl from that night. The way those men reacted when I brought her up, I just assumed she was dead, that they had done something to her and tossed her body overboard. But she looked right at me, and I'm positive it was the same girl. On my honor, Ms. Hunt. The ghost of that young woman killed Robert Chandler."

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Jessie didn't believe the ghost theory for a second.

But she didn't tell Oliver Stanton that. She let him think she might be open to the idea for the rest of the interview and while she and Riddell drove him to the Sheriff's station. They put him in the same interrogation room where they'd spoken to Mark Dawson and had him write out the statement he'd given her verbally earlier.

When he was done a half hour later, they asked him to stick around so they could keep him safe and told him they wanted to have him give a description of the woman he'd seen to a sketch artist. After they left the room, Jessie checked her phone and found that she had three texts from Ryan, all asking her to call him back as soon as she could. She motioned for Riddell to join her in a conference room and returned the call.

"You're on speaker with me and Detective Riddell," she said the second Ryan picked up. She didn't want a repeat of the earlier call when her husband had talked smack about her current partner when he was listening. "What's up?"

"First off, Captain Parker wanted me to update you on the status of getting these club members to come in," he said, skipping any spouse pleasantries that he would have likely offered if Riddell wasn't on the line.

"What's the situation?" Riddell interjected.

"Parker got authorization from both Chief Decker and Sheriff Hauser to pursue your plan to bring these guys in," Ryan answered. "She directly made the requests to all of their lawyers, asking them to come in for their own protection. While I wasn't on the

call, my understanding is that while these were technically requests, it was made clear that if their clients didn't show up quickly and voluntarily, they were at risk being taken into custody in connection with an 'ongoing investigation.'"

"That's actually pretty good," Riddell said, impressed.

"I thought so, too," Ryan agreed.

Jessie noted that her husband, who had a rocky relationship with Captain Parker, sounded sincere.

"And how did they react?" she asked.

"The last I heard, the attorneys for both Archie Crittendon and Jackson Dwyer were negotiating the time and place for their surrender—excuse me—'accepting protection.' Joel Cisco's lawyer said he couldn't get hold of him but would keep trying. We don't yet know if that's legitimate or just a stalling tactic."

"Why do you suspect he's stalling?" Jessie asked.

"Because according to Jamil and Beth, the guy is being investigated for financial improprieties in relation to his work. He's a financial advisor to some big time billionaires and there have been allegations that he siphoned some of their money for his personal use."

"Did Parker explain that this isn't about that?" Jessie wanted to know.

"She said that she made it clear to Cisco's lawyer what this was about and the danger he might be in, so I'm inclined to think the lawyer is being straight about not being able to reach him, but who knows for sure. He said he'd call back once he'd made contact with Cisco."

“So it’s a waiting game then,” Riddell said unhappily.

“Not necessarily,” Jessie countered. “Are Jamil and Beth there with you, Ryan?”

“Yeah, I’ll put them on speaker,” he said, then continued a moment later, “Okay, go ahead.”

“Hey guys,” she said. “I know you’ve got your hands full, but we need your help.”

“Whatever we can do,” Beth replied enthusiastically.

Jessie gave them a rundown of Oliver Stanton’s statement before explaining what she wanted.

“He gave me the date of this yacht party outing. It was on March 9th, three years ago,” she said. “I need you to look into missing persons in this area starting from that date. A sketch is being done now, but we believe this was a brunette female in her early to mid-twenties. If we can lock down her identity, maybe we can locate her now, assuming it really is the same woman.”

“We’re on it,” Jamil said, though without his usual verve.

“What’s wrong?” Jessie asked.

He paused a moment before replying.

“Of course we’ll pursue this, Ms. Hunt,” Jamil told her, still constitutionally incapable of calling her by her first name, no matter how many times she’d reminded him.

“But?” she prodded.

“But I’m just wondering about the likelihood of a woman being harmed and thrown overboard, seemingly left for dead, then managing to get back to shore and stay off the radar for the next three years, all so she could engage in an elaborate revenge scheme. It just seems so involved.”

“I agree that it would be a lot,” Jessie conceded. “But frankly, I’ve encountered wilder scenarios. And right now, it’s our best lead. So let’s see where it takes us.”

For much of the night, it didn’t take them anywhere.

Despite the skill of the HSS research unit, and even with the sketch provided by Oliver Stanton, they had hit a wall. They’d looked out a full three months after the night of the party and couldn’t find any record in the South Bay region of a woman going missing who met Stanton’s description. They’d now expanded the search to the entire Westside of Los Angeles for that time period.

In the intervening hours, word came that both Archie Crittendon and Jackson Dwyer had presented themselves to authorities. But conveniently for them, they’d both done so at far-flung stations. Crittendon had gone to Oxnard and Dwyer to West Covina, each of which were over an hour’s drive away, even though both men lived in the South Bay.

It was a transparent attempt to secure police protection while avoiding questioning from the case investigators for as long as possible. And it was working. Jessie and Riddell couldn’t afford to travel that far when their murderer was likely nearby. And they weren’t going to ask detectives unfamiliar with the case to question the men.

“Maybe we question them over video conference?” Riddell suggested.

“I don’t think that will be very effective,” Jessie said. “These guys are going to keep quiet as long as they can, and it will be hard to put pressure on them from a distance.”

“Even if their lives might be in danger?” Riddell countered.

“Even then,” Jessie said. “First of all, they aren’t in imminent danger now that they’re in custody. And they don’t have any reason yet to talk about what happened that night. There’s no evidence of a crime on their part. For now, their lawyers will surely tell them to play the waiting game.”

“That’s a risk,” Riddell noted.

“Yes,” Jessie agreed, “but it’s a calculated one.”

Meanwhile, there was still radio silence on Joel Cisco. Riddell had sent a unit to search Cisco’s boat, but they came up empty. It was unoccupied. He told them to stay in the yacht club parking lot in case the man showed up.

There were additional units positioned outside Cisco’s home and his office, though there was no sign of his car at either. Captain Parker had authorized Jamil to get approval to access the GPS location data for both his phone and vehicle, but the authorization hadn’t come through yet.

“I say we have the officers parked outside Cisco’s house knock on the door and talk to his wife,” Riddell suggested grumpily over the conference call line.

“It’s 4:15 in the morning,” Beth reminded him over speakerphone. “Are we sure we want to do something that dramatic?”

Jessie thought about for a moment and decided that they did.

“I think Riddell is right on this one,” she said. “At this point, with Crittendon and Dwyer in custody, Joel Cisco is the default next potential victim. And right now, we don't yet have access to his GPS data. By the time we get it, it could be too late. We can't err on the side of caution any longer.”

“What does that mean exactly?” Beth asked.

“Let's have the officers knock on their front door,” Jessie said. “Maybe Cisco has been home all night and we didn't know it because his car is in the shop. If not, we ask his wife where he is. If she doesn't know, maybe she has “Find My” on her phone and we can track him that way. But we need to start getting aggressive here. Cisco could be in danger as we speak.”

“I'll have them approach the house now,” Riddell said.

“In the meantime,” said Jamil, who had been quiet during this entire conversation, “I think I may have just found your ghost victim.”

“Who?” Jessie and Riddell demanded in unison.

“Her name is Heather Silver,” Jamil told them. “Her photos match the sketch that Stanton provided. She is—or would be—27 now, but she'd have been 24 at the time of the yacht party.”

“Why are we only hearing about her now?” Riddell demanded gruffly.

“Because she wasn't reported missing within the three month window after the yacht party occurred,” Jamil explained. “To be honest, looking that far out felt like a stretch as it was. Who would wait three months to report a missing person? Turns out there was a good reason for it.”

“What?” Jessie asked.

“Heather Silver was reported missing by her younger sister, Monica, three and a half months after that night,” Jamil said. “According to Monica’s statement, she was doing field research in the Amazon rain forest for her degree in Applied Biological Sciences and had minimal phone and internet access.”

“They didn’t keep in touch at all?” Jessie pressed.

“Monica said spoke to her sister just before she went into the field,” Jamil said. “Heather was moving to L.A. the following week from Baltimore. Apparently, Monica e-mailed her several times and tried to call her twice but never got a reply. She chalked it up to connection issues or Heather just being too caught up in her new life to spare a minute.”

“So that would have Heather moving to L.A. only two weeks before the yacht party,” Beth calculated. “It might explain why no friends reported her missing. She might not have had any yet.”

“Who knows where she was living either?” Ryan added. “Maybe she was staying at a cheap motel or crashing in a hostel until she found an apartment. Then there’d be no landlord to demand rent payment and report her if they didn’t get it.”

“That’s probably right,” Jamil confirmed. “I can’t find any record of a Heather Silver in any county database. She isn’t listed with the DMV, probably because people don’t have to get a California license or plates until they establish residency. She was just too new to town to put down any roots yet.”

“Which would also make her very appealing to a group of guys looking to take advantage,” Jessie noted. “A girl new to town, without a support system, just trying to find her way. Then she meets up with a bunch of rich yacht club guys who want to

show her a good time. She was ripe for the picking.”

“But I still don’t get how her disappearance wasn’t reported until her sister came back to the country,” Riddell said. “Didn’t she have any friends or family back in Baltimore who got concerned when they couldn’t reach her?”

