



The Perfect Crime (Jessie Hunt #36)

Author: *Blake Pierce*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Wealthy couples are torn apart when a killer strikes at the heart of their perfect lives, leaving one dead and one to mourn.. LAPDs finest profiler, Jessie Hunt, is on the trail of this vengeful predator, but as she closes in, will the hunter has become the hunted?

Total Pages (Source): 40

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

As they pulled into the garage just before 9 pm, Sarah Whitaker had to concede that the dinner was just okay.

She'd read all the reviews ahead of time and got excited—perhaps more excited than she should have. After all, she'd been through this sort of thing before.

Hot new chef opens a high-end restaurant. She and her husband, James, make reservations for the first week, only to be a little disappointed. Maybe they should learn from that. It was fun to be able to get reservations to all the trendy places before most everyone else. But there was a downside. Sometimes these restaurants needed a few weeks to settle into their groove.

Then again, maybe she was being too harsh. As Sarah got out of the passenger seat, she tried to have a little perspective. It wasn't like the meal was actively bad . It just wasn't amazing. And they'd still had a good time.

James was being his typical, hilarious, smart-aleck self, cracking jokes that made her snort her wine through her nose. And he'd made a truly heartwarming toast too. Even now, after twenty-seven years together, he still had that magical, sweet-but-sassy charm that she loved.

She walked around the back of the car and was surprised to find that, while the driver's side door was open, James hadn't gotten out of the seat yet.

“What's taking so long, slowpoke?” she asked. “You're not that old.”

She peeked inside and was startled by what she found. James's face was chalky

white, and he had beads of sweat rolling down his forehead. He was grimacing.

“What’s wrong, honey?” she asked.

“I’m not feeling so great,” he grunted. “I started feeling bad on the way home, but it suddenly got a lot worse in the last couple of minutes.”

“Do you think it was something you ate?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said through gritted teeth, “but I’m really struggling here.”

“Well, let’s get you inside so you can lie down,” she said, helping him out of his seat. “Once you’re settled, I’ll see what we have in the medicine cabinet.”

She guided him in through the garage’s side door but found it difficult to support his weight. He could barely stand up on his own. There was no way she could get him to the living room couch in his condition, so she guided him to one of the breakfast room chairs and eased him down.

“Just stay here,” she said, as she moved into the kitchen. “I’ll look for something to help with the discomfort. Tell me exactly what hurts.”

“It’s everything,” he moaned. “I don’t think it’s food poisoning. My whole insides are on fire. I feel like I’m going to explode or—.”

He stopped talking abruptly, and Sarah looked up to see why. James was staring back in the direction they’d come from the hall that led to the garage. The kitchen wall was blocking her view, so she moved over to see what had caught his attention.

Standing in the doorway was a large person wearing all black, with a ski mask covering their face. Sarah screamed. The masked person took a step toward her, and

she screamed again. But the second time, the sound of her own voice snapped her brain and body into action.

She darted over to the cordless phone on the counter and grabbed it, trying to focus on the buttons rather than the person moving her way. But she couldn't stop herself from looking up.

As the intruder approached her, James tried to push himself out of his chair and launch himself in that direction. But his legs immediately gave out, and he crumbled to the floor.

Sarah pressed "9-1..." but before she could hit the final digit, the intruder reached her, ripped the phone from her hand, and threw it against the wall, shattering it into plastic bits. Then they grabbed her by the back of her top, dragged her into the breakfast room, and forced her down onto a chair near where James lay helplessly. She started to go to him, but the intruder put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her back down.

"Stop fighting it," the intruder's distinctly male voice growled. "You need to see the show."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Jessie Hunt did her best to hide her delight.

It almost felt like the old days, but she worried that saying that would ruin the vibe.

As she sat at the breakfast table, she watched Hannah Dorsey move deftly around the kitchen. Her little sister, who was home from college on spring break, was making Jessie and her husband, Ryan, breakfast.

Hannah was a talented amateur chef, and she appeared to be compensating for her inability to use those skills very often in her freshman dorm by putting together a massive spread for them. There were already yogurt parfaits and egg bites on the table, and she was putting the finishing touches on a stack of blueberry pancakes.

"You know that we have to leave for work in a half hour?" Jessie reminded her, referring to the police station where both she and Ryan worked. She was a criminal profiler for the LAPD, and Ryan, professionally known as Detective Hernandez, led an elite investigative unit.

"I know," Hannah said, "but breakfast is the most important meal of the day. You don't know what societal dregs you'll be dealing with when you get there. You're going to need your strength."

"I, for one, am not complaining," Ryan said, popping a cheddar, bacon, and chive egg bite in his mouth. "And what are you using your strength for on this first official day of spring break?"

"I thought I already told you," Hannah said, as she slid the last pancake onto the stack

and placed it on the breakfast table.

“You only told me ,” Jessie reminded her.

"Oh, right," Hannah said, joining them at the table. "I'm helping out Kat this week."

Jessie had already known that answer was coming, but she shifted uncomfortably in her chair anyway. The topic of Kat Gentry, her best friend and a private detective, was a sensitive one these days.

“You’re helping her with a case?” Ryan asked.

“Yeah,” Hannah answered. “She said she has some surveillance gig and having a partner would be a lot easier than handling it solo. She offered me fifty bucks a day and all the junk food I could eat, so I didn’t really have a choice.”

“Do you have any idea what the case is?” Jessie asked.

“She said she’d fill me in when I got to her office,” Hannah said. “I get the sense that I might be dealing with some societal dregs today myself.”

“Well, please be careful,” Jessie said, realizing she sounded more like Hannah’s mother than the adoptive half-sister who had raised her for the last two years of high school. “I know you can take care of yourself, but some of these people are more than a little extra, especially when they’re desperate.”

She knew her little sister could take care of herself. She'd made sure of that by taking her to self-defense classes and giving her some basic martial arts training. But Hannah, five foot nine and slender, with blonde hair and the same green eyes as Jessie, was a beautiful 18-year-old co-ed, which made her a target.

“I promise,” Hannah said before taking a long sip of coffee. There was a pregnant pause before she asked the question Jessie knew was coming. “How are things between you two? I don’t want to spend eight to twelve hours in a car with Kat without having a sense of what topics I have to avoid?”

Jessie sighed. “She’s still mad about me working with Haddonfield. At least I think she is. I haven’t heard much from her since she lashed out at me over it. I’m just trying to give her space, hoping she’ll eventually come around.”

“Good to know,” Hannah said, pouring some syrup on a pancake, “so steer clear of any mention of my sister while trapped in a car with her best friend. Got it.”

“I meant to ask you,” Jessie said, clumsily changing the subject, “how’s everything going on the...passion front?”

"The passion front?" Hannah repeated with a quizzical smile. "Are you talking about my love life, or are you referring to my latent desire to violently extract retribution against perceived wrongdoers?"

“The latter,” Jessie said, “no uncontrollable urges to physically punish scumbags?”

Hannah shook her head.

“I’m proud to say that, at least lately, it remains dormant,” she said. “I’ve been pulling a ‘Jessie.’”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that when the feelings of bloodlust surge in me, the ones I assume we both got from our shared serial killer father, I do what you do. I know it sounds cheesy, but I try to channel it into a fight for justice. That’s why I’ve been informally helping

other students at school with issues they don't want to take to campus police. If I can help them unmask a stalker, or find a missing friend, or even bust someone who falsely accused them of cheating on a final, it gives me the same thrill I used to get from—less altruistic methods of payback. That's what you do for a living, and it seems to be working pretty well. So I figured it was worth a shot."

Jessie smiled as she swallowed a spoonful of parfait. It was yummy, but that wasn't the reason she didn't respond. The truth was that these days, she wasn't doing as well at managing her own bloodthirsty impulses as her little sister seemed to be. It was something that she'd finally acknowledged—at least to herself—she couldn't ignore anymore. But none of that was stuff she intended to share with Hannah. She didn't want to disappoint her.

Ryan, who had been witness to some of her recent struggles, stepped in to save the day.

"I'm happy to ask about your love life," he said boisterously. "How are things going with—what's his name—Finn?"

Hannah's smile faded.

"That's a conversation for another time," she said. "it's not a blueberry pancake topic."

"Are you sure you don't want to bare your soul to the guy who isn't technically your stepdad but who you've always viewed as a hero and a mentor?" he teased.

"Maybe I can fill you in on Finn after you update me on how things are going with Parker," Hannah shot back with a mildly malevolent grin.

"Touché," he said and went silent.

Parker was Captain Gaylene Parker, who had taken over the job after Ryan resigned to return to his old position as leader of Homicide Special Section, or HSS, which specialized in cases with high profiles or intense media scrutiny—typically involving multiple victims or serial killers.

Jessie knew what Hannah was doing. Her sister was aware that things had been bumpy between Ryan and Parker and that asking about the relationship would put him on his heels. What Hannah didn't know—but Jessie did—was that the two of them had actually recently had a meeting with LAPD Chief Roy Decker to try to hash out their differences. And while things seemed better on the surface, it was clear to Jessie that the simmering tension between them remained. She feared that one day, it would erupt in a way that could put Ryan's career at risk.

Just then, both their phones rang. Jessie looked at hers. The call was from Parker.

“Speak of the devil,” Ryan said.

“That’s not constructive,” she chided.

Ryan stuck his tongue out at her before answering.

“Hi Captain,” he said, “You’re on speaker with me and Jessie. What’s up?”

“Sorry to bother you both before you even get in for the day, but I didn’t want you to waste time by coming into the office.”

“Why?” Jessie asked.

“I’m going to text you an address in the West Adams district,” she said. “There’s been a home invasion murder. We just got word a few minutes ago.”

“Why are they requesting HSS?” Ryan asked.

“I’m not sure,” Parker said, “But apparently the officer in charge at the scene was pretty adamant that this was up your alley. All I know is that he said this was definitely a case for HSS. And we all know that other divisions don’t like to give up case unless they have to. I guess you’ll find out more when you get there.”

She hung up without another word.

“Always the charmer,” Ryan said sarcastically.

Before Jessie could respond, they got a text with the address.

“Let’s go,” she said, before returning to Hannah. “Sorry to bail on you.”

“That’s okay,” her sister said. “Catching whoever did this is more important than egg bites. But I’ll still save you some.”

Jessie gave Hannah a kiss on the forehead and dashed back to the bedroom to put on her most comfortable walking shoes. She had a feeling she was going to need them today.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Jessie almost felt like she needed sunglasses.

When they pulled up in front of the West Adams mansion, there were so many flashing lights that she had to squint to see the house clearly. Ryan ended up having to park halfway down the block because of all the emergency vehicles.

They got out and walked on the sidewalk past the other mansions, which had a varied mix of architectural styles including Victorian, Craftsman and Beaux-Arts, all of which were typical for the historic district, located not far from downtown L.A. When they arrived at the address, Jessie looked up at the impressive place.

The house they'd been sent to was a Victorian. It was mostly green with white shutters. It had a giant yard and a large, wraparound porch. There were angled bay windows and a deeply pitched roof that led to an impressive turret. Jessie guessed that the home was built around 1900. She didn't have to guess to know that it was pricey.

They walked up the path to the huge front porch, where both police tape and a uniformed officer stopped them. Ryan held up his badge and ID before the young man could object to their presence.

“We’re looking for the officer in charge,” he said.

“That would be Sergeant Delco,” the officer replied. “I’ll alert him that you’re here.”

As he radioed the sergeant, Jessie gave Ryan a satisfied nod. They’d worked with Paul Delco before, and she’d always found him to be competent and professional.

Knowing that he was the one who requested them was a good sign. Delco wouldn't have reached out unless this situation was beyond the norm.

When he stepped outside to meet them, she was reminded of something else: Delco didn't give off a touchy-feely vibe. A rail-thin officer in his late thirties with crew cut brown hair, the man wore a permanent scowl. She didn't mind.

"Good to see you again, Sergeant," she said affably, just to see if she could get him to crack a smile. She couldn't.

"Ms. Hunt," he replied crisply before acknowledging Ryan, "Detective Hernandez. Thank you both for getting here so fast."

"We were told that you thought this case might be right for HSS, but we don't know why," Ryan said. "Care to fill us in?"

"Sure," Delco said, motioning for them to follow him inside, "the victim's name is James Whitaker, 56 years old, an investment banker at Wiley McComb. The medical examiner has just started his work, but unofficially, it looks like the guy was poisoned."

"What makes you so confident of that?" Jessie asked.

"That's what his wife, Sarah, said before she was taken away to the hospital," Delco explained. When both Jessie and Ryan gave him questioning looks, he continued.

"She started having a panic attack soon after I arrived and had to be sedated," he explained. "But according to the first officers on the scene, she said that her husband started to feel bad on the drive home from dinner. While she got him inside the house, an intruder apparently snuck in. He tied her up and made her watch while James died. The intruder told her that he'd poisoned him at the restaurant and then followed them

home to make sure everything went as he'd planned and that she saw the whole thing."

"So he poisoned the husband so that he could make the wife watch while he died?" Ryan confirmed as they walked down a long hallway.

"Yes, over the course of several hours," Delco said. "Then the guy apparently left her there, tied up, next to her dead husband. Now you understand why I thought this was a case for Homicide Special Section. This isn't your standard-issue murder."

They reached the breakfast area and Jessie stopped for a moment to take the room in. She didn't immediately look at the body that she could see out of the corner of her eye, lying on the floor.

Instead, she made her way to the kitchen, where she noted over a dozen chunks of plastic, metal, and wiring strewn on the floor. It took her a few seconds to grasp that they had once been a cordless phone. She wondered if it had broken in some kind of struggle while one of the Whitakers tried to call for help. They'd learn those details soon enough when they spoke to the wife at the hospital. Right now, she needed to learn as much as possible from the scene. She knelt down and noted what looked like bloody zip ties on the kitchen floor, along with copious blood drops on the ground.

"Your people already saw these?" she asked Delco.

"Yes," he said, "they just didn't want to bag anything until you got a chance to review everything."

"You ready to look at the body?" Ryan asked, well aware of her preference to take in the surroundings before studying the victim. She nodded. They walked to the breakfast room table, where multiple crime scene unit members were swabbing, dusting, and the like.

Jessie recognized the deputy medical examiner as Kelvin Soto, a smallish Latino man in his forties with brown hair parted neatly to the side. He was kneeling beside the body of James Whitaker.

The victim was lying on his side. Whitaker was slightly pudgy, with thinning brown hair. He was wearing slacks, a button-down shirt, and a sport coat, which suggested the restaurant they'd gone to on a Sunday night was at least somewhat upscale. A pool of saliva rested under his cheek. His eyes were clenched tightly shut.

"Any preliminary thoughts?" Ryan asked Soto.

The examiner looked up, saw who he was dealing with, and got to his feet.

"Too early for anything definitive, but he seems to have died between six and ten hours ago, which would have been between 9:30 last night and 1:30 this morning. We'll do a tox screen once we get him back to the office, but the wife's claim that he was poisoned seems credible. We should have something to work with by this afternoon."

"Okay, thanks," Ryan said, turning to Jessie. "Any theories yet?"

She shook her head.

"I'm just trying to wrap my head around the basics so far," she told him. "It seems like someone somehow poisoned James Whitaker without anyone noticing, then followed the couple home, tied up Sarah Whitaker and spent the night making her watch while her husband died. Whoever we're dealing with, they had this planned out."

"That's what worries me," Ryan said. "Was this some kind of vendetta against the Whitakers that's settled now? Or are we dealing with someone who's just getting

started?”

Jessie had the same concern.

“Let’s go to the hospital,” she said. “Right now, Sarah Whitaker may be the only one with those answers and we need to get them quick.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

When they arrived at the hospital just before 8:30, Jessie noted that the place was unusually quiet. There were no ambulance sirens going off outside, and the chaos they'd come to expect in the emergency room was nowhere to be found. Apparently, Monday mornings were quiet time on the trauma front. Or at least this Monday morning was.

The charge nurse directed them back to the bed where Sarah Whitaker was lying. When they arrived and pulled back the curtain, a nurse was taking the woman's vitals. Whitaker was lying there quietly, her eyes open but dull. It was clear that the sedative hadn't completely worn off yet.

She wore a floral hospital gown and had an IV in her arm. Someone, likely not her, had tied her brownish-gray hair with a loose scrunchie. She still wore her makeup from last night, and her mascara tears stained her cheeks.

"We're with the police," Ryan told the nurse. "Is she able to talk?"

"She's gotten more alert in the last few minutes," the nurse said. "If you'll just wait until I finish recording her blood pressure before asking any questions, I'd appreciate it."

They both stood there in awkward silence. Jessie watched her husband shift nervously from one foot to the other. Even under the circumstances, Jessie found it cute to see him so obviously uncomfortable.

Ryan was usually so self-assured. And why wouldn't he be? Not only was he a block of human granite, with a square jaw and a well-muscled, two-hundred pound, six-foot

tall body that strained at his dress shirt. But he also had warm brown eyes, a shy grin, and adorable dimples.

The man was gorgeous. So any time he seemed slightly out of his element was a delight, one that made him even more attractive to her. Jessie shook the thought out of her head. She was used to being in situations like this but James Whitaker wasn't and she didn't want to be seen fawning over her husband in front of a victim.

The nurse nodded that it was okay to continue. Ryan, now back in control, held out his badge so the woman lying in bed could see it.

"Hello, Mrs. Whitaker," he said softly. "I'm Detective Hernandez with the LAPD. This is Jessie Hunt. She works with us. We're sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," Whitaker said, her voice dry. The nurse handed her a cup of water, and she took it, sipping from the straw.

"We'd like to talk to you about what happened last night," Ryan continued.

"I know her from TV," Whitaker said, pointing weakly at Jessie. "She's the one who catches serial killers."

"That's right," Jessie said, taking a step forward, "but I also help on other kinds of cases, Mrs. Whitaker. And with your help, I'm hoping to catch the person who poisoned your husband."

Hearing those words, Sarah Whitaker flinched and closed her eyes tight for a second. When she opened them again, they seemed more focused than before.

"I'll do whatever I can," she said firmly.

“Thank you,” Ryan said. “We’d like to start with your dinner last night. Where did you go?”

“A new place called Daddio,” she said. “It just opened last Thursday, and we were able to get in yesterday. We were really excited.”

“Did you notice anything unusual at dinner?” Jessie asked. “Did either of you have an argument with someone there or take note of anyone acting oddly?”

“No, nothing like that,” Whitaker said.

“Your interactions with the waitstaff were pleasant?” Ryan checked.

“Absolutely,” Whitaker said. “Everyone was wonderful to us. We agreed that the food wasn’t everything we hoped for, but we gave them a pass because the place was so new. And we certainly didn’t say anything negative to anyone while we were there.”

“What about anyone not affiliated with the restaurant?” Jessie wondered. “Did someone else possibly approach your table, engage you in conversation?”

“No, not that I recall.”

“Did either of you leave the table, maybe at the same time?” Ryan pressed.

“I don’t think so,” Whitaker said with less certainty. “We both went to the restroom, but at different times.”

Jessie was reluctant to ask the next question because it might sound like she was placing blame.

“A lot of times, when someone who I’m eating with steps away for a minute, I’ll check my phone and not really pay attention to what’s going on around me,” she said. “Any chance you did the same thing when James went to the restroom?”

Whitaker’s face sank.

"Yeah," she said. "I do that all the time. I don't specifically remember doing it last night, but I'm sure I did. Are you saying that someone poisoned Jim's food or drink while I was sitting right there, oblivious to it?"

“I’m not saying that at all,” Jessie said quickly. “I don’t want you to think that. It’s our job to explore every possibility. That’s why we ask so many questions. Most of the time, it amounts to nothing. Tell us about the drive home. The sergeant at your house said that your husband started feeling bad then.”

From Whitaker’s expression, it appeared that Jessie had successfully short-circuited the guilt that the woman was starting to succumb to.

“Yeah, when we got home he told me he’d started feeling bad on the drive but that it had gotten much worse in the last few minutes,” she explained. “I had to help him inside. I guess that’s how the man got in. I wasn’t focused on lowering the garage door or locking the inside one. It’s my fault that he got in.”

“That’s not true,” Jessie assured her. “How could you have possibly envisioned what was going to happen? The fault here lies exclusively with the intruder.”

“Mrs. Whitaker,” Ryan said, “a moment ago, you said that ‘he got in.’ Are you sure it was a man?”

She nodded forcefully. “Absolutely. He was pretty big—easily six feet tall and when he talked, his voice was clearly male.”

Ryan looked over at Jessie. She knew his expression well. He was letting her know that he planned to get into the hard part now, and she should pay close attention to Whitaker. She nodded back at him.

While everything they'd learned so far matched up with Sarah Whitaker's story, they couldn't be certain that she hadn't made the whole thing up and killed her husband herself. Jessie wanted to closely observe her reaction to Ryan's next questions.

"Okay," he said, turning his attention back to Whitaker, "so what happened after the intruder got into the house?"

The woman sighed heavily at the memory before answering.

"I started screaming and grabbed the home phone to call '911,' but he took it from me and threw it against the wall. Jim tried to stop him but couldn't stand up and fell on the floor. The man forced me to sit at the breakfast table and tied me up. I begged him to let us go, but he said I 'needed to see the show.'"

She paused for a moment to take another sip of water. But Jessie suspected it was also to regroup. Neither she nor Ryan spoke, waiting for her to continue.

"The 'show' was Jim dying over the course of several hours," Whitaker said bitterly. "I kept pleading with the man to call for an ambulance, but he didn't answer. He just kept staring down at Jim. At one point, I refused to watch, and he said that if I looked away, he'd slit Jim's throat. So I started watching again. Looking back on it, maybe I should have refused. Then Jim wouldn't have been in pain for so long. But some part of me kept hoping that the man would relent and help him or let me call '911.'"