“The officer who took Monica’s statement back then asked the same question,” Jamil said. “According to her, they didn’t have any living family. Their dad split when they were little, and their mom died in a car accident when they were teenagers. They were put in the system, bouncing around foster care, until they were eighteen.”

“And friends?” Jessie asked, feeling an ache of empathy grow in her chest.

“None of note,” Jamil said. “According to Monica, Heather struggled with addiction and checked in and out of multiple rehab facilities. She never developed any strong, long-term personal relationships. She was supposedly trying to change that by making a new start out here.”

“Not the best place for a new beginning if you don’t have your head on straight,” Riddell muttered.

Jessie noted that the comment, while harsh, was true. L.A. could crush the dreams of the most self-assured person. A young, friendless, parentless person with no support system and a history of drug abuse was a sitting duck for the predators out here.

“Did they do any investigation?” she asked, though she knew the answer.

"According to the officer who filed the report," Jamil said, his usually detached voice betraying a hint of emotion, "he told her that without anyone to interview out here or any indication of foul play, there was nothing they could do. He took a photo that Monica gave him for the file but closed the case less than 48 hours later. His notes

suggest that she likely left town or that she possibly overdosed, theorizing that perhaps the folks with her when she OD'd dumped the body to avoid questions. But he apparently didn't base those conclusions on actual evidence or ever share them with Monica."

Jessie was quiet for a moment before saying aloud what she suspected was in all their heads.

"One has to wonder if maybe Monica Silver wasn't satisfied with the answers she got and started poking around on her own. Maybe she unearthed some of the same secrets we've recently discovered."

"Where is Silver living now?" Riddell asked, nodding in agreement with her theory.

"It looks like she established residency here just weeks after reporting her sister's disappearance. She was working on her master's in Environmental Science at Loyola Marymount University just up the coast about ten miles from where you are now. She moved around for a while but for the last year she's lived in a condo in Hermosa Beach. I'm sending you the address, as well as her DMV photo and the picture of her sister from her case file."

As Jessie waited for the messages to arrive, she noted an anticipatory tingle in her gut. Something about Monica moving here only weeks after her sister went missing felt crucial to everything that was going on. She sensed that they were on the verge of something big.

Jessie's phone pinged, and she quickly opened the attachments in Jamil's texts. She had to blink when she stared at the photos of the two women.

"You said that Monica is the younger sister?" she double-checked.

“Yes,” Jamil assured her, “by three years.”

“They look like they could be twins,” Riddell marveled.

“That might explain the ghost that Oliver Stanton saw,” Jessie said quietly, before squinting at some numbers scrawled below the photo of Heather from the case file. “What are those numbers under Heather’s photo? I can’t read them.”

"It looks like a date," Beth said. "It's a little hard to read, but I think it says 4/25/99 . I assume it was her birthdate.”

“It was,” Jamil confirmed.

A shot of adrenaline shot through Jessie’s body as the truth fell into place for her.

“April 25th isn’t just Heather’s birthdate,” she said, barely able to get the words out fast enough. “It’s also her birthday. And the first victim, Daran Peterson, was killed four days ago, on April 25 th .”

Over the phone, she heard Beth gasp.

“I can’t believe I didn’t pick that up right away,” Jamil muttered.

“She’s been living here for years,” Jessie told them all, “setting everything up in order to start delivering payback on her sister’s birthday. She’s way ahead of us.”

The rest of the group was quiet for a while. It was Riddell who managed to find his voice first.

"Well, maybe we can catch up," he said. "Her place is close."

“Let’s go say hi,” Jessie told him.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:48 am

It only took six minutes to get from the station to Monica Silver's Hermosa Beach condo.

Still, Jessie could barely contain herself as her legs bounced up and down in the passenger seat of Riddell's car. When they pulled up on the street in front of the place, it was 4:30 and the sky was still dark.

The complex, about a half mile inland from the beach, was modest but well-maintained. They entered the vestibule and used the Knox Box to let themselves in. The building was only two stories tall, but Jessie took the elevator and Riddell the stairs so they wouldn't miss her if she saw them and tried to slip by.

When the elevator doors opened, Jessie found Riddell waiting for her. They walked down to Silver's unit at the end of the hall. It was facing away from the street, meaning the woman wouldn't have seen them pull up. That was good news. At least they had the element of surprise.

"Are we announcing ourselves?" Jessie whispered.

"Briefly, before I kick open the door," Riddell said. "I'm not taking any chances with a three-time murderer."

Jessie couldn't argue with his logic. They both unholstered their weapons. Riddell counted down from three with his leg cocked, ready to kick.

"Monica Silver, this is the Los Angeles Sheriff's department," he barked. "We're coming in. Put your hands above your head."

The words had barely left his mouth before he smashed the door open. The lights were off. Riddell rolled into the unit, going one direction. Jessie followed suit, going the other way. They both crouched low, listening for any movement or words, but there was only silence.

Using the light from the hallway, Riddell indicated for Jessie to check the kitchen nook off to the left while he approached the open bedroom door. She scurried around the corner, then popped up and leapt to the right as she scanned the kitchen. It was empty.

Riddell was at the bedroom door. He reached out and flicked on the light before diving in. Jessie started to follow but noticed that the bathroom door was closed. She sidled over to it and waited for word from Riddell. It came a few seconds later.

“Clear,” he said.

Hearing that, she kicked in the bathroom door. It shot open without resistance. She dropped to her knees and peeked in. There was no one there. Then she heard a sound from the hall and spun to her left, aiming her gun at a silhouetted figure in the doorway. Her finger was just starting to squeeze the trigger when she noted that the figure was heavysset and seemingly bald, a far cry from Monica Silver.

“What the hell?” the man demanded.

“Put your hands above your head,” she ordered. “This is the LAPD and Sheriff’s department.”

The man’s hands immediately shot in the air.

“Lie down on your stomach,” Riddell instructed. He was now standing in the bedroom doorway, his weapon also trained on the man. The chunky fellow obeyed

immediately, and Riddell hurried over to search him. While he did that, Jessie moved to the bedroom and looked in.

The bed was made, and the room was generally tidy. There was no obvious visual indication of the kind of chaos in Monica's life that had marked her sister's. Jessie wandered over to the sliding closet door that was off its track, likely a result of Riddell slamming it open. At the far end, on the built-in shelf, she noticed something that the detective must have missed in his haste.

Four mannequin heads rested on the shelf next to each other. They each had wigs on them. One was blonde. Another dark black. A third was a lighter brown. The fourth was uncovered. Jessie moved over to that side of the closet to get a closer look.

The blonde wig generally matched her memory of the hair length of the bikini-clad woman in the security footage with Daran Peterson. The uncovered head had one word scrawled in red marker at the base: red. She turned and left the bedroom.

"The guy is just a neighbor," said Riddell, who now had the man sitting on the floor against the hallway wall. "I was about to question him about Silver."

"Okay," Jessie said. "But we may have a more pressing concern."

"What?"

"There are a bunch of wigs in her closet," she explained, "and at least one of them looks like what she was wearing with Peterson. But the bigger issue is that there's one missing. I think it's for a redhead. She might already be out there hunting down Cisco."

Before Riddell could reply, his phone rang.

“It’s the deputy watching Joel Cisco’s house,” he said, picking up. “What’s going on?”

“We’re at the front door,” the deputy said, “Mrs. Cisco replied to us, but has refused to open the door. We’ve been here for ten minutes, but she’s not budging. She says she may have to call a lawyer.”

They didn’t have time for this, and Jessie had lost her patience.

“Can you make this a video call?” Jessie asked as she walked over.

“Yes, ma’am,” the deputy said and did so. He appeared on the screen.

“Turn your phone around and hold your screen up to the peephole,” she instructed, motioning for Riddell to point his phone at her. “Then tell Mrs. Cisco to look through the hole.”

The deputy did as he was told. A moment later, Jessie could hear a female voice speak.

“I said I don’t want to talk.”

“Then just listen,” Jessie said loudly. “Mrs. Cisco, my name is Jessie Hunt. I’m a criminal profiler with the LAPD. I’m working with the Sheriff’s Department on a case. My guess is that you’re concerned that all this has something to do with allegations about your husband’s work as a financial advisor. But I want to assure that it doesn’t. This is about his safety.”

“What does that mean?” Cisco asked from behind the door. This was no way to conduct an interview.

“I’ll explain,” she answered, “but first, like I said, my name is Jessie. What’s your first name?”

“Lana,” the woman answered reluctantly, “what did you mean about Joel’s safety?”

"Lana, I need you to open the door so we can talk for real," she said. "I promise that no one is going to barge into your home. I just want to do this face-to-face."

She heard a lock click and the door opened to reveal a petite, attractive woman with brown hair. She was wearing a robe over pajamas.

“Thank you, Lana,” she said before deciding to be as direct as she could, within reason. “Have you heard about the recent murders at the yacht club?”

“Yes,” she said. “I saw something about two members being killed on the news.”

“Well, it’s now up to three,” Jessie informed her. “I don’t know if Joel told you this, but they were all friends of his. And we’re concerned that he may be the next target. In fact, we’re nearly certain of it.”

“Why?” Lana asked, her face scrunched up in concern.

"We don't really have time to go into it right now," Jessie said. "But we need your help to find him. I assume he's not at home, or he would have come to the door."