"But he never did?" Ryan said quietly.

Whitaker shook her head.

“At one point, I asked why he was doing this,” she said. “He said I needed to experience the pain, that it would be good for me. When I asked why, he said it would all become clear eventually.”

“But he never gave you an answer?” Ryan asked.

"No, he mostly just sat there in his black ski mask," she said. "Occasionally, he would check on Jim to see if he was still alive. For a while, he was awake but eventually he lost consciousness so the man would hold up a mirror to his mouth and nose to see if he was breathing.”

She paused for a few moments and Jessie thought that Ryan would have to prompt her but then she resumed. When she spoke again, there was a catch in her voice.

"One time he did that routine and there was nothing—no fog on the mirror, no blood pressure reading at all. He looked up at me and made this formal pronouncement that my husband had died at 10:41 pm Then he got up and left."

“He didn’t say anything else?” Jessie asked, speaking for the first time in a while.

“No,” Whitaker said. “He just left me tied up, alone with my husband’s dead body and all these terrible thoughts. I did the math in my head. From the time we got home around 9 pm until he died was close to two hours. There was lots of time to save him, if that madman would have allowed it.”

Jessie didn't say anything, but so far, every response from Whitaker, along with her body language, reinforced her credibility. One could never be completely certain, but Jessie was inclined to believe her story.

“How did you get free?” Ryan asked.

"For a long time, I didn't even try," Whitaker said. "I just sat there, broken, trying to process what had happened. When I did finally work up the strength to try, it took forever. The man had zip-tied my hands together behind my back and then tied them to a leg of the table. I had to figure out how to press up on the bottom of the table, which was heavy, while getting my hands low enough to slide them out from under the table leg. I gave up multiple times. But then I started to get angry, and I used that fury. It gave me the power I needed to lift the table and slide out. Then I went to the kitchen and got a knife out. It took me a while to cut myself loose. That's how I got these."

She held up her hands to show the bandages on both wrists. That explained the blood that Jessie had seen on the zip ties and on the kitchen floor.

"Are we done?" Whitaker asked.

"Almost," Ryan assured her. "We understand that your husband was an investment banker. Did he have any enemies? Ever mention a falling out with a co-worker or reference an angry client?"

"He didn't really get into the details of his work with me," Whitaker answered. "I mean, I know he played hardball and there were probably a lot of people who didn't like him. But he never specifically mentioned anyone who made him feel physically threatened."

Ryan nodded as if satisfied.

"Mrs. Whitaker," he said carefully. "May we have permission to search the rest of your house and your husband's office?"

"I assumed you already had," she replied.

“We’ve done a cursory search of the crime scene but for something more involved, we need a warrant, unless you authorize us to go in without one.”

“Of course,” she said. “Do whatever you need to. I want this person caught.”

Suddenly, she gasped.

“What is it?” Jessie asked.

Whitaker shook her head, upset.

"I was just going to ask that you not disturb our son's room when I realized I have to tell him."

Jessie and Ryan exchanged confused looks. Whitaker saw it and explained.

"Our son, Rob, is away at college in New Hampshire," she said, choking up. "I'm going to have to call him and tell him his father is dead, that he was murdered. I don't know how I'm going to do that."

Even though it wasn't standard protocol, Jessie moved toward the woman and put her hand on top of Whitaker's.

“As someone who has been in your situation, my one suggestion is to be supportive but direct. No ‘he passed on’ or ‘he’s not with us anymore.’ Tell Rob that his father died. It will be painful, but he’ll process it better if you’re forthright about things.”

“Thank you,” she said, squeezing Jessie's hand.

“I’m sorry I can’t help more.”

“You can,” Whitaker said. “Just do what you always do—catch the bastard responsible for my husband’s death. That’s all I ask of you.”

“We’ll do our best,” Jessie promised.

Ryan was already on the phone with Jamil Winslow, the head of the HSS research department, moments after they left Sarah Whitaker.

“We want a list of every employee and customer at the restaurant, Daddio, from last night,” he explained, “along with as much info as you and Beth can get on Whitaker’s co-workers and clients at his firm, Wiley McComb.”

Beth was Beth Ryerson, Jamil’s lone employee in the research department. Whatever he said in response to Ryan was brief. Based on everything Jessie knew about him, it was likely something along the lines of “we’re already doing all that.”

After Ryan hung up, they walked out of the hospital in relative silence. Jessie was focused on what kind of person would force someone to watch their loved one die slowly over the course of hours, and why he would want to be there for the process.

Most killers she investigated preferred their murderous violence to be more dramatic. Whether via shooting, stabbing, or strangling, they typically favored the thrill that came with the suddenness of death at their hands. But not this one.

She glanced over at Ryan and saw that he was deep in thought too.

“Any epiphanies yet?” she asked him.

He seemed startled by her question.

“I wasn’t actually thinking about the case, at least not in the way you’d expect,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just—I was thinking about the call that Sarah Whitaker is going to have to make to her son and it reminded me of the conversation we had last week with the adoption counselor.”

Jessie recalled the meeting. It was the first formal step they'd taken to explore the idea of adopting a child. For months now, they'd been sparring over the idea of having a baby. Ryan wanted one. Jessie was less enthusiastic, worried about the impact of a pregnancy on her career and her physical health after suffering multiple serious injuries since becoming a profiler for the department. She'd eventually suggested that they investigate the possibility of adoption, which led to the meeting last week.

“What about the conversation?” she prompted.

"Well, do you remember how the counselor said that they sometimes worried about placing children with couples that have high-risk jobs?"

“Of course,” Jessie said. “She said that many of these kids are without parents because of some trauma related to abandonment by a parent, or even their death.”

“Exactly,” Ryan said, “so hearing Sarah Whitaker talk about breaking the news of a father’s death to his son made me wonder what would happen to a child we adopt—one who might already have lost a parent. It would be a double trauma if they settled into a new life and then lost one or both of us. I don’t know if the adoption service would consider us too risky, or if we should even be putting ourselves in that situation.”

“It’s definitely something to think about,” Jessie agreed, though she was less concerned about the issue than him. She’d lost both her birth mother and her adoptive parents to murder, and she was still plowing ahead.

Of course, she periodically had a near-uncontrollable desire to inflict bodily damage on those she deemed guilty of a crime. So maybe she wasn't all that emotionally healthy after all. Beyond that, part of her wondered if this was some coded hint from Ryan that they should reconsider having a child themselves. She chose not to engage on the issue for now.

"Let's worry about our parental risk level later," she said crisply. "Right now, we've got a killer to catch."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Kat's car smelled like onions.

Hannah didn't say anything out loud about it. She didn't want her friend and sometime mentor to feel bad. But it was pretty clear to her that the woman had made a pit stop for a cheeseburger before picking her up. It was still only 9 am, which seemed early for that kind of thing, but Hannah wasn't in charge of this surveillance session, so she kept her mouth shut.

"So tell me about this guy we're investigating?" she said as they sat parked on the side of South Figueroa St., waiting for their subject to show up.

"We can get to that in a minute," Kat said, sucking loudly on the straw in her Diet Coke cup. "I want to hear about how school's going."

Hannah decided to throw her a bone. The woman had earned it. After all, she'd been in Hannah's life almost as long as Jessie. Since two years ago, when Jessie learned that she and Hannah were half-sisters and assumed guardianship of her after the murder of her adoptive parents, Kat had been there too. She was Jessie's best friend, which meant that she felt a responsibility for Hannah's welfare too.

In addition to Kat's friendship with Jessie, she was also a private detective. That combo made her a perfect fit when Hannah wanted to get into the world of crime investigation too. With Jessie's blessing, she'd served as an unofficial intern for Kat last summer, helping her out on multiple cases as she learned the ins and outs of investigative technique.

That summer seemed like forever ago. It was before Hannah started at UC Irvine. It

was before Jessie suffered a brain injury that required surgery. It was before a serial killer named Mark Haddonfield tried to kill Jessie while she waited in her hospital room for the procedure. And it was before one of Haddonfield's minions, while trying to kill Kat, instead shot her fiancé, Mitch Connor. The young killer was following Haddonfield's orders that all his acolytes try to take out Jessie's loved ones.

Since that moment last December—only four months ago—every day had been a struggle for Kat. She only started taking cases again a couple of months ago. And it was only weeks ago that she'd learned Jessie had agreed to occasionally meet with Haddonfield in prison to let him look at cases she was working on.

Hannah knew that her sister had a good reason. It was the only way to get Haddonfield to call off his dogs and keep those close to her safe. But Kat hadn't seen that way. She viewed it as a betrayal of Mitch's memory. Since the day she'd learned about the arrangement, the two women had barely talked.

All of this was incredibly awkward for Hannah, who wasn't sure exactly what she was allowed to say around Kat without setting her off. So for now at least, she threw Kat the bone she was after and updated her on college life.

"Both the fall and winter quarters went well academically. I have a 3.9 GPA, which I think is pretty solid considering everything that's gone on since I started school."

"Better than pretty solid, I'd say," Kat agreed.

She took another sip from the straw. As she did, Hannah took note of how, when Kat pursed her lips, her scars were more prominent.

Katherine Gentry, prior to this life, had served in Afghanistan as an Army Ranger. That was where she was injured in an IED explosion that left her with damage both internal and external, including multiple facial burn marks and a long scar that ran

vertically down her left cheek from just below her eye.

“Thanks,” Hannah replied, trying to keep her focus on the woman’s eyes, “I worked really hard.”

“What about that guy you mentioned?” Kat asked. “Finn, right?”

Hannah was a little more reluctant to discuss that topic but knew that trying to avoid it would only pique Kat’s curiosity more.

“That’s right,” she said. “I’m not sure exactly where that situation stands. We were kind of headed in the romantic direction. But after I helped him find a missing fraternity brother last month, things soured a little. He seemed more interested in protecting the reputation of the fraternity than the safe return of the missing guy. He insists that’s not what he intended, but right now, I have a bit of a bad taste in my mouth, so I hit ‘pause’ on everything.”

“Okay,” Kat said, thankfully not pressing the issue, “but you found the student, right?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve helped out several other people with problems they didn’t want to take to campus police?”

“Two other people,” Hannah confirmed.

“So it’s almost like you’re running your own little private detective agency out of school.”

“Kind of,” Hannah agreed, “although I don’t get paid, and it complicates study time.”

Kat looked like she was about to respond when her eyes narrowed. Hannah followed her gaze and saw that she was staring at a forty-something man in a suit who was walking down the sidewalk toward them. He was about five foot ten, skinny, with slightly thinning brown hair and wire-rimmed glasses. He was holding a small briefcase in one hand and talking on his cell phone with the other.

“I assume that’s our guy?” Hannah asked.

“He is,” Kat confirmed. “His name is Rex Stiller. He’s a manager for a trucking company that operates out of the building to our right.”

Both women knew better than to look at Stiller as he walked by them and through the circular doors leading inside. In fact, Hannah turned to face Kat so that her face wasn’t visible to the man.

“So what are we checking on?” she asked. “Is he pilfering from the company? Authorizing transport of illegal goods?”

"I'm afraid it's nothing that cloak and dagger," Kat answered. "His wife, Moira, thinks he's cheating on her. He's been consistently coming home late for the last month. He'd dodgy about where he's been, saying that he's 'working on a special project.' But when she came by unannounced last week, he wasn't here, and his assistant didn't know anything about the project. Plus, Moira says he's in better shape than he used to be, something he never used to care about. And she says that when he gets home, his hair is sometimes wet, like he took a shower. He told her that he's been at the gym, but she's worried that he's washing the scent of another woman off him."

“That’s a lot of suspicious activity on Rex’s part,” Hannah had to concede.

“Agreed,” Kat said, “which is why we’re going to be getting up close and personal with the man today.”

“Should one of us go in now?” Hannah asked.

“No, let’s give him a little time to get settled,” Kat told her. “I want him in his routine before we implement any measures. He’s less likely to notice us once he’s immersed in his work.”

“Great,” Hannah said, “then that gives us a chance to address the elephant in the room.”

“What’s that?” Kat asked, though it was clear from her squirming that she knew what it was.

“I’m not going to sit in this car for hours on end and act like everything is hunky-dory when we both know it’s not,” Hannah replied. “When are you going to forgive my sister?”

Kat sighed deeply.

“I don’t want to get into that with you,” she finally said.

“So we’re just going to pretend like it’s no big deal that you two have barely communicated over the last month?” Hannah said, pressing ahead anyway. “Is this how you want things to stay?”

“Look, she really hurt me, Hannah,” Kat said. “She’s working with the guy responsible for Mitch’s murder.”

“I get that,” Hannah said, “and there’s no question that she should have told you about it earlier. That’s on her. But you’ve got to give her a little grace too. It’s not like she wanted to partner up with Mark Haddonfield. It was the only way to ensure that his collection of toadying psychos didn’t keep coming after the people she cares

about. Remember—the guy who killed Mitch was coming after you. And there was that madman who tried to kill Dr. Lemmon. They weren't going to stop, Kat. She had to do something.”

“She didn't have to do that.”

"Really?" Hannah said, trying to keep her own frustration in check. "What alternative idea would you have suggested? Because I don't recall you offering one. And forgive my bluntness, but I think that's mostly because you were in a depression about losing Mitch, one you haven't yet emerged from. So you weren't pitching options."

“That's harsh,” Kat said.

“You're right ,” Hannah conceded, “and I'm sorry. But she had to make a choice. It was admittedly an imperfect one. But since she made it four months ago, none of us have been attacked by one of Haddonfield's people. And from what I understand, because he's about to go on trial, she's only had to work with him on one case, which he apparently helped with by the way.”

“I really don't want to talk about this, Hannah,” Kat insisted.

“Fine, then what do you want to talk about—perhaps your obsession with Ash Pierce? I know you haven't let that go either.”

Hannah didn't have to be a private detective to figure that one out. Clipped articles about the upcoming trial of the hit woman who had almost killed both Hannah and Kat littered the backseat of the car. Hannah understood why Kat might be fixated on Pierce. After all, the woman had tortured her within an inch of her life last summer before trying to murder her. But she'd also tried to kill Hannah, and she'd made a conscious decision to move on.

“I’m just keeping tabs on her case,” Kat said.

"Why?" Hannah demanded. "She killed over a half dozen people, and some of those were caught on video. She's in custody facing murder charges for that, along with what she did to us. She's never getting out. Why fixate on her instead of moving forward with your life?"

Kat smiled at her wearily.

“I’m actually trying to do that,” she said. “That’s one of the reasons I wanted you to help me out today. I have a meditation appointment this afternoon. I scheduled it before I got this case, and I didn’t want to cancel. I was hoping you could go solo watching Stiller for a little while until I finished.”

“Of course,” Hannah said, feeling slightly guilty for how hard she’d pushed. “How long do you think you’ll be gone?”

“All told, I can’t imagine that it will be more than an hour and a half.”

“Not a problem,” Hannah promised.

“Thanks,” Kat said. “Now can we stop talking about all these personal issues and discuss how we’re going to find out if Rex is stepping out on the missus?”

“I’m all ears,” Hannah said. “Let’s catch a cheater.”

“Hey,” Kat reminded her. “Don’t jump the gun. His wife might be paranoid. The guy could have a totally legitimate reason for his behavior.”

“Sure,” Hannah said sarcastically. “I’ll bet he joined a book club.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Jessie walked down the unfamiliar hallway. In her nearly three years of profiling for the LAPD, she'd never been here before.

She'd been to the Forensic Sciences Division of the police department more than once when the kind of poison used was immediately obvious. But she'd never been to the more specialized toxicology unit which was headed up by Dr. Amelia Roth. That's who Jessie was supposed to meet with at 9:30, just a few minutes from now.

She stopped just outside the door to the office and allowed herself a moment to regroup before going in. She wanted to make sure that her internal churn wasn't visible on the outside. She saw her reflection in the glass of the office door mirror. She ran her fingers through her shoulder-length brown hair and determined that she looked presentable.

She was five foot ten but closer to six feet today in the loafer-like black sneakers she wore. Her green eyes—the exact same shade as her younger sister—were clear and fresh. Her outfit—black slacks and a gray, buttoned top—oozed professionalism. And her early morning five-mile runs had her feeling strong and fit.

Despite all that, and her calm and collected outward appearance, she was still fuming over what Sarah Whitaker had described happening to her. What kind of person forces a wife to watch her husband slowly die over several hours?

It was the right question to ask from a profiling perspective. If she could get into the mindset of this killer, it would give them a better chance of catching him. But right now, she was less interested in understanding the motives of the man than in making him pay for his cruelty. She knew that mentality wasn't constructive to her work, but

there it was all the same.

She tried to clear her head, but it was no good. Then she recalled how Dr. Lemmon had recommended employing the box breathing technique in these situations. As she tried to use it, she flashed back to the appointment with Lemmon a few weeks ago. That was when, after delaying for months, she finally revealed her secret to her longtime psychiatrist: that the feelings of bloodlust that she thought she'd permanently channeled into a constructive outlet had returned and curdled into something darker and more violent.

"I thought that when my father died—when I killed him—that whatever part of his vicious nature, the part that turned him into a serial killer, was extinguished from me for good," she had explained to Lemmon. "But that was clearly naive. Those urges, the same ones that Hannah has been successfully fighting, have bubbled up lately and I'm worried that sometime soon, they're going to boil over."

Dr. Lemmon hadn't seemed all that stunned at the revelation. Then again, few things stunned Janice Lemmon. The 70-year-old might look meek and unassuming, with her tiny body, thick glasses and tight, little gray ringlets of hair, but she was no pushover.

Prior to her work as a psychiatrist in private practice, she was also a highly decorated LAPD and FBI criminal profiler. Despite being out that game for over a decade, the woman was still sharp as a tack. It was hard to get anything past her.

"So what do you want to do about it?" she had asked bluntly.

"I want to get control over this so that I don't accidentally kill someone that I should be arresting," Jessie had told her.

So that's what they'd been working on in the weeks since: both trying to get to the root of her cravings and finding methods to control them when they sprouted up. It

was a frustrating process.

Jessie was snapped out of her reverie by a phone call. The caller ID indicated that it was coming from Twin Towers Correction Facility, one of the main jail facilities for L.A. County. She knew that the call could only be coming from one person: Mark Haddonfield, the twenty-two serial killer she'd caught when he tried to murder her in her hospital bed.

"Hello," she said.

An automated voice answered.

"You have received a collect call from ' Mark Haddonfield,'" the voice said, with Haddonfield inserting his name after the pause. Then the robot voice returned. "Will you accept the charges?"

"Yes," she replied.

After a several-second delay, she heard his voice again.

"Hi, Ms. Hunt," he said chipperly. "How are you this morning?"

"I'm okay," she answered, "but don't you have limited time for these collect calls? Maybe you should get to the point."

"I was just trying to be polite," said the man who first became obsessed with her, and when she didn't respond as he hoped, tried to kill her and everyone she loved. "But I'm sure you're very busy, so I'll be brief. I need to meet with you."

"What about?" she asked apprehensively. Every conversation with Mark Haddonfield, no matter how innocuous, was a source of anxiety.

“I’d rather discuss it in person,” he whispered, as if that would make a difference. “Besides, we haven’t interacted face-to-face in weeks. I’m starting to feel unappreciated.”

Though he didn’t say it, a silent threat lingered in the air after that comment. They both knew that if he sensed that he was being ignored, he might resuscitate the kill order from his online manifesto. That couldn’t happen.

“I’m a little overwhelmed today,” she told him, “but I’ll try to come by tomorrow. That’s the best I can offer right now.”

“What are you working on?” he asked. “Is it a case? Can I help?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she answered, ignoring his question.

“I can’t wait,” he said, and his voice was filled with genuine glee.

She hung up and opened the door to the toxicology office. Right now, discussing murderous poisons sounded more appealing than thinking about Mark Haddonfield.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Normally, Jessie would have come here with Ryan.

But they had decided to split investigative duties. Since he was a detective and had more authority when it came to getting people to answer questions, he was at Wiley McComb, the investment bank where James Whitaker worked, talking to his co-workers.

That meant Jessie would talk to Dr. Roth alone. She didn't have the power to formally question someone without an LAPD officer present, but since the toxicologist worked for the department, there was no concern that she would refuse to answer.

Still, Jessie was apprehensive. She'd heard that Amelia Roth had something of a...caustic personality that was only tolerated because she was so good at her job. So she was surprised that when she entered the outer office, the place seemed so chill.

She was in a small, currently empty waiting room that reminded her of a doctor's office. There were three chairs along the wall with a small table in the middle that had celebrity magazines on it. Smooth jazz played over the speaker system.

She stepped up to the closed, frosted reception window and knocked softly. The door slid open to reveal a twenty-something guy with frizzy blond hair, pale skin, and thick glasses.

"Yes?" he said irritably.

"I'm Jessie Hunt," she replied as pleasantly as she could. "I'm supposed to talk to Dr.

Roth about a case I'm working on."

"Jessie Hunt," he repeated his voice unusually high-pitched. "I've heard of you. You're the one who tangles with serial killers. Wasn't your dad one?"

"He was," she said, keeping the smile plastered to her face. "Is Dr. Roth available?"

"She's in the back," he said. "I'm her lab assistant, Monty. I have to check your ID before I can buzz you back."

She showed it to him. He looked it over more closely than she would have expected. Then he buzzed the door. When she opened it, she found that he had moved directly in front of her in the doorway.

"Didn't you end up killing your dad?" he asked, standing uncomfortably close.

"I did, Monty," she confirmed. "It was kind of a 'him' or 'me' situation. So you probably don't want to piss me off."

"Leave her alone, Monty," a female voice called out from behind him. "You're making the genius profiler nervous. Stop invading her personal space."

Jessie looked in the direction of the voice and saw someone emerge from behind a whiteboard at the back of what appeared to be a lab. It was a woman in a white lab coat, which hardly did her justice.