“No,” she said. “With all the legal stuff going on, he said he wanted to clear his head. He planned to spend the night on the boat.”

Jessie glanced over at Riddell, who had stiffened up. She understood why. Cisco wasn’t on the boat. If his wife didn’t know where he really was and they didn’t get his GPS data soon, they were flying blind.

“Lana,” she said delicately, “we sent officers to look for him on the boat and he wasn’t there. Do you know where else he might be?”

“Which boat did you check?” Lana asked.

“There’s more than one?”

“Yeah,” she answered. “There’s the larger yacht docked in King Harbor and the smaller sailboat he keeps up in Marina del Rey.”

Jessie couldn’t stop her jaw from dropping at that tidbit. For a moment, she was upset that Jamil and Beth hadn’t picked up on this crucial detail. But then she reconsidered. They found the boat in Redondo. Why would they assume the guy had a second one at a different location? It was an understandable oversight.

“Mrs. Cisco—Lana,” Riddell said, turning his phone so that he was now on camera too. “I’m Detective Riddell with the L.A. Sheriff’s Department. We need the name and hull identification number for the boat in the marina. We’re going to have someone check on him.”

“Okay,” she said, “but should I maybe just call him now?”

Riddell looked over at Jessie to see if she had any objection. She nodded to indicate she was cool with it. Right now, Cisco’s potential culpability in any crime was secondary to his safety, even if it meant alerting the man that they were on to him.

“Go ahead, we’ll stay on the line so you can conference him in,” he said before turning to Jessie. “We should get down to the car and head up that way.”

They started down the hall when the man sitting on the floor called out to them.

“What about me?”

“You’re free to return to your apartment,” Riddell said without looking back.

They took the stairs down as Lana Cisco called her husband. It went straight to voicemail. She tried a second time with the same result.

“Could he be asleep?” Riddell asked her.

“I don’t think so,” Lana replied. “If he was, it would ring multiple times before going to voicemail. But I have noticed that when he leaves the marina and is out in open water, this will happen sometimes. He can’t always get a signal out there.”

Jessie looked at Riddell, concerned.

“What?” he asked.

“Hold on a second,” she said. “Lana, we’re going to hang up for now. Keep calling. The deputies will stay with you. If Joel picks up, conference us back in again.”

“Okay,” she said. “Can you tell me what this is about now?”

"We'll deal with all of that once Joel's safe," Jessie deflected. "Right now, we're going to try to make sure he is."

As they got in his car, she indicated that Riddell should hang up.

“What were you thinking before?” he asked.

“That we shouldn’t drive to the marina,” she said. “We can have someone check his slip. But if he’s out to sea already, we need another way to get to him. I say we go to

King Harbor, which is much closer to us, and go from there to catch him. Have any recommendations for our best option?"

"I do," he said, pulling out onto the street. "We'll catch a ride with the Coast Guard. Those guys move pretty fast. It's our best chance to make up time."

"Great," Jessie said.

What she didn't add was the concern bubbling in the back of her mind: what if they were already out of time?

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:48 am

Monica Silver sat in a lounge chair on the deck of the Bodacious Tata, waiting for the sunrise.

It was so peaceful at this time of the morning. The waves were rocking gently. She had a perfect view of the coastline to the east, where the first morning rays sun would soon peek over the hills.

She hadn't had much time for peace lately. But she would soon. Her work was almost done. She had some regrets, notably that she wouldn't be able to get to either Archie Crittendon or Jackson Dwyer. The trackers that she put on both their cars indicated that they'd each gone to law enforcement locations overnight, which was a sure sign that they knew they were in imminent danger. She had to accept that they were out of her reach.

But that was okay, because she already had the big fish here with her now. And she could take her time with him. Joel Cisco was currently below deck, roofied into unconsciousness, and tied to a chair. She'd tossed his cell phone in the ocean and turned off the boat's AIS beacon. She'd wake him up soon, once the sun began to rise, so that their final act could begin.

She allowed herself a moment to appreciate the work she'd already done. She couldn't really relish the accomplishments, as her work wasn't for pleasure, but rather justice. She wasn't happy about what she'd done, so much as satisfied. She hoped that wherever her sister was, Heather was feeling some measure of satisfaction too.

It was a long time coming. After she'd returned from her academic research trip to the Amazon three years ago, she gone straight to L.A. to find out why Heather had

seemingly dropped off the face of the earth. But the police officer she spoke to was no help. It was obvious that she would have to pursue Heather's disappearance on her own. So she did exactly that.

First, she switched from the master's program that she was about to start at Johns Hopkins to one at Loyola Marymount, which was ecstatic to have her. She got an apartment near the school and then proceeded to use every non-academic moment to figure out what had happened to Heather.

She started with what she knew, which wasn't much. In their last conversation, Heather had mentioned that until she got a job, she planned to stay at a hostel to keep costs low. Her one priority was to find a place within walking distance of the ocean.

So Monica made a list of every hostel that ran along the Southern California coast, starting at Point Mugu in Malibu and going all the way south along the oceanfront to Long Beach, a distance of over 75 miles. She also included cheap motels along the same route just to be safe.

Then she started looking. Every free moment she had, she would visit these places and show the staff there pictures of Heather in the hope that someone would recognize her. After Malibu turned up nothing, she moved south to Santa Monica, followed by Venice, Marina del Rey, Playa del Rey, El Segundo, and Manhattan Beach.

That process took two and a half years and turned up nothing. Between hostels and motels, she had visited over two hundred locations without a single hit. She completed her master's degree in that time, which was both a blessing and a curse.

She'd been offered a job with a top research facility researching biodiversity in the Southern Hemisphere. But it meant relocating to Florida. She sank into what she eventually realized was a deep depression when she processed the truth: accepting the

position would essentially mean giving up on any hope of finding Heather, either alive, or more likely dead.

That was when she visited, almost as an afterthought, a hostel just off the Hermosa Beach Pier. She still remembered that day six months ago, when the on-duty manager had casually said, “oh yeah, I remember her.”

“You do?” Monica replied, stunned.

“Yeah,” replied the middle-aged guy with the paunch and sun-bleached blond hair. “I can’t recall her name, “but she was definitely here. She was nice.”

“How do you remember someone who stayed here three years ago?”

“Because she pre-paid for her bed in the dorm for two full weeks,” he explained, “but she left before the second week was up. She didn’t ask for a refund or anything. Everyone who stays at places like this is on a budget. No one would just leave money on the table, uncollected. She even left some clothes and toiletries behind. I was surprised.”

“Did you try to find out what happened?” Monica asked.

“I asked some of the gals who shared the room with her, but they didn’t seem to know anything.”

“Didn’t seem to?” Monica said.

“They were from Brazil and my Portuguese is non-existent so I might have missed something in translation.”

“Do you remember any other details?” Monica pressed. “Did she indicate where she

hoped to move? Any job prospects? Or guys she liked?"

The manager's face lit up.

"Actually now that you mention it, she did say she thought she was on the verge of getting a job," he said. "She said that she was interning as a cook at a nearby restaurant—what do they call that?"

"Staging?" Monica offered.

"Yeah, that was it."

"Do you recall the restaurant?" Monica asked.

"No, I'm not sure she ever said the name," he told her, "but I know it was close because she mentioned loving that her commute was a five-minute walk."

Monica left the hostel with a surge of renewed hope. This was the most encouraging development she'd had after years of searching for her sister, and she felt borderline giddy. In between rehab visits, Heather had gone to culinary school. She was a great cook and an aspiring chef, so this lead made sense. Unfortunately, while that sounded promising, it wasn't a slam dunk.

Monica counted over thirty restaurants within about a five minute walk of the hostel, and fifty if her sister was just approximating the walking distance. So that weekend, she got a hotel room nearby and committed to visiting every single one.

She hit paydirt at her 22 nd stop. It was an upscale seafood place called Hermosa on Harbor and the executive chef, a tall, painfully thin man with prematurely gray hair named Marcus Hillenbrand, immediately recognized Heather.

“She was really talented,” he said. “In fact, I was going to offer her a full-time gig starting the following month because one of our people was moving up to San Francisco.”

“Did she know that?” Monica asked.

“I mentioned that it was a strong possibility if she kept up the good work,” he said. “She seemed excited. But then she just bailed.”

“Do you remember anything about the last time you saw her?” Monica asked.

“Yeah, a little,” he said. “If I’m remembering right, she worked the lunch shift, then hung out at the bar afterward with some folks.”

“How do you recall something from so long ago?”

“Because the people she was with were pretty raucous, and I was debating whether to ask them to leave. But they beat me to it and decided to head out on their own. She left with them, but before she did, she said that she’d see me tomorrow. That’s why I was so surprised when she never showed up again.”

The phrase “pretty raucous” sent a shiver through Monica. Exactly what kind of people had Heather hooked up with?

“Do you remember any of the people she was hanging out with at the bar that afternoon?”

He looked at her like she was crazy.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m impressed that I remember this much.”

“Would any of your staff remember? Maybe a hostess or server?”

He shook his head.

“Other than my general manager, who works in the back office, the staff has turned over multiple times since then. No one here now would have known her.”

Monica was just leaving when he called after her.

“I do remember one thing,” he said. “one of the folks she left with was a guy with a red Maserati.”