She had flaming red hair that cascaded down her shoulders to her elbows. She wore expensive glasses that didn't mask her bright, blue eyes. Her skin was pale, too, but not like Monty's. It had a delicate, well-cared-for porcelain quality to it. She wore a bold, fuchsia buttoned top and a form-fitting black skirt that stopped just below the knees. Even without her high heels, it was clear that the woman was several inches

taller than Jessie, likely well over six feet. With them, she was closer to six foot four.

“Dr. Roth, I presume?” Jessie asked, hoping to start things off on a lighter note.

“Yes,” she answered, apparently not getting the arcane reference being paraphrased. “Who else would it be?”

“No one,” Jessie said, giving up on the attempt to establish some kind of repartee. “Thanks for meeting with me. I know the medical examiner was stumped on the origin of the poison used on James Whitaker. He said you might have better luck. Was he right?”

“It’s never luck, Ms. Hunt,” Roth said sharply, “but yes, I’ve had some success in determining the toxin used to kill your victim. Why don’t you join me back here?”

Jessie wandered to the back of the lab and joined Roth on the other side of the whiteboard, which was covered in equations she couldn’t begin to understand. The doctor nodded at the board as if just looking at it should give Jessie her answers.

“I see it,” she replied, “but I don’t get it. Chemistry was never my strongest subject. Maybe you should walk me through what you’ve discovered.”

“I thought you were supposed to be some kind of genius,” Roth noted tartly.

“I’ve never claimed to be,” Jessie told her, doing her best not to let the woman get under her skin. “Maybe you’re thinking of yourself. But I’m happy to try to learn whatever you can teach me.”

She couldn’t but wonder if having her own little fiefdom hadn’t screwed up Roth’s ability to interact with visitors in an appropriate way. Or maybe the woman was like this all the time. Either way, Jessie wasn’t enjoying it.

“In that case, I’ll dispense with the exciting particulars,” Roth said. “The dumbed-down version is that whoever poisoned Mr. Whitaker didn’t just find a poison and use it. He created his own.”

“What?” Jessie said, unprepared for that answer.

“The killer combined a series of chemicals that might seem harmless on their own. But in concert, they would have the desired effect. The combination would be odorless and tasteless in smaller amounts. And small amounts are all that would be needed to do what the police report says happened.”

“Are you saying that this poison was designed to work in this specific manner?”

“Quite likely,” Roth said. “That, or someone stumbled onto it as a lucky accident. Hard to be certain. Either way, it’s nasty stuff. It wouldn’t have an obvious immediate effect. But within about fifteen minutes, the victim would begin to feel some discomfort. They might dismiss it as just starting to get sick or, as it initially seemed in this case, food poisoning. But at some point between a half hour and forty-five minutes after ingesting the poison, the pain would become more acute.”

“How long after that before they are at risk of death?” Jessie asked.

“That’s the most insidious thing, Ms. Hunt,” Dr. Roth said, turning her attention away from the whiteboard to stare directly at her. “If brought to a hospital and administered the proper medication, this poison isn’t necessarily fatal. The odds of recovery are quite good. But if untreated, the victim has about an hour and a half, maybe two at the outside, before the poison’s effects are irreversible. The person who did this must have known that. That’s why he stuck around until it was too late to do anything.”

“That fits,” Jessie mused aloud. “The Whitakers got home from the restaurant around nine. He was probably poisoned sometime in the half hour prior to that. And we

know that he was dead by 10:41.”

“Sounds about right,” Roth agreed.

“So what kind of person would have the sort of knowledge needed to ‘create’ a poison. Are we talking someone who’d require medical expertise?”

"That would certainly make it easier for them," Roth answered. "A doctor, nurse, or pharmacist would be a prime suspect in my book. But it doesn't have to be a medical professional. A scientist, or even just someone with an affinity for chemistry who did the required research, might be able to create the right concoction. Hell, even Monty over there could probably do it if he was more patient and less sloppy in his work."

Jessie looked over at the lab assistant, who appeared offended by the accusation that he might be a killer.

“I’m not sloppy,” he said petulantly.

Jessie found it mildly amusing that he was more hurt at the attack on his work habits than the suggestion that he could be a murderer.

“For the record, where were you last night, Monty?” Dr. Roth demanded, appearing to be enjoying herself for the first time in the conversation.

“I was at a double bill of the Andrew Garfield Spider-man movies,” he answered immediately. “I dressed up as The Lizard. He’s the villain in the first one.”

“Of course you did,” Roth said, before turning back to Jessie. “Well, I guess he’s off the hook then.”

Jessie was tempted to ask Roth where she was last night, not because she suspected

the woman. They were confident the killer was male. But she thought the doctor deserved to be knocked down a peg or two, for both her general arrogance and her treatment of Monty. But she held her tongue. She might have more questions for Roth, and it wouldn't do any good to alienate her.

“Are these components difficult to get?” she asked instead.

“Unfortunately, not as difficult as they should be,” Roth said. “I’ve never looked into it, but I’d be willing to bet that a quick hunt on the dark web would get your killer what he needed.”

Jessie nodded. That was doubly dispiriting. Not only would it make it nearly impossible to track down the source of the poison, but it could also mean something far worse.

They didn't yet know if this was a one-off attack focused specifically on the Whitakers. If it was, then as awful as what happened last night had been, they could breathe a little easier while they searched for the culprit.

But if this was part of some larger mission, if the killer had more attacks in mind, then it sounded like he wouldn't have any trouble finding more of his weapon of choice.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

He watched the news on his office TV, so focused that he didn't realize that he hadn't blinked in several minutes.

He didn't want to miss a single second of the report on what he'd done. The anchor talked about how a well-off West Adams district couple was the victim of an unusual home invasion.

"Strangely, nothing was stolen," she said. "But according to authorities, James Whitaker was poisoned while his wife, Sarah, was tied up and forced to observe as her husband slowly died. The assailant then left the home, leaving Mrs. Whitaker alone. After taking several hours to free herself, she called the police. Other than suspecting that the intruder was male, authorities offered no details on his identity or motive."

He smiled to himself as the anchor moved on to the next story. It was only then that he realized his eyes were incredibly dry, and he got up to find some drops.

Of course, that dyed-blond anchor wouldn't have any idea why he did what he did. But he would have thought the cops would have a better sense of his motive. The fact that they didn't made him even more certain of his plans. He would need to have another go at it tonight in order to help them better understand.

After putting the drops in his eyes, he closed them tight and allowed his mind to drift back to last night. He clearly recalled seeing the Whitakers at Daddio, watching as they acted all lovey-dovey at their little table, oblivious to the impact their public display of affection might have on others.

Well, they'd learned the hard way that their actions weren't appreciated. They were the first to pay the price for their indiscretion. But they wouldn't be the last.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

It was almost lunchtime, and Jessie felt like they hadn't made much progress at all.

She looked at the others in the HSS research room and wondered how, with all of them hard at work on the case, they had so little to show for it.

They'd been at this for several hours now. When she returned from meeting with Dr. Roth at the toxicology unit, she found Jamil and Beth already running down leads.

Jamil Winslow ran HSS's two-person Research department. He was a short, skinny twenty-five-year-old with thick glasses and no sense of fashion style. He was also a 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. His social skills didn't always match his intellectual ones, which is where his sole employee came in.

Beth Ryerson, also twenty-five, was as adept with people as Jamil was with numbers. Her perpetually chill, friendly vibe was the complete inverse of Jamil's jittery intensity. And while not a human supercomputer like him, she had an incredibly sharp mind, which people tended to underestimate because she was an attractive, six-foot-plus former college volleyball star.

Jamil had been going over security video from the restaurant last night, or at least trying to. Unfortunately, since the place was so new, only a few security cameras had been set up. One was overlooking the front of the restaurant near the valet stand. Another showed the back hallway leading to the manager's office, where the safe was kept. But none of the dining room cameras had been set up yet. And with multiple exits from the place, a customer could leave without ever being caught on camera.

Beth had been reviewing the receipts from last night, hoping to create a list of suspects from it. But that was challenging too. The credit card payment system had multiple issues throughout the course of the evening. For people who couldn't pay with a phone or cash, servers ended up having to give patrons paper copies of their bills and ask them to call back this morning with credit card numbers in order to pay.

Some had done so. Others hadn't. Regardless, everyone at HSS agreed that the killer was likely to have paid in cash, or if he used a card, almost certainly not called in and potentially implicated himself.

They were even getting help from two other detectives, Susannah Valentine and Sam Goodwin, who had wrapped up the case they were working earlier that morning.

Susannah Valentine was a study in contrasts. To look at her, one wouldn't immediately peg her profession as police detective. She was also, by all accounts, a bombshell. Almost impossibly gorgeous, she had hazel eyes, deeply tanned skin and long, black hair to go along with a curvy figure that suggested swimsuit model more than cop. Of course, the woman knew how she was perceived and rather than hide from it, she preferred to lean into the persona, to use it like a weapon. That is until recently.

Ever since she started dating an older, incredibly chill surfer and police sergeant from Manhattan Beach, she'd been less defensive about leering remarks on her appearance. Of course, that didn't mean she was any less intense in her investigative style than she used to be.

Her brash, sometimes abrasive personality, along with her "bull in a china shop" investigative intensity hadn't been handed down by her happier personal life lately. She was still a Doberman of a detective, which Jessie was generally glad for. But that intensity didn't manifest as overtly when she was doing office work. So far today, she'd been fairly mellow.

Sam Goodwin was the unit's newest detective. At thirty-three, the man was lean and tall, easily six foot two, with irrepressible brown hair. He made a habit of wearing corduroy sport coats over checkered shirts and black ties, which Jessie said made him look like either a young, absent-minded professor, or the past-his-prime bassist in a band that played Americana music. But his looks belied his reputation.

He had served eight years as a uniformed officer, followed by three as a detective in Vice Division's Exploitation and Investigative Section, which focused on human trafficking, exploitation of minors, and prostitution connected to organized crime. He may not have formally handled homicide cases prior to joining HSS, but he'd seen ugly things. Since coming aboard, he'd proved a valuable asset.

Neither of their skill sets were best used reviewing databases or calling up co-workers of Whitaker but as their former captain—and current LAPD Chief—Roy Decker had often said, not all police work was busting perps.

So along with Jessie and Ryan, they were reviewing the list of suspicious co-workers that Ryan had provided from his interviews this morning at the Wiley McComb office, looking for anything incriminating. But so far, it was to no avail.

"Where's Parker?" Ryan asked as he stood up and stretched his arms.

Captain Gaylene Parker, who had taken over the role from him when he'd decided to resume his old position as head of Homicide Special Section, hadn't been in most of the morning.

"I heard her son had some event that she had to attend," Susannah said, "but I don't know any more than that."

"Well, hopefully we can lock down some more details before she returns," Ryan said. "If we go all day without providing at least one legitimate lead, she's going to

be...even more unhappy than usual.”