“You didn’t know him?”

“No,” he said apologetically.

“Would you remember him if I showed you a photo?”

“Maybe?” he said unconvincingly.

But that was all Monica had to go on, so she put all her efforts into it. So she got records for every red Maserati registered in the South Bay. Of course, this guy could be from Beverly Hills and have just come down for the afternoon, but she had to start somewhere.

Her search uncovered eleven owners of red Maseratis in the area, nine of whom were men. After finding photos of all them, she brought them to Chef Hillenbrand.

“That’s him,” he said, pointing at a moderately attractive man of about thirty with longish black hair that swooped across his forehead.

“You’re sure?” Monica asked.

Hillenbrand nodded. The man’s name was Joel Cisco.

After that, everything got easier. She declined the position in Florida. Instead, she decided to pursue a PhD at LMU but took this semester off. With nothing to distract her now, she found that researching Cisco was easy.

She learned about his business as a financial advisor and the ongoing investigation into whether he had stolen from clients even richer than he was. She found out about his wife, an innocuously pleasant woman named Lana. She drilled down on his circle of friends, many of whom were from the South Bay Yacht Club, where he was a member.

She hung out at the club’s bar, wearing disguises and keeping a low profile as she eavesdropped on these guys’ conversations. She watched them take an endless array of girls—many close to a decade younger than them—onto their boats for parties. She even spoke to some of those women after they returned. Few of them had nice things to say about the way they were treated.

She looked into the backgrounds of these friends and found that each of them had a history of impropriety with women, ranging from solicitation to stalking to outright assault. Some had settled sealed legal claims from women. While she didn’t have any hard evidence of anything involving Heather, Monica could draw conclusions. But she needed to be sure.

That’s why, four months ago, she’d purchased a wig with flaming red hair and altered her makeup to look as little as possible like Heather. Then, she approached Cisco at a Manhattan Beach restaurant bar. She knew that his marital status wouldn’t be an impediment, as she’d seen him take multiple young women onto his boat.

She flirted with him aggressively and within an hour they were in a room at a nearby hotel. In the room, they partook of the mini bar. When Cisco went to the restroom, she slipped him a dose of sodium amytal, which would eventually knock him out. But that was a secondary benefit. The drug, which was banned in many jurisdictions and hard to come by, also had a reputation as a truth serum of sorts. And in this case, it worked.

Just before he passed out, with her phone recording the conversation, Monica cajoled Cisco to recount any yacht parties that went off the rails. Though drowsy, he was also uninhibited and at least somewhat forthcoming. While he never confessed to anything specific, he made reference to him and his friends “doing a bad thing” one night about three years ago. It was clear, though he did his best to restrain himself, that he still recalled the night vividly.

Before he drifted off, she got him to list the names of everyone who’d been “bad” with him and even concede that the “bad thing” was his idea, with support from his “best bud” Robbie Chandler.

After he zonked out, she stripped him naked. She slept fitfully on the small couch against the wall. When morning came, she undressed so that she was only in the lingerie she’d worn for the occasion. Then she got into bed beside him and woke him up. He was groggy and confused. She told him that they’d had a great night together, that he was amazing in bed.

“But this has to be the only time,” she said regretfully as she got out of the bed and quickly put her clothes back on. “I let my passion get the better of me last night but now, seeing you with that ring on, I realize that I can’t be responsible for breaking up a marriage.”

“It doesn’t have to be anything like that,” he replied, now convinced that they’d hooked up and apparently recalling nothing about his semi-confession. “We can just

keep it casual.”

“I just can’t,” she said, “but I have your number if I ever change my mind.”

She considered taking the recording to the authorities. But she doubted they’d do anything. After all, she had drugged the man into his confession. And even then, admitting to "doing a bad thing," wasn't a smoking gun. There was nobody. He could claim that the bad thing was cheating on his wife or snorting coke or any number of other things. Even if the cops were interested, Cisco and his friends had shown an ability to skirt responsibility for their misdeeds. No, she had to handle this herself. So she did.

She came up with a plan. And to make it a reality, she prepared accordingly. She trained relentlessly to get in the best possible shape so that she would be desirable to the group known as the “yacht club bros.” She worked on different makeup styles that ensured she didn’t conjure up memories of her sister for them. She bought three more wigs for when she needed them. And she swam. All the time. Her plan required her to be both unflappable and full of stamina in the water.

Then, after so many months of prep work, she finally put the plan into action. She’d chosen this last Tuesday, not only because it was Heather’s birthday, but because she was now the same age—24—that Heather had been on the night she disappeared. It felt appropriate.

She’d planned to kill each of the yacht club bros on successive night. But in retrospect, that was naïve. Of course, the cops would figure out the connection among the guys. The morning after the first kill, she went to the yacht club and parked outside to spy on events there. The second that she saw the profiler Jessie Hunt walking around, she knew time was short. And of course the guys would scurry for protection the second they understood they were in danger.

So she'd been forced into this situation where she had to jump ahead to the grand finale to exact vengeance on the man she knew to be the ringleader in whatever happened to Heather. She called Cisco and told him that she hadn't been able to get him out of her head, that she wanted a repeat of their night four months ago.

Under normal circumstances, the man might have been suspicious of such an offer. But because they'd "hooked up" months before his friends had started dropping like flies, he apparently felt a level of unjustified safety in her presence. But he wasn't completely clueless.

He told her that it wasn't safe for him to hang out at the South Bay Yacht Club right now and instead suggested they meet at his sailboat in the marina for what he called a "slumber party." Fighting off the urge to throw up, she'd agreed.

That was why she was lying on the deck of the Bodacious Tata now, while Joel Cisco was down below, roofied and tied up. Very soon, she would wake him, and get his confession, torturing him if necessary, and maybe even if it wasn't. Then, after he came clean, she'd kill him anyway. It was the only way to get justice for Heather. Whatever happened to her after that, she was okay with it.

The silence of the boat was broken by what sounded like a dull moan from down below. Apparently, Cisco was starting to wake up on his own. It was perfect timing, as the first rays of the sun were just starting to peek out over the hills.

Monica stood up, pulled off the red wig she'd been wearing, and tossed it onto the deck. She wouldn't need it anymore. Then she started down the stairs.

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Jessie reminded herself to breathe.

She was standing on the deck of the Coast Guard Coastal Patrol Boat Halibut, watching as it cut through the water. She squinted and held her hand up to block the sun, which had started to rise.

She glanced at her phone. It was 6:14 A.M. She noticed that she had a voicemail. It was from Dante Moore, the administrator of the Twin Towers Correctional Facility, whom she'd asked to reach out if he had anything new on Mark Haddonfield. She tried to play the message but there was no cell service out here. She'd have to wait until they got back closer to shore. Besides, she needed to focus on this case.

It had taken longer than they would have liked to find Cisco's boat. After eventually identifying it, the Coast Guard managed to locate the last signal from Cisco's boat, the Bodacious Tata. But someone had apparently turned off the sailboat's Automatic Identification System, or AIS beacon around two in the morning.

As a result, the Coast Guard had to use its last known bearing in combination with reports from other vessels in the area to try to lock in a location for the boat. They were now, finally, barreling toward what they believed was the right vessel. She thought she saw it in the distance. Riddell took up a spot next to her.

"The captain says we'll reach Cisco's boat in about five minutes," he said. "He wants to know how we want to play it. Come in loud and make an announcement over the PA system. Or try to sneak up on them and have some divers sneak over?"

Jessie thought about it for a moment.

“I don’t think we can chance sneaking anyone over there,” she said. “This is a big boat. Monica Silver might have already seen it. I think the element of surprise is gone. Plus, that sailboat left last night. If Cisco was in control of the situation, his beacon would still be on. If she’s even still there, we have to assume that she’s in charge. If he’s not already dead, we don’t want to do anything to expedite that outcome.”

“So what, we ask to come aboard and try to talk her down?”

This was the conversation that Jessie had been dreading since soon after they departed King Harbor. But she knew it was inevitable.

“Not ‘we,’” she said. “Just me.”

“What are you talking about?” he demanded, stepping back and glaring at her.

When she responded, she tried to sound as sympathetic to his ego as she could.

“I know your department has jurisdiction, Detective,” she told him gently, “but think about this. If Cisco’s not already dead, he’s probably got some kind of weapon pointed at him right now. And it’s being pointed at him by a woman who believes he, along with a bunch of his buddies, did something terrible to her sister,. Do you really thing that some alpha male coming onboard to talk her down is going to work?”

He paused to consider her words.

“I’ll temper my style,” he said. “You can take lead and I’ll be there for support. Okay?”

This situation was playing out just like the one last night with Oliver Stanton. And just like that time, she was going to have to impose her will on a guy who viewed

himself as an investigative badass. She didn't relish the next few moments, but lives were at stake, and she had to hold firm.

"Still not okay," she replied. "Just your very presence could set her off. She believes—with good reason—that a group of men harmed her sister. Three years ago, a male police officer dismissed her concerns. Now another male cop shows up, belatedly, to take her into custody. How do you think that's going to go?"

"So what do you want me to do if she lets you onboard alone, just stay over here and twiddle my fingers, hoping she doesn't shoot or stab my partner? It's not like we can put a sharpshooter out here in case she loses it. With the waves and the distance, if she makes a sudden move, you or Cisco might end up taking the bullet."

"I appreciate the concern," Jessie said, impressed with his seeming sincerity, "but we both know it has to be me going solo. And we also know that I have to go unarmed. If she finds me with a weapon, it'll ruin any chance of building a rapport with her. I'll do my best to talk some sense into her. And if that doesn't work, well, I know how to take care of myself."

Before Riddell could reply, one of the ship's officers stepped outside and waved at them.

"The captain says it's time. They'll be able to see us by now. And in about sixty seconds, they'll hear us, even with the engines cut. If you want to talk to her, now's the time."

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Jessie finished rowing the short distance between the boats in the dinghy she'd been given and tied it off to the ladder that extended off the Bodacious Tata. As she gripped the rails and started up, she still wasn't sure how she'd managed to get on board.

“Monica,” she had called out over the speaker not ten minutes ago, “This is Jessie Hunt with the Los Angeles Police Department. We know why you’re out here. We know what Joel Cisco did. And we want to get justice for Heather. But for that to happen, you have to let me come over there and talk with you. I’ll come over alone and unarmed. I want to help.”

She hadn’t really expected it to work but somehow it had. After twenty seconds that felt like sixty, a hand had extended from the companionway of the boat, waving her over. It had all happened so suddenly that the Coast Guard crew barely had time to strap her into a life jacket before dropping her into the dinghy and pointing her toward her target, the ladder.

She was just reaching the top of it when a female voice called out.

“Take off the life jacket and lift up your shirt so I can see that you don’t have a weapon.” Jessie did as instructed.

“Now walk backward toward the stairs.”

She did that too. As she moved, she noticed a red wig lying in a heap on the deck.

“Now come down, still facing backward.”

The voice was much clearer now. It was hard to be sure, but from her tone, Monica Silver sounded very much in control of herself. There was no panic in her voice, and she spoke with authority and confidence. When Jessie reached the bottom of the stairs, Silver gave another instruction.

“You can turn around now,”

When Jessie did, she clenched her jaw so that she wouldn’t visibly react too strongly to whatever she was about to see. Sure enough, it wasn’t pretty.

Joel Cisco was facing her, tied to a chair that was bolted to the floor. He was wearing loose khakis and a light blue short-sleeved button-down shirt. Both were covered in blood. The shirt had been cut open to reveal Cisco's chest, which had several gashes across it.

Jessie looked at his face. If not for the many photos of him that she’d seen, she might not have recognized him. His face was also covered in blood, a result of several cuts that were still seeping, including one on his forehead and on each cheek. His mouth was stuffed with a dishrag. His brown eyes were wild with fear.

Behind him, with a six-inch kitchen knife pressed against his neck, was Monica Silver. This was the first time that Jessie had seen her without any disguise. Her brown hair was tied back in a ponytail. She was wearing a sarong and a loose white shirt over a bikini top.

It was stunning how much she looked like her older sister. No wonder Oliver Stanton had thought he’d seen a ghost. The fact that even hiding her looks, Cisco hadn’t noted the resemblance between the sisters, was an indictment of him. Either he was too oblivious to have made the connection, or he’d never paid enough attention to Heather Silver when he was with her to care.

The woman's expression was placid, as if nothing about this situation struck her as unusual. Jessie tried to think about how best to begin a conversation that wouldn't end with Cisco dead. As she wracked her brain, an unexpected epiphany came into it. She didn't really care if the man lived or died.

This was a person who had used women all his life, often hurting them, and maybe doing more than that. Because of his wealth and power, he'd never faced any consequences for his actions. Now—finally—someone was holding him to account.

Jessie knew that she was supposed to protect victims, even imperfect ones, but this felt like a stretch. Joel Cisco was a predator. In fact, Jessie wondered what would happen if she was the one holding the knife to his throat right now. Would her desire for bloodlust win out over her sense of duty?

She pictured Hannah in Heather's position and herself in Monica's. Could she really say that she would do anything differently? If anything, she suspected she might have already done what Monica intended.

Here was a chance to allow someone else to take their vengeance. Maybe she should just let Monica cut him open and savor the pleasure of watching the man bleed out. She wouldn't be personally responsible for it. She would simply have been "unable" to prevent it. That was totally defensible if she was questioned later.

What did it matter anyway? Monica Silver was already going to prison for three other murders. In the grand scheme of things, what was one more? Would it really be that bad to let her finish off this guy, who was by all measures the most culpable of the yacht bros? Jessie fought back a snicker as a random thought entered her head: the medication she'd taken to curb her urges had definitely worn off.

Apparently she hadn't hidden the near-chuckle well enough, because Monica's calm expression changed. She looked confused.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

Nothing,” Jessie said. “I guess I’m just trying to think of a way to talk you down. The problem is—I’m coming up empty.”

“Why would you want to talk me down?” Monica demanded. “You said over the speaker that you knew what he did and wanted justice for Heather. This is justice. Why would you even consider getting in the way of that?”

Jessie realized that her hands had been up the whole time they’d been talking.

“Do you mind if I put these down?” she asked.

“Only if you answer my question,” Monica said.

“It’s a fair question,” Jessie conceded as she rested her arms at her sides. “Give me a second to come up with a good answer.”

She was quiet for a moment as she really pondered it. A big part of her wanted Monica to tear the knife across Cisco’s throat so she could watch his blood spurt everywhere. That part of her was so all-consuming that she wondered if there was space left for anything else. She was tempted to just whisper, “do it” and enjoy the show.

She closed her eyes and exhaled heavily. When she opened them again, she decided she owed it to her professional self, if not to Cisco, to at least try to make a compelling case. She wasn’t sure if even she would find it convincing.

“I can think of one reason,” she said.

“You have to follow the law, even if you don’t agree with it?” Monica offered

sarcastically.

Jessie shrugged.

“I guess I should say yes to that, but no,” she replied. “The reason is that if you kill him now, we’ll never know the truth about what happened to Heather.”

That wasn’t entirely true. There were two other men that might be able to solve that mystery. But that detail wouldn’t help her right now, so she didn’t mention it. Instead, she continued.

“I assume that’s why you’ve been methodically cutting into his flesh, to get him to come clean. Or is it just for the fun of it?”

“Can’t it be both?” Monica wanted to know.

“It can,” Jessie conceded. “Has it worked?”

“Not yet,” Monica admitted, “but until you showed up, I planned to take my time.”

"Well, maybe we can still get some answers from Joel in the time we have left," she said before focusing her attention on the bloodied man before her. "What do you say, Joel? Are you ready to be honest?"

The fear in his eyes hadn’t dissipated, but Jessie sensed something more than just fear of more pain in them. She also saw hopelessness. He thought he was going to die, no matter what he said. She needed to change that.

“I have a deal for both of you,” she said, a surge of adrenaline rising in her as the perfection of it became clear to her. There was a way to feed both her bloodlust and her sense of duty and come out unsullied on the other side. Well, maybe not

unsullied, but mostly unscathed.

“What is it?” Monica asked.

“Here’s what I propose,” Jessie said. “You remove the rag from Joel’s mouth. He describes what happened that night with Heather, in full, without excuses. I will record him on my phone. In exchange for his honesty, you let him live. Then he faces responsibility for his actions. Unfortunately, Monica, so will you. But I get the sense that you’ve made your peace with that. That’s one option.”

“Or?” Monica said.

“Or,” Jessie continued, “you remove the rag, and Joel declines to be honest about the events of that night. He denies responsibility entirely, or tries to pass the buck, or just refuses to say anything at all.”

“What happens then?” Monica wondered.

“Then,” Jessie said slowly and with total conviction, “I imagine you’d kill him.”

Other than the waves lopping up against the hull outside, there was total silence. Monica’s jaw had dropped open in shock. Joel’s eyes were on the verge of popping out of his skull. Jessie went on.

"I can't really do anything to stop you," she explained. "If you slit his throat, no one would find it hard to believe that I tried to talk you down and failed. You were just too far gone. He'd bleed out, and those wild eyes I'm looking at would go dull forever. I'd take you into custody, and you'd spend the rest of your life in prison. And that would be that. You'd never know the truth, and he'd be dead. That feels like a lose-lose for both of you, but I'd be okay with it. The question is, would the two of you?"

Cisco tried to spit the rag out.

“I think he wants to say something,” Jessie noted.

Monica yanked the rag out of his mouth. He coughed for several seconds, then swallowed a few times. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse.

“How do I know she won’t kill me anyway after I talk?”

Jessie shrugged.

“I guess you don’t,” she said. “But I’d imagine that after three years of injustice, Monica would like to finally see someone pay for what was done to her sister. I’m hoping that her need for the world to acknowledge Heather in a court of law would trump her desire to gut you. Plus, in my experience, men like you don’t fare too well in prison. That means that your suffering will continue, rather than just ending here on this boat. That should offer her some solace.”

“Then why should I say anything?” he snarled. “If my only choices are die now or get raped in in prison for the next fifty years, that’s no choice at all.”

"There's always the chance that you could beat the charges," Jessie proposed. "You could claim that your confession was coerced. Maybe a jury will see it your way, and you'll walk free. But if you don't talk now, you'll never know."

Cisco closed his eyes in concentration. He had a big decision to make. Behind him, Monica had an appalled expression on her face, clearly horrified at the prospect of him escaping punishment after all this.