Jessie gave him a half-scowl. After the arranged sit-down between him and Parker with Chief Decker, Ryan was supposed to keep his distaste for the captain to himself so as to not alienate the rest of the HSS team from her. His little comment had come dangerously close to crossing the appropriateness line.

“Once we’re through looking at the background of James Whitaker’s co-workers,” she said, “I think we should dive into his competitors and his clients. Sarah said he could play hardball. Let’s see if anyone thought he went over the line and filed a complaint against him for any reason.”

“That’s good,” Ryan agreed. “We should also see who lost big based on his financial advice. There might be people out there who hold a grudge but didn’t want to make it official.”

“Right,” Jessie agreed. “And if any of them have a medical background, we should definitely flag that. According to Dr. Roth, creating this kind of poison isn’t just something that anyone off the street could do.”

"And let's not forget good old-fashioned jealousy," Susannah volunteered. "Are you guys sure that Sarah Whitaker wasn't having an affair with this guy? Maybe he decided to get rid of his competition. Or maybe they did it together, and he tied her up so she wouldn't be a suspect."

“All legitimate areas of inquiry,” Ryan said. Let’s split it all and see what we can find.”

Three hours later, they hadn’t found much.

Susannah's affair theory had been intriguing, but searching through all of Sarah Whitaker's financial transactions and GPS data, Jamil hadn't found anything that suggested she'd been involved in a relationship with anyone other than her husband.

Beth's review of James's co-workers showed that while there was some competitive zeal among them, nothing appeared to rise to the level of outright animosity. Susannah and Sam had focused on James's competitors in the investment banking world, particularly those who had lost clients to him in recent years. There were quite a few.

But it quickly became clear that these folks stole and lost huge clients all the time. No matter how things shook out, these people were still all doing unfathomably well. It was hard to imagine any of them getting irate to the point of violence when they were raking in so much.

That left clients who were unhappy with Whitaker's work. Jessie and Ryan had focused on them. It was a slog. James Whitaker had been in this business for many years and had quite a record. There had been 29 formal complaints filed against him over the years, most of them over minor issues. Of the more substantial ones, the last was four years ago. And in every case, the client wasn't upset that Whitaker had acted unethically, just that they'd lost money.

Eventually, Jessie had switched over to focus on clients who had lost large sums but hadn't filed a complaint. To her, that was more suspicious than people who had put their anger on the record in the via a formal complaint. She'd been at it for an hour when she came across something that made her sit up straighter.

Last November, Whitaker had made some investments on behalf of a man named Ethan Blackwell. But just three weeks ago, they'd gone bad. One company in the portfolio had gone bankrupt. Another's stock cratered. According to the angry e-mail that Blackwell sent Whitaker two weeks ago, he'd lost over \$3 million as a result.

They'd had a spirited back and forth in subsequent e-mails, which no one else was cc'd on, in which James Whitaker seemed more nonchalant about the losses than his client. He urged patience, and when that didn't satisfy Blackwell, he suggested that the man could take his business elsewhere.

There were no physical threats, but the tone of Blackwell's final response, from last Thursday, had some menace to it. It read: Your blasé attitude toward my significant losses is reprehensible. You need to be held responsible for your inadequate expertise and your cavalier manner.

Under normal circumstances, that might not be enough to raise Jessie's eyebrows, but there was one additional detail that did. Blackwell was actually Dr. Ethan Blackwell, an anesthesiologist.

Jessie looked up. Ryan must have sensed her eyes on him because he looked up too.

"What?" he asked.

"I think we've got a suspect," she said.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Kat sat anxiously in her seat, unable to keep her feet from tapping on the floor.

If Hannah could see her now, she'd say that she wasn't acting very meditative. But there was a good reason for that. While Hannah was currently sitting in the car, conducting solo surveillance of suspected adulterer Rex Stiller so that Kat could go to her meditation appointment, her mentor was in fact seated in a federal courtroom.

Kat had lied to her young protege. There was no meditation appointment. She was here for a hearing involving Ash Pierce. It was the third of these that she'd attended in the lead up to Pierce's murder trial.

There was no official reason that Kat couldn't be here. In fact, had she made a request to the prosecutors' office, they would have likely ensured that she got a seat in the courtroom. But she preferred to go the unofficial route.

She was friendly with one of the courthouse security guards, a squat, charming woman named Glenda, who had been giving her access through a side entrance and saving her a spot in the back corner of the courtroom. Each time Kat attended a proceeding, she would try to make herself invisible, wearing a big jacket with a high collar and even a cap, which she had to remove before entering court.

As she waited for both Pierce and the judge to arrive, she slumped in her seat, trying to fight off the guilt she felt at lying to Hannah. She was doing the exact opposite of what the young woman had suggested this morning: move on. Instead, she was borderline obsessing over each twist and turn in the case.

Today, it was an evidentiary hearing over admissible evidence. The prosecution

intended to get testimony from a fellow prisoner at the Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla, where Pierce had been held prior to escaping from a transport truck on her way back to L.A. The prisoner, a six-foot-tall, 250-pound woman named Cally Mae Carlson, claimed that Pierce assaulted her outside the cafeteria. Pierce's lawyers were trying to have the testimony thrown out.

Truthfully, it wasn't a make-or-break issue. The incident had left Cally Mae with a fractured skull, and its inclusion was intended to offer additional proof of Pierce's callous, violent nature. But her cold-blooded murder of over a half dozen people, including the four transport truck guards, was proof enough. And that had been caught on video.

Still, Kat felt as if she had to be here, almost as if her attendance was some kind of good luck charm that would make the judge's rulings go against Pierce. Of course, there was another reason that Kat was here, and it had little to do with the minutiae of the case. She was scoping the place out.

Kat had come to a decision. If the prosecution didn't go as planned if Pierce's conviction wasn't a clear slam dunk by the end of the trial. Kat would have to take matters into her own hands to ensure that the killer faced justice. And if it came to that, she needed to understand the ins and outs of the courtroom mechanics.

That meant: noting when Pierce was brought in and removed, determining how much security there was around her, the means of transport throughout the courthouse, and where the weaknesses were in those procedures. Only once she was familiar with all those details, could she formulate the best strategy to get to Pierce and make her finally pay, once and for all.

Her fingers twitched slightly at the thought. She could still recall last summer, when Pierce had tricked and kidnapped her, taking her to a remote spot in the desert. That was where she tortured her mercilessly before planning to murder her on a livestream.

It was all part of Pierce's assignment.

She'd been hired to torture and kill those closest to Jessie Hunt by a zealot named Zoe Bradway, who had attempted to kill hundreds of innocent Angelenos, only to be thwarted by Jessie. Going after Jessie's loved ones was her payback and Ash Pierce was her tool. Only Hannah's discovery of the desert location and unexpected physical takedown of the killer had saved Kat's life.

After her escape from custody, rather than flee to a country without extradition, Pierce had hunted down Hannah, seeking revenge. That effort had culminated in a brutal knockdown, drag-out fight between Pierce and both Hannah and Kat, in which Pierce was stabbed in the neck with her own knife.

In a decision that she still regretted, Kat had given the assassin CPR, saving her life. Pierce spent months in a coma. When she awoke, she claimed not to remember any of her prior acts. Nonetheless, she was charged with multiple counts of murder and, after recovering enough, she was taken to Twin Towers Correctional Facility to await trial.

But that hadn't stopped Kat's nightmares, the ones in which she was still being tortured. That's what she was really after. Knowing that Ash Pierce would spend the rest of her life behind bars might ease her suffering. Then again, Pierce had already escaped once. What was to prevent her from doing it again? After all, she wasn't just a hitwoman for hire.

Prior to entering the private sector, Pierce was a Marines Special Operations element leader and later, a CIA asset who conducted covert assassinations for the Agency. She was smart, and she was relentless. If she ever got out, she might try to disappear. But she could also do what she did the last time she escaped and decide to finish the job she started. Kat needed to beat her to the punch.

Just then, the side door to the courtroom opened and two guards stepped in, followed

by Pierce, who wore blue prison scrubs and was shackled at the wrists and ankles. To the average person, Pierce might not look like a deadly hitwoman. Her tiny frame, short black hair, arched nose, and pale skin all suggested someone fragile. But Kat knew better and apparently so did the authorities because she was trailed by two additional, nervous-looking guards. Kat took mental notes.

Pierce scanned the gallery, and her eyes quickly fell on Kat. Neither looked away. Kat studied her, looking for any proof that the woman was faking her amnesia. Despite multiple people that Kat trusted insisting that Pierce's assertion was credible, including Dr. Lemmon, Kat just didn't buy it.

She was certain that it was all a ruse designed to either win sympathy from a jury or get her security contingent to let down their guard. And as she stared back at the woman who had almost killed her, she resolved that if the criminal justice system didn't do its job, then when the time came, she would.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Jessie didn't like waiting, but in this instance, she didn't have much of a choice.

She looked at the clock on the wall again. It was 4:08. They'd been sitting in uncomfortable chairs in the hospital waiting room for over forty-five minutes now. The nurse had told them that Dr. Ethan Blackwood should be out of surgery by 3:45, but they'd blown through that time.

From personal experience, Jessie understood all too well that sometimes these procedures ran long, but that hadn't stopped Ryan from checking in at the nurse's station twice in the last twenty minutes. Both times, he was told that Blackwood had been alerted to their presence and would join them as soon as he got out of surgery.

"I'm starting to wonder if maybe he's using this operation as an excuse to make a run for it before we know he's gone," Ryan said conspiratorially.

"Don't you think that if he'd done that, one of the nurses would have told us?" Jessie asked. "They know we're with LAPD. Are they really going to cover for the guy like that?"

Before he could reply, the door opened. Out stepped a man that Jessie immediately recognized as Blackwood. He was better looking than his hospital website photo suggested. Tall and lean, with short black hair and a few days' worth of stubble, he looked the part of a physician on one of those doctor shows. He was 42 but appeared half a decade younger.

He walked over to the nurse's station and whispered something, after which a nurse pointed in their direction. He strode toward them with a broad smile on his face.

“Ethan Blackwell,” he said, extending a hand. “I apologize for the wait. I understand you’ve been here a while. But when an extra tumor is discovered during a procedure, things tend to run long.”

“We understand,” Jessie said. “Maybe we can talk outside so as not to disturb the other folks here.”

Jessie was actually less concerned with the people waiting for word about their loved ones than she was that Blackwell might not be very forthcoming if he had an audience. He nodded his assent, and they headed out through the automatic doors to a small courtyard.

“What’s this all about?” he asked once the doors closed.

"I'm Detective Hernandez," Ryan said. "This is Jessie Hunt. We're investigating an incident involving one of your financial advisors, and we were hoping you could shed some light on an issue that came up."

Blackwell’s smile remained frozen in place, but his eyes lost their warmth, turning suddenly cold and wary.

“Who’s the advisor?” he asked.

“James Whitaker.”

“He’s not my advisor anymore, and I recommend that if you’re thinking about using him, you reconsider.”

“Why do you say that?” Jessie asked innocently.