Jessie smiled back at her and shook her head, as if to silently say, “don’t worry, that’s not going to happen.” Of course, she couldn’t really make that promise. Anything

could happen at trial. But admitting that in this moment felt counterproductive. Cisco opened his eyes.

“Aren’t you supposed to be a law enforcement officer?” he balked. “How can you just stand by and let her commit murder?”

“We’re well past that,” Jessie said coldly. “You should worry less about what I should be doing and more about whether you ever want to do anything ever again.”

Cisco went quiet. After a few seconds, Monica lowered the knife slightly and moved off to the side so that she could see the man’s face.

She was still too far away for Jessie to get to her before she’d be able to lift the knife to his neck again. But that might be a moot point. Jessie wasn’t sure if she even wanted to stop her. In this moment, it appeared that Joel Cisco would decide how this played out.

“Turn on the recorder,” Monica whispered.

Jessie pulled out her phone and hit record.

“It’s on,” she said.

Monica turned her attention back to Cisco. “Go ahead.”

Jessie looked at her phone, watching the seconds tick by. When it reached 14, Cisco finally opened his mouth to speak.

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“We didn’t mean for it to happen,” Cisco said, his voice quiet and his eyes on the ground. “We’ve had tons of parties on our boats over the years and no one reacted like she did. I don’t know if she was high or crazy or what, but she was out of control.”

“What does that mean?” Jessie asked.

Cisco paused for a moment, as if deciding whether he was really going to share this. Then he continued.

"Usually there are lots of girls at these things," he said. "But because it was so late that night, she was the only one around. We'd all been drinking in the yacht club bar and were pretty sloppy when we left the harbor. Everything was cool for a while. The two of us hit it off, and I took her down here to my cabin. We started to hook up when she just started to lose it, scratching at me and stuff."

Jessie was already dubious of his version of events. Why would Heather suddenly “lose it” in the middle of a consensual encounter? It was far more likely that Cisco pressured her into something she wasn’t comfortable with. But for the sake of keeping him talking, she didn’t press the issue.

“What happened then?” she asked as if she believed he was being straight with them.

“She was so out of control that I locked her in my cabin so she could calm down. I went up to the deck to tell the other guys what happened, and we all agreed that we should head back to shore and just unlock the cabin and let her leave.”

Jessie glanced over at Monica, who seemed as skeptical of this version of events as she was. But to her credit, the woman said nothing. Maybe she was hoping for a big revelation. Or perhaps she was just holding back until she couldn't take it anymore, at which point she'd make use of the knife. Regardless, she was quiet for now.

"But that obviously didn't work out," Jessie prompted.

"No," he said. "While we were up top talking, she somehow climbed out the cabin window and up onto the deck. She started screaming that we had kidnapped and assaulted her. I walked over, trying to calm her down. But she backed away from me. I guess she slipped on a wet spot or something because she suddenly fell backward and hit her head. It knocked her out. But her momentum sent her off the side of the boat. She fell in the water."

He paused briefly as if he expected questions or pushback, but when neither Jessie nor Monica spoke, he went on, his increasingly confident tone suggesting that he thought they were buying what he was trying to sell.

"I jumped in right after her to try to save her," he continued. "But she had started sinking right away. It was dark out and I lost sight of her. Some of the other guys jumped in too. We were all searching around. Someone shined a light on the area where we last saw her, but there was nothing. We kept looking for about ten minutes but eventually had to give up. The water was really cold, and we couldn't see anything. We came back on board and just, you know, had a moment of silence for her."

Jessie saw Monica's grip on the knife handle tighten at that last line and spoke quickly, before the woman did anything.

"Why didn't you report the incident then or when you got back to shore?" she asked.

He shrugged limply.

“We were scared,” he said, finally making eye contact with her. “Who would believe us? It looked really bad. So we all just kept quiet about it, which I know was wrong. After about a day, I felt so awful that I decided I had to go to the police. But Robbie convinced me not to. He said that no one had reported her missing and that maybe it would all blow over.”

“Robbie, who is dead now and can’t dispute your version of events, talked you out of it?” Jessie asked.

“Yes,” he answered, looking down again. “I know it was cowardly, but I allowed myself to be convinced by him. I’ll always regret that.”

Joel Cisco might have been a good financial advisor. He was obviously competent enough to amass all this wealth and, at least for a while, hoodwink his clients. But he was a terrible liar. Jessie didn’t have to be a professional criminal profiler to see that.

And it was clear from her expression that Monica wasn’t falling for any of this either. But she hadn’t made any move toward Cisco. She looked over at Jessie, who waited to see what she would do next. Unless the woman came at her with the knife, Jessie was fine with whatever path she chose.

After what felt like forever, and without a word, Monica Silver dropped the knife on the floor and kicked it over to Jessie. Then she took a step forward and extended her wrists, palms up. When she spoke, she sounded on the verge of tears.

“I assume you have handcuffs?”

Jessie nodded, filled with an odd mix of relief and disappointment at the woman’s decision.

She suspected she knew why Monica had made it. Cisco's story about that night was laughable. But even if one bought it, he'd still admitted to covering up a woman's death. Monica had to realize that his self-incrimination was enough to get him convicted of something.

More importantly, now she finally knew the truth: her sister was dead. Whether it was an accident, or far more likely an assault gone horribly out of control, Heather was gone. There could be a funeral, even if there wasn't a body. And someone would finally pay.

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They were almost back to shore.

Jessie looked over her shoulder. Behind her, seated on metal benches on either side of the patrol boat, were Monica Silver and Joel Cisco. Both were handcuffed. Cisco had bandages all over his body and a medic was taking his blood pressure one last time before they were to disembark.

He was much more mellow than when Riddell and three Coast Guard officers had boarded the Bodacious Tata an hour ago. The second that he saw them, he started screaming that he'd been coerced into a false confession and Jessie had been willing to let Monica kill him if he didn't make it.

Riddell had turned to her with a raised eyebrow. When he spoke, his words took her by surprise.

"Pretty desperate guy," he said, "to make up something like that."

"Can you believe it?" she replied, neither confirming nor denying anything.

"As soon as we get back on land," he said, "I'm going to reach out to have units from Oxnard and West Covina bring Archie Crittendon and Jackson Dwyer down here. With only three of the yacht bros left alive, there's going to be a lot of finger-pointing. We'll get them in rooms with their lawyers and get their version of events. My guess is that these guys were so arrogant that they didn't come up with a shared cover story for what happened that night."

"What if they did?" Jessie asked.

“Even if they did, it won’t go as they hope. If their stories are exactly the same, that will look bad. No one’s memory of a traumatic event is exactly the same as someone else’s, especially three years later. If it is, that suggests they conspired to make it that way.”

Jessie nodded. Every now and then, some sophisticated ideas came out of Riddell’s thick head.

“And if the three versions are substantially different,” he continued, “then we use that to play them against each other. You and I both think Cisco was the mastermind here. And based on my experience, Crittendon and Dwyer will both roll over on him pretty quick. It was his boat. Even in his version, he took her down to his cabin. He locked her in there. It won’t be hard to get them to paint him as the ringleader if it saves their hides.”

“He was the ringleader,” Jessie pointed out.

Riddell nodded. He was quiet for a moment, but she could tell he wanted to say something more. She waited until he was ready.

“You know,” he finally muttered. “I almost feel bad for Monica Silver, despite everything she’s done.”

“Really?” Jessie said, using all her willpower not to sarcastically add “almost?”

"Yeah," he said sincerely, which suggested that she'd been successful in hiding her feelings. "She tried to get help three years ago, but no one took her seriously. I'm guessing that even if she had come to law enforcement with suspicions about these specific guys, she would have been ignored because there's nobody. After all that time hunting these guys down and then thinking nothing would be done, she probably snapped—thought this was her only recourse."

“That sounds entirely plausible,” Jessie said. “Maybe you should be the profiler.”

“Maybe I should,” he agreed with a smile. It was one of the few she’d seen from him.

"You know, Detective," she said, "in many ways, you are one of the most objectionable people I've ever had to work with, and that's saying a lot. But in the end, when it really came down to it, you were mostly a professional."

“Thanks, I guess,” he said with a furrowed brow. “Does that mean the jury’s no longer out?”

“What?”

“When your husband called the other day, he asked how bad I was, and you said the jury was still out.”

“Oh right,” she said, remembering it now. “How about this? You’ve been found guilty of multiple misdemeanors, but no felonies.”

“I’ll take it,” he replied. “And for the record, I plan to stop badmouthing you to my friends in the Sheriff’s Department.”

“Oh really,” she said. “What have you been telling them?”

He shrugged.

“Just that you’re a self-important, controlling pseudoscience chick who doesn’t know what she’s doing and uses her celebrity as a crutch,” he said with a smile.

“Oh, is that all?”

“No,” he added. “You also have a penchant for napping that made me wonder if you were on ludes or something. You really should make your bedtime earlier.”

Jessie wondered if he was messing with her or if he really suspected the truth about why she’d been so out of it for a while. His expression gave no hint as to where he stood.

“And what will you be telling them now?” she asked, pretending not to be thrown by his last comment.

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “I’m revising my description.”

“How’s that?” she asked.