“Because he cost me—” he started to say, before pausing to properly calibrate his

response for his audience, “well, let’s say that he cost me a great deal of money.”

“Did he cheat you in some way?” Jessie pressed.

“Is that what this is about?” Blackwell asked, sounding convincingly like he had no idea of the purpose of their visit.

“If you could just answer the question, Dr. Blackwell,” Ryan said politely but firmly.

The man looked slightly put out, but still answered.

“He didn’t officially cheat me, but his investment advice was catastrophically bad,” he said, his voice tightening in anger. “Then, when I tried to get him to acknowledge his failures, he was incredibly dismissive. Detective, I do quite well for myself, but even in my position, these losses were difficult to swallow.”

“It sounds like you were pretty upset,” Jessie said sympathetically. “How did you resolve the situation?”

He sighed and shrugged.

“According to my attorney, there wasn’t anything to resolve. Apparently, I assumed the potential for risk when I signed on with Whitaker. There’s all kinds of fine print to that effect. So I just had to take my lumps and move on.”

“Did you?” Ryan asked with a little edge.

“Did I what?” Blackwell demanded, starting to lose his cool. “Did I accept that I lost over three million dollars in a matter of weeks? What else was I supposed to do? Go to the media or something? That would only make me look like some rube and probably cause potential patients to wonder whether they should put their lives in my

hands.”

“Maybe you decided to take matters into your own hands?” Ryan suggested.

Blackwell's eyes narrowed, and he took a small step backward.

“What exactly are you investigating?” he asked. “Did something happen to Whitaker?”

Ryan looked over at Jessie, who nodded. Now that Blackwell was riled up, they could drop the hammer, and she could observe him and hopefully get a genuine reaction. Ryan nodded back before returning his attention to Blackwell.

“Actually, something did happen,” he said. “James Whitaker was the victim of a home invasion murder last night.”

Blackwell's eyes went wide, and his jaw dropped. Jessie couldn't be sure whether it was a legitimate response or planned because he knew what was coming. Ryan pressed ahead.

“We're talking to people who have expressed animosity to him, as you did in your e-mail, when you said —” at this point Ryan pulled out a sheet of paper from his pocket and read from it directly— “ you need to be held responsible for your inadequate expertise and your cavalier manner. Do you recall writing that, Dr. Blackwell?”

Blackwell shook his head vigorously.

“You can't possibly think that I would kill someone over a financial transaction?” he huffed indignantly.

“It wouldn't be the first time someone had,” Jessie noted.

“Listen—yes, I resented the guy, maybe even hated him, but I didn’t kill him.”

“You could go a long way to convincing us of that by telling us where you were last night between 7 p.m. and midnight,” Jessie suggested.

Blackwell looked at her, then at Ryan. His expression seemed to shout, "Are you serious?"

"All right," he finally said, "I was at home with my wife. We had dinner and watched some television."

“What did you watch?” Ryan asked.

“Some action movie on one of the streaming channels,” he said.

“You don’t remember the name of it?” Ryan asked.

“Not off the top of my head,” Blackwell said. “It involved Chris Hemsworth punching and shooting people.”

“Your wife likes that kind of movie?” Jessie wondered.

“I like the punching and shooting,” he replied. “She likes Chris Hemsworth.”

“In that case,” Ryan said, “I assume you won’t mind if we ask to review the GPS location data for your phone and car from last night, as well as your streaming data.”

“Not at all,” Blackwell said with a confidence that suggested that he knew he had an alibi or had planned ahead well enough to make it seem like he did.

“Great,” Ryan said. “Our unit’s senior researcher will be reaching out to you soon to

go over all that in greater detail.”

“Not a problem,” Blackwell said, his confidence bleeding over into arrogance. “May I go now?”

“For now,” Ryan said.

The man turned on his heel and stormed back through the sliding doors. Once he was gone, Ryan turned to Jessie. “What do you think?”

“I think that once Jamil reviews the GPS and streaming data, he’s going to find that Ethan Blackwell’s phone and car were at home last night. Whether the good doctor was really there too is another matter. We can question Mrs. Blackwell, but you know as well as I do that having your wife say you were home all night may be an alibi, but it’s not the best one ever.”

“Unfortunately, unless the data or the wife undermine what he told us, there’s not enough to bring him in yet,” Ryan concluded. “For now we’ll just have to keep an eye on him and hope that either he’s innocent or, if he’s guilty, that his cockiness makes him sloppy.”

Jessie was skeptical that Blackwell was the type to make a stupid mistake, which left her in an odd position. She found herself hoping that the man was innocent. Because if he was guilty, she wasn’t sure they’d be able to prove it.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Elena Vega was glad that her husband was the one driving them home from the movie.

She never liked maneuvering up the narrow Hollywood Hills streets that led to their hillside home. But tonight was something else entirely.

She had started feeling woozy halfway up the road. By the time they pulled into their driveway at 6 p.m. and waited for the giant metal gate to swing open, she was full-on sick.

She had been fine when they left the movie theater twenty minutes ago and couldn't understand why she suddenly felt overwhelmed by nausea, uncontrollable sweating, and a burning sensation in her chest.

As the gate closed behind them and Marcus pulled up next to the house, she feared she might pass out. She turned to him and spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"I feel terrible."

"What's wrong?" he asked as he turned off the car and leaned close to her.

"I don't know," she croaked. "I started feeling bad on the way home. I thought it would pass, but it's getting worse."

"Do you want to go to the hospital?" he asked, worried.

"No," she said, literally unable to stomach the idea of driving back down the hill in

her current condition, “I just want to lie down for a bit. Maybe you could help me inside and then get me some water and ibuprofen?”

“Sure, sweetie,” he said, getting out of the car and dashing around to help her out of the passenger seat.

He was just easing her out when a new wave of nausea overwhelmed her, and she vomited in the driveway.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled once she caught her breath.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, at first helping guide her to the house and then simply picking her up and carrying her in his arms as he rushed to the front door. As he fumbled with the keys, Elena felt the burning sensation get worse, coursing throughout her body. She feared she might lose consciousness.

He finally got the door open and carried her down the hall to the living room, where he placed her gently on the couch. He put the back of his hand to her forehead, and his face scrunched up.

“Hold on,” he said. “You’re burning up. I’m going to get you that medication and a cold washcloth. Just give me a minute.”

He darted off toward the kitchen. Elena was about to close her eyes in the hope that it would help her shut out the pain when she noticed movement by the living room entrance. For a second, she thought she was hallucinating.

There appeared to be someone standing in the doorway. They were dressed all in black and wore a black ski mask and gloves. She blinked several times, assuming the mirage would disappear. But it didn't. Instead, the figure moved across the living room in the direction of the kitchen.

Despite the cloudiness in her head, Elena realized that this was real, and that the person was headed toward Marcus. She tried to call out to warn her husband, but other than a soft moan, she couldn't make a sound.

With all the energy she could muster, she rolled onto her side and pushed herself into an upright seated position. She grabbed the arm of the couch, pulled herself to her feet and took a step to follow the black-clad figure. But as her foot landed on the carpet, her leg gave out.

As she felt herself fall toward the floor, she tried to launch her body at the intruder. But as she collapsed, darkness swallowed her up.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

“We’ve got good news and bad news,” Jamil announced to the team members assembled in the HSS research department at LAPD’s Central Station.

Jessie turned away from the desk she’d been working at. She knew better than to get her hopes up. If this was a major discovery, the brilliant young researcher probably would have left out the “bad news” part.

Still, they’d all been grinding away in this overheated office for three hours now without much to show for it, so any good news was better than none.

“Tell us,” Ryan asked.

“The good news is that CSU just issued their preliminary report, and they found a partial fingerprint at the Whitaker home that doesn’t belong to either James or Sarah,” he said. “Unfortunately, it’s not enough to make an identification in any database. But if we get a suspect in custody, a match might be possible at that point.”

“I guess that’s better than nothing,” Jessie mumbled unconvincingly. She looked at the time. It was 7:47 p.m. “Should we update Captain Parker on where we’re at? I feel like we’ve hit a wall, at least for today.”

“She actually left a few hours ago,” Beth said.

“Without checking in with us?” Jessie said. “That’s not like her.”

“Maybe she had another event for her kid,” Ryan suggested snarkily.

“I actually think she did,” Beth said. “She ran out of here pretty fast.”

“Regardless, let’s not complain about not getting the third degree,” he replied. “I think everyone should call it a night. We can come at this thing fresh tomorrow morning.”

“You all go ahead,” Jamil said. “I’m going to stick around a little longer to see if I can find any other unhappy clients of Whitaker’s from his time at the investment bank he worked at before Wiley McComb. We haven’t really explored that angle.”

Jessie knew better than to suggest that Jamil hold off until morning. Once he got fixated on a task, there was no pulling him away from it. Sometimes, he worked through the night on this stuff without a break. The kid was a freak of nature.

But she wasn't—at least not in that way. Apparently, unlike Jamil, she needed at least a few hours of sleep to function efficiently. She always feared that taking any kind of break could mean she'd miss something important, but if she didn't get some shuteye, the same thing might happen. Getting up slowly, she stretched her arms to the ceiling and yawned, then did a couple of lunges.

“You want to drive?” she asked Ryan, who was shoving some papers in a manila folder.

“Sure,” he replied. “You know I love to be at the wheel.”

“You mean be in charge?” she teased.

He was just opening his mouth to deliver a comeback when Beth interrupted.

"Um, guys, I think you may want to hear this."

The tone in her voice immediately made the hairs on the back of Jessie's neck stand up. Before she could say anything, Ryan was standing up.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A 911 dispatcher just sent officers out to a home in the Hollywood Hills," Beth said. "A man says he saw a masked figure sneaking out of his neighbor's house. When he went over to check on them, he found the husband tied up and the wife dead."

Jessie looked at Ryan, who had already started toward the door.

"We're on our way," he called out over his shoulder, "Text us the address. Then call us while we're en route with whatever else you can find out."

Jessie followed him out the door without a word. She had to break into a run to catch up to him. By the time she did, he was already at the elevator, punching the down button repeatedly.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Twenty-five minutes later, Jessie got out of the car, happy to be off the roller-coaster ride that was Ryan Hernandez speeding along the twists and turns of narrow Hollywood Hills streets at night.

By the time they arrived at the address that Beth had given them, they already had some sense of the situation. The young researcher had simply repeated the information that the 911 dispatcher had given to the first officers to head to the scene.

"The victim is Elena Vega," she had said. "She was 34 years old. Her husband is Marcus Vega. He's 36. There's no real information on their backgrounds yet. According to the neighbor who called it in, they don't have any children. The officer in charge of the scene is Sergeant Calvin Warnes."

That's who they looked for as they approached the house. Like many in the Hollywood Hills, it was built into the hillside. Though it had a modest-seeming first floor. Jessie knew that could be deceiving. It was modernist, all black and white with boxy angles.

The scene was so fresh that there wasn't even police tape up yet. A young officer with strawberry blond hair stood by the driveway gate, apparently to stand guard, but his back was to them, and he didn't notice them until they were right up on him.