“I guess you kind of know what you’re doing,” he allowed.

“Thanks, Detective,” she said, shaking her head and turning her attention to the fast approaching harbor.

As the Coast Guard patrol boat slowed and eased toward the dock, she let her exhausted mind drift. She needed a mental break after she’d been up all night and spent the previous day fighting off the effects of a drug that messed up her greatest asset: her ability to understand people in ways others couldn’t.

She definitely understood Monica Silver. Riddell was spot on with his analysis of her, but he hadn’t gone deep enough. Monica hadn’t “just” snapped. Over time, she’d built up a cauldron of hate that simmered and eventually boiled over. She didn’t just want justice for her sister. She wanted to see those who’d hurt her suffer the way she had.

Jessie knew the feeling the well. It had consumed her for the last several months. Her

ability to settle for bringing wrongdoers to justice rather than seeking vengeance against them had atrophied to the point that she no longer trusted herself. She truly wondered if, had she been alone with Joel Cisco on that boat, she might have used the knife herself.

One thing she knew for sure—if Monica Silver would have gone a different route, and slit the man's throat, she wouldn't have lifted a finger to stop her. Was that any different than killing him herself? It was just luck that she didn't have to answer that question.

What would happen next time she was in a situation with a perpetrator that she had passed judgment on? She knew she couldn't count on that medication. She wouldn't be taking it again. It prevented her from catching those very perpetrators.

So, what recourse did she have to prevent herself from giving in to the darkness? She no longer trusted her self-control when these urges rose up inside her. Therapy didn't seem to be working. Medication wasn't an option. She couldn't go to a rehab facility without being outed.

What was left?

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Kat followed all of her evasion tactics.

She had to be especially cautious this morning, because she wasn't going to her new office, the one that Ash Pierce knew nothing about. She'd set up a P.O. box as a forwarding address for her business mail. The mail from that box was then forwarded to a second P.O. box, where she was currently collecting it.

She'd been slightly apprehensive about even showing up in person for this, but there had to be a point where she felt she'd taken enough precautions. And taking two different rideshares and one taxi to a flea market and then a metro station before coming to this hole-in-the-wall postal center felt like enough.

Still, she walked around the block once before entering, making sure to watch for any tails. When she entered the place and moved to the back where the mailboxes were, she kept an eye on the large mirror by the entrance, in case anyone came in. No one did.

She opened her box and removed the mail. There wasn't much. That was a good sign. The bulk of her correspondence was now coming to the new office. She hoped that soon, the stuff coming here would turn into a trickle, and she could just stop by once a month or so.

She flipped through the envelopes. Most of the items were easy to identify without even opening them. There were three pieces of junk mail solicitations, one bill that had been sent out before the office address change, and what she knew to be a check from an elderly client who didn't trust "electronic banking." Then she came to the last one.

It was a postcard. The front of it showed a man playing jai alai. Kat's mouth went dry at the sight of it. Jai alai was once a hugely popular sport in Tijuana. For a long time, she just stared at the image.

Finally, she ordered herself to flip the card over. The address of her old office was written on one side. On the other side were two sentences:

Been missing you.

Be seeing you.

There was no signature. None was necessary.

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Hannah was stalling.

It was 8:55 A.M. and she was standing outside the main entrance to the building where her 9 A.M. class was about to start. But it was such a gorgeous morning, with the sun shining and the cool breeze stoking goosebumps on her skin, that she didn't feel like going into a drab classroom just yet.

"Aren't you worried that you're going to be late?" a familiar voice asked from behind her.

She turned around to find Dallas Henry standing there. Unlike at the café yesterday, when he wore that goofy ensemble of a collared shirt and slacks, he was back to dressing normally this morning. He had on jeans and a t-shirt that read "Don't F#*k with Mr. Zero."

"I know that line," she said with a laugh, pointing at the shirt.

"You do?" Dallas said, looking surprised. "Where from?"

"It's from the movie When Harry Met Sally..." she said. "You didn't know that?"

"No," he admitted. "I just found it in a thrift shop and thought it was funny. How do you know that movie? Isn't it super old?"

"Yeah," she said, "but my older sister loves it. And she's made me watch it so many times that now I love it too."

“Hmm,” Dallas said, “maybe I should check it out to find out what all the fuss is about.”

“You should,” she told him. “It’s got some interesting ideas.”

"Sounds intriguing," he said, "and I'd love to hear about them, but don't you think we should head into class? I don't want to get in trouble."

“Afraid of a little trouble, are you?” she teased, not sure what had come over her. Maybe now that she’d researched the guy and found that he had a clean record, she felt more comfortable engaging with him.

“Wow,” he said, taken aback. “Are you flirting with me, or are you just overcaffeinated?”

“Speaking of caffeine,” she said, dodging his question, “do you remember how you asked me yesterday about getting coffee?”

“I do,” he said. “If I remember correctly, you said you needed some ‘Hannah’ time.”

“Well,” she replied. “I’ve had some time—.”

“It’s been like, 21 hours.”

“Do you really want to interrupt me right now?” she asked, pouting slightly.

“Sorry, go ahead.”

“I’ve been thinking that I might be willing to dip my toes back in the coffee waters,” she said, before realizing that the metaphor didn’t quite work. “Sorry, that was gross, but you get the point.”

“I absolutely do,” he said with an embarrassed grin before turning serious. “And I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but I think maybe we should hold off. I don’t want to be presumptuous but maybe you should take that Hannah time and figure out your situation.”

“Oh,” she said quietly.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he said quickly. “I only say that because I don’t want you to be dipping your toes in the water and then I end up being the rebound pool. Lake? River? Oh god, that was worse than your coffee toes thing.”

“It really wasn’t,” she assured him, relieved that he wasn’t actually rejecting her and impressed at his unusually evolved attitude.

“That’s very kind of you to say,” he replied. “Maybe we could be school friends—.”

“Like Little House on the Prairie or something?” she teased.

“Now who’s interrupting?”

“Sorry,” she said, her cheeks reddening.

“I just mean, maybe we can be friends who have the same class and see how things go from there. What do you say?”

She side-eyed him for a second before relenting.

“Okay,” she said.

“Okay,” he said back. “Now can we please get in there before the professor calls us out for coming in late.”

“Such a goody two shoes,” Hannah said as they started up the steps.

Dallas held the door open for her. She was about go in when she notice that her sneakers were untied.

“You go in,” she said. “I’ll catch up.”

"Okay, truant," he said jokingly and darted in.

She smiled to herself as she bent down to tie the shoe. As she did, she got a strange sensation, as if there were eyes on her. She looked up, scanning the quad. Then she saw him. Standing next to a pillar in the shadows of the building across the lawn was Finn Anderton.

He was staring at her with an expression she’d never seen before. It was more than a frown. It had twisted into something more intense. If she didn’t know better, she’d have called it anger.

Hannah wondered if maybe she should know better. She’d spent all this time making sure that Dallas Henry wasn’t some sicko that she needed to watch out for. But lately, she’d let down her guard with Finn.

She knew his record was clean too, but ever since she’d rebuffed his romantic interest, he’d seemed different. Jealous yes. But something more. He seemed edgy, volatile.

Suddenly, Finn turned and darted into the building. As the door closed behind him, she couldn’t help but wonder if she should be worried about him.

Or even afraid of him.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:48 am

Jessie let out a relieved sigh.

She'd been playing phone tag with Twin Towers administrator Dante Moore all morning without success. But now his assistant said to wait on the line and he'd be right with her, finally.

First, he'd left her that voicemail when she was on the boat without a cell signal. It had been a cryptic request for her to call him back, with no details. When she returned the call, he was in a meeting with his guard supervisors.

When he tried her back again, she was with Riddell in an interrogation room, questioning Jackson Dwyer. He'd given up Joel Cisco within ten minutes of entering the room, right around the time that they revealed that they were giving Oliver Stanton immunity to testify and hinted that he could get a reduced sentence if he was helpful too.

According to Dwyer, Heather Silver had passed out within minutes of getting on the Bodacious Tata. Cisco carried her down to his cabin. After she eventually woke up, Cisco tried to make a move on her. But she wasn't into it. When she attempted to fight him off, slapping him across the face, he hit back, knocking her unconscious.

While she was out cold, Cisco and Robbie Chandler convinced the rest of them that it was too risky to go back with her. What if she went to the cops and claimed assault? What if they saw the bruise on her face?

Cisco proposed just pushing her overboard. He said the chick was new to town and had mentioned that she hardly knew anyone. And no one but the club manager,

Oliver Stanton, had seen them leave with her on the boat. If they each kept their mouths shut and scared Stanton into doing the same, this whole thing might disappear, especially without a body. They all agreed to it, though Dwyer claimed he did so reluctantly. So they tied the boat's anchor to her and dropped her in the Santa Monica Bay.

After that, Cisco moved the Bodacious Tata up to Marina del Rey and brought his yacht down to King Harbor. Dwyer said that none of them wanted to hang out on the sailboat anymore after what had happened.

When Jessie left the interrogation room, she felt like she needed a shower. She was actually glad that Cisco hadn't told the whole truth when he "confessed" on his boat. If he had, she would have almost certainly taken that knife from Monica Silver and gutted the man herself.

She had been debating just how much of what she'd just learned to share with Monica when she'd seen the text from Moore saying he was available to talk. Both the shower and the conversation with Silver would have to wait. She called Moore right back.

"Jessie, you're a hard woman to get a hold of," he said when he came on the line.

"Right back at you, Dante," she said. "You were pretty closemouthed in your message. What's going on."

"Do you remember how you asked me to make you aware if anything cropped up regarding Mark Haddonfield?"

"Of course," she said, doing her best to keep the sense of anticipation out of her voice.

"Well, something cropped up," he said. "The inmate who took Haddonfield's bed after he died had an issue last night."

"An issue?"

"He soiled himself overnight, possibly intentionally. He's not playing with a full deck," Moore said. "After we moved him and his roommate out of the cell, we cleaned it. The mattress was obviously a lost cause. But when they were removing it, the cleaning crew noticed something written on the underside of it."

"What?" Jessie asked, a pit of dread and excitement forming in her gut.

"It was written in crayon," he said. "It reads as follows:

JH

6-21-HD-44.

Though she felt certain that the message, which had Hannah's initials, was intended for her, she tried not to jump to that conclusion.

"Are you sure he wrote it?" she asked.

"Yes," Moore said. "Haddonfield complained about his last mattress smelling and being lumpy. He was relentless, even brought it up with his lawyer and filed a formal complaint. So we changed it out."

Jessie thought about that. Had Haddonfield specifically demanded a mattress switch and gotten a record of it in his file so that when this question came up, she could be sure he'd written the message? It felt like something he would do.

“Was there anything hidden inside it?” she wondered.

“No,” he said. “I knew you’d ask that, so I made my people cut it open and check. They hate me now, by the way. But they didn’t find a thing.”

“Do you have any idea what it means, Dante?” she asked.

“Not a clue,” he said. “We’ve saved the nasty thing in case you wanted to come check it out personally. And I took a photo of it too, which I can send your way. But I don’t know what else I can do for you.”

“You’ve done more than enough,” she said. “Please just send me the photo. I’ll try to come by tomorrow to check out the mattress, though I’m sure I’ll come up empty too.”

“Will do.”

After Dante hung up, Jessie stepped outside for a bit of air. She had no idea what the message meant, but it seemed clear that Haddonfield had intended it for her, perhaps as some kind of code. And it seemed equally clear that he expected that if she got it, it would be after his death, just like his box of personal effects. The box that she’d so far refused to look at.

Then she remembered another message, the one that Haddonfield had asked Hannah to pass on to her when he called the day before his death. He had said: if you want to be independent, you have to go to the mattresses. That couldn’t be a coincidence.

When she’d first heard it, she thought it was some odd reference to the movie, *The Godfather*, which had a similar line about mattresses. But now she knew he’d said it that way to cover up his true meaning in case the wrong person was listening to the call. The problem was that she had no idea what he meant either.

Jessie thought about what she knew. She had a cryptic plea from a dead serial killer. She had a code written in crayon on a mattress. And she had a box of Haddonfield's effects. Maybe it was time to finally open that box and see what connection it might have to the code and the plea.

She didn't know what Mark Haddonfield was up to. And yet, even though she had nothing more than a hunch, some part of her couldn't help but think that if Haddonfield had gone to this much trouble, what he wanted her to know had to be important.

She couldn't shake the feeling that somehow Mark Haddonfield was reaching out from beyond the grave, trying to warn her.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:48 am

The young man warned himself not to get over-confident.

Just because everything so far had gone as he'd hoped, that didn't mean it would be smooth sailing the rest of the way. He'd put in so much hard work and preparation that getting cocky when he was this close to his goal would be idiotic.

He'd scrubbed the traditional internet of anything that might look even vaguely suspicious. All of his more explosive message board comments had been made on the dark web under an alias. But just to be safe, he'd stopped participating in those forums months ago.

And now it was all set to pay off. The young man's patience and dedication would be rewarded. It had been a lonely road, being a men's rights advocate as a scrawny teenager. He still remembered the day that he committed to the cause.

He was fifteen and his parents announced they were getting a divorce. He learned it was because his bitch of a mother had been cheating with her boss at the bank and intended to marry him. Needless to say, his dad got fired on some trumped-up charge of malfeasance at the company where he worked as an electrician.

His dad was a good man, but the twin hits of losing his family and his job were too much for him. He sank into a depression and started drinking too much. When he died a few months later in a drunk driving accident, everyone assumed it was a tragic result of his poor choices. But his son knew the truth. He hadn't lost control and gone off that cliff. He'd done it intentionally to end things.

It was in that moment of realization that the young man vowed to avenge his father's

memory. But it would take time to do it right. Of course, that meant that from then on, any hint of bitterness was kept hidden from the world. The young man shared his thoughts on dark web forums related to alpha male uplift and dominance but never with his name attached.

He also began to focus hard on his schoolwork, making sure he'd have the grades to get into a good college. That was the path to a position within the power structure that would eventually allow him to implement policies which supported male primacy in the culture.

He'd found a personal hero last spring when a young college student named Mark Haddonfield emerged. Haddonfield was doing the hard work, taking that celebrity profiler skank Jessie Hunt down by killing people she'd saved, and by proxy, sullyng her reputation. He'd almost taken her out too at one point, along with her slut sister, who somehow escaped and injured his knee in the process.

When Haddonfield was captured, it was a sad day. That is until his manifesto appeared online, asking others to take up the mantle and butcher those close to Hunt. The young man almost went out that night. But then he held back, deciding that he needed an action plan if he was really going to do the most damage.

So he came up with a strategy. He was in his fall semester at a community college, working to maintain the grades that would allow him to transfer to a top school. Now, he knew which school he would pursue. The mission gave him purpose.

All that was thrown into question when, a few months later, Haddonfield retracted his manifesto in a video that was made public. In it, he said that no harm should come to Jessie Hunt or her loved ones. The young man felt betrayed. His hero had gone beta.

But then, after a sleepless night, he had an epiphany. He understood what had really happened. Haddonfield was being forced to retract the manifesto. He surely had to do it to survive in that hellhole. He was likely being tortured, too, maybe even subjected

to brainwashing. Hunt was a profiler with expertise in psychology. She almost certainly led these indoctrination sessions.

That knowledge gave the young man some solace. In fact, he wrote a letter to Haddonfield in prison, telling him that he knew the video was made under duress. He assured his hero that he wouldn't let the false repudiation of the manifesto distract him from the mission that Haddonfield hadn't been able to complete. He would eliminate the one person that the whore Jessie Hunt cared most about: her little sister.

So Dallas Henry picked up the mantle. He learned everything he could about Hannah Dorsey. He studied up on her sordid history, which involved a murderous serial killer father who slaughtered her adoptive parents, not to mention surviving a kidnapping and several stalking incidents. He found a gap in her academic record where she simply disappeared from school for several months but had yet to discern what that was about. He was intrigued to pry open that secret.

He applied to transfer to her school, UC Irvine, and was accepted into both the university and the same major as one of hers—Psychology—for the spring quarter. He worked out religiously so that he would look attractive to her. Even smart girls like Dorsey could be hoodwinked by a sculpted torso, and he intended to keep her in the dark by blinding her with his looks and charm.

He'd heard about how Dorsey was a whiz at online sleuthing who had helped other students out of tricky situations. So he re-checked all his social media data, re-scrubbing anything that might even hint at philosophical leanings. Luckily, he'd never logged on to any site under his own name and had used a VPN to mask his IP address when he visited the dark web.

Then, like a good fisherman, he lured her in. He kept some distance from her during the first weeks of the quarter so as not to seem too eager. He wanted her to come to him. And it would have stayed that way if not for Haddonfield's death at the hands of some human scum hitwoman. Frankly, Dallas didn't dismiss the possibility that Jessie

Hunt had hired the woman to kill him as part of an inside job.

After that, he knew that he couldn't wait any longer. To honor Haddonfield, he had to accept the responsibility of picking up where he'd left off. So he created a situation where he needed help on an assignment. The hook was baited.

He made sure not to come on too strong so as not to scare her off. In fact, when she suggested a coffee date, he had declined, knowing his reticence would only make her trust him more. He found it amusing that now he was playing "hard to get" like one of the many hateful shrews that would soon get their comeuppance.

He knew he had his fish on the line when she commented on his t-shirt. That was inspired. His online research had revealed that the Sally movie was among her favorites. So he knew it would melt her defenses. Sure enough, her brain turned to mush the second she saw it.

He'd already watched the putrid thing as preparation so that he could seem "evolved" when he eventually told her he'd checked it out on her advice. He had wanted to vomit when the characters started debating whether men and women could really be friends.

The discussion was a waste of time. Women weren't put on this Earth to be friends with men. They were here for two reasons only: male pleasure and to propagate the species. Any suggestion otherwise was delusional.

Now that he had her hooked, he would reel her in slowly. She'd have no idea it was even happening. And when the time was right, he'd yank hard, ripping through her flesh both physically and metaphorically.

He would make Hannah Dorsey suffer, and when he grew bored with that, he would end her. And the best part was that because Jessie Hunt couldn't see him coming after her sister, she would be helpless to stop him.

Actually, that was the second best part. The true joy would come after Hunt lost her precious Hannah, when she was broken and vulnerable, a shell of herself.

That was when he'd come for her too.