"Officer," Ryan said, making him jump.

The officer turned around, looking startled and a little overwhelmed. Jessie doubted he was more than 22.

“Um, this is a crime scene,” he said uncertainly. “No one is allowed on the property?”

“Is that a statement or a question?” Ryan asked him, before cutting him some slack and holding up his badge. “It’s okay, Officer. We’re official. Can you tell us where to find Sergeant Warnes?”

“He’s inside,” the young officer said unhelpfully.

“Okay, thanks. Now I recommend that you keep your attention directed that way,” Ryan said, pointing at the street. “You’re more like to find nosy neighbors coming from—you know—other houses than inside this one.”

“Yes sir,” the officer said sheepishly.

They moved past him and into the house. No one was in the foyer, so they walked down the hallway. Sure enough, it opened into an expansive living room with giant windows that had views of the entire city nightscape. But that wasn’t what grabbed Jessie’s attention. Next to a large couch, she saw a woman lying on her back on the carpet.

Normally she would have held off to study the victim, but it was too late. She’d already seen the vomit lying next to the woman’s head and that her right wrist was zip tied to the base of a nearby coffee table. Her eyes were squeezed tightly shut as if trying to shut out the pain, just as James Whitaker’s had been.

In the middle of the room, right across from the couch, was a lone dining room chair. Jessie suspected it had been placed there by the intruder and that Marcus Vega had been forced to sit in it. As further proof, she saw four zip ties, all now cut, strewn across the carpet, along with a kitchen rag that she suspected had been used as a gag.

Neither the crime scene unit nor the medical examiner had arrived yet, but there were

multiple officers standing nearby. One of them, a muscular back man in his forties with tightly shorn hair, saw them and moved in their direction.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

"I hope so," Ryan said, flashing his badge. "I'm Detective Hernandez of the Homicide Special Section. This is Jessie Hunt. Are you Sergeant Warnes?"

“I am,” he confirmed. “I didn’t realize detectives had been assigned yet. I’ve only been here fifteen minutes myself.”

“They probably haven’t,” Ryan told him, “but if they have, we’ll be sending them home. This is our case.”

“I thought you guys handled celebrity deaths and serial killers, that sort of thing,” Warnes said.

“We do,” Jessie told him, “and we think this might fall in that second category. You might have heard about that home invasion murder in West Adams last night?”

“In passing,” Warnes said, “but I don’t really know the details.”

"Well, it sounds like they're very similar to what we've got here, assuming the neighbor's statement to the dispatcher holds up," Jessie told him. "Assailant dressed all in black. One spouse was murdered while the other was tied up and forced to watch. We obviously need to learn more, but if the pattern holds, we likely have a serial killer on our hands. Is the husband still here, or was he taken to the hospital?"

"No, he's here," Warnes said, "He's back in the main bedroom but I don't think he's going to be of much use to you, at least not yet. When the first officers arrived, he was in shock, barely able to speak. When he found his voice, he started screaming

incoherently, even lunged at one of my guys. They had to restrain him. When the EMTs got here, he was still thrashing about, so they gave him a sedative. They just brought the stretcher back there and were getting set to take him to the hospital. You might have to wait until the meds wear off to get anything out of him.”

Jessie sighed in frustration.

“There is the neighbor who found them though,” Warnes volunteered. “His name is Victor Maltin. He’s sitting out back on the deck. Maybe he can offer you more than the basic statement he gave us.”

“That would be great,” Ryan said, “Can you take us to him?”

Warnes guided them past Elena Vega’s limp body and through the kitchen to the door that opened onto the deck. Even under the circumstances, Jessie couldn’t help but appreciate the beauty of the place. The deck was the size of an extra living room and overlooked a canyon. She could see the lights from dozens of homes down below.

Victor Matlin was sitting uncomfortably on one of the chaise lounges. When they stepped outside, he looked up at them. He was wearing jeans and a Pepperdine sweatshirt. Jessie guessed that he was in his early forties.

“Can you tell us what happened, Mr. Maltin?” Ryan asked as they walked over.

“Yeah,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief as he spoke. “I was taking out the trash when I saw someone sneaking down the Vega’s driveway, away from the house. They were dressed in all black and had on a ski mask.”

“Could you discern any features?” Ryan asked.

“Nothing other than that it was a guy,” Maltin said. “He looked to be on the bigger

side.”

“What did you do when you saw him?” Jessie asked.

"I called 911 right away, but while I was waiting for someone to answer, I went over to their house. I knocked and rang the bell repeatedly, but there was no answer. Then the 911 operator came on. I told her the situation. She said to wait at my place until officers arrived, but I was worried. I checked the front door, and it was unlocked, so I went in. I called out to Marcus and Elena but there was no answer. I was really suspicious because their car was in the driveway. They always park it in the garage. So I walked into the living room and found—what you saw in there. I checked for a pulse on Elena but couldn't find one. Then I got a knife from the kitchen and cut Marcus loose."

“Did he say anything?” Jessie asked.

"Yeah," Maltin said. "He told me that the intruder had snuck in after they got home. I guess Elena was feeling really sick, and he had to carry her in. But then this guy—he said it was a guy too—tied him up and made him watch while Elena got sicker and sicker. The guy told him that he'd poisoned her. Marcus said that the guy made him watch Elena die."

“Did the guy say when or where he poisoned her?” Ryan asked.

“We didn’t get that far,” Maltin said. “After Marcus told me how he had to watch his wife die, he just kind of shut down. I couldn’t get another word out of him. I took him back to his bedroom and told him to lie down, that I would meet the cops when they got here. I haven’t seen him since.”

Just then, Sergeant Warnes motioned for them to join him by the deck door. “My people are saying the EMTs are taking Vega to the ambulance now. He’s semi-

conscious but non-responsive. Do you want me to have them hold off?"

Ryan looked at Jessie, who shook her head.

"We won't get anything useful out of him right now," she said, "let's wait until he's more coherent. Besides, we've got a lot of work to do around here."

"CSU and the medical examiner are both arriving soon," Warnes said, "Maybe they'll be able to offer some answers that Mr. Vega can't yet."

"Maybe," Jessie said, "But there's one thing we already know."

"What's that?" Warnes asked.

"Based on what Mr. Maltin told us, we're dealing with same killer from last night," she answered. "That means we've got a serial killer on our hands, and I don't think he's going to stop anytime soon."

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Jessie's back was killing her.

She and Ryan had spent the last couple of hours at the hospital, waiting for an all-clear from the emergency room doctor so that they could talk to Marcus Vega. She'd briefly drifted off while lying on the row of chairs and somehow bent herself into an awkward position while she slept. Now, it felt like someone had taken a hammer to her spine.

She sat up and glanced out the window. The first rays of morning sun were appearing in the distance. The clock on the wall said that it was 6:53 a.m. She looked around for Ryan, who was nowhere in sight. She was about to text him when he pushed through a double door across the waiting room with a coffee cup in each hand.

"My knight in shining armor," she said as he handed one over. "Is this medium roast, dark roast, or Tylenol-infused, because I could really use that last one right now. I tweaked my back something awful."

"I'm afraid it's just standard hospital cafeteria coffee," he told her, "but you may be in the right place to ask for some medication."

"If it doesn't settle down, I might," she replied. "For now, I'll make do with information. Did anything new come in while I was zonked out?"

"A little," he said, sitting down next to her. "Your new best friend, Dr. Amelia Roth, tested Elena Vega's blood sample. She found the same poison that was used on James Whitaker. So that's official."

“Not a surprise,” Jessie said, “but good to know.”

"Right," Ryan said, "and Jamil used the time of their neighbor's 911 call, along with security camera footage from the Vega home to calculate approximately how long it took for the poison to kill her. He said the footage showed them arriving home around six. By the way, it also showed the killer sneaking through the open driveway gate and entering the house right after Marcus Vega carried his wife inside. The man in black left the house at 7:35 p.m. So the time from when she was probably poisoned until she died fits that two-hour window that Dr. Roth estimated."

“Could Jamil give any more detail on the killer based on the video footage?” Jessie asked.

“Not yet,” Ryan said. “He says that everything reinforces that it’s a male, but because of the angle of the exterior camera and the darkness, it’s difficult to gauge height or weight. But he’s still working on it.”

“What about his car?” Jessie wondered. “He must have followed the Vegas from wherever he poisoned her. Was there any camera footage of what he drove?”

“Beth was working on that,” Ryan said. “She’s gotten permission to review footage from other houses on the street, but she’s not optimistic. Because most of those homes are set so far back, they don’t generally have views of the street from their front doors. We’re going to have to get lucky.”

“I won’t hold my breath,” Jessie said.

Just then, a nurse walked through the door and approached them.

“Mr. Vega is awake and lucid now,” she said. “If you’d like to speak with him, I can take you back.”

Marcus Vega, understandably, was in rough shape.

Jessie had seen pictures of him in the house and that man—suave-looking with black hair and olive skin—was almost unrecognizable as the same person. His hair was disheveled, his eyes were bloodshot and puffy, and he had an ashen pallor. His hospital bed was at a forty-five-degree angle, and he had an IV in his left arm.

“Mr. Vega,” Ryan began. “I’m Detective Hernandez with the Los Angeles Police Department. This is Jessie Hunt. First of all, we’re terribly sorry for your loss.”

"Thank you," Vega said hoarsely. "I mean, I don't know what I'm supposed to say. My brain keeps telling me that I have to accept this, but it's not really working."

“This is an almost impossible situation to be in,” Jessie said. “We can’t pretend to know the right thing to tell you right now. But what we can do is try to catch the man responsible for your wife’s death. That’s why we’re here. We’re hoping that, as painful as it might be, you could walk us through what happened last night while it’s still fresh for you. It’s possible that some detail that might seem unimportant to you could be what helps us find this man and stop him before he does the same thing to someone else.”

“Someone else?” Vega replied in disbelief.

“Yes,” Ryan said. “Your wife is the second victim that we’re aware of. An almost identical incident occurred two nights ago. We fear that the perpetrator might be planning to do the same thing again tonight. We’re hoping to prevent that.”

Vega nodded silently, as if he was wrapping his head around the larger dimensions of what had been exclusively a personal tragedy for him until now.

“Okay,” he said. “What do you want to know?”

“What were you doing prior to arriving home?” Ryan asked.

“We went to an afternoon movie,” Vega explained before adding sheepishly, “I do pretty well for myself, but you can’t beat those matinee prices.”

Jessie was briefly tempted to ask him what he did for a living but decided they could get that information from Jamil and Beth later on. Right now, they needed to focus on his personal experience.

“And we understand from your neighbor that the man who did this admitted to poisoning your wife while he held you captive last night,” she said. “Was he more specific than that?”

“He said that he had put something in her soda toward the end of the movie,” Vega said. “He didn’t explain anything more than that. I don’t know if he was sitting next to her the whole time or if he snuck over when she went to the restroom or what.”

His tone got increasingly agitated as he spoke.

“Okay,” Ryan said, moving on quickly, “So after the movie, did you go straight home?”

“Yes. It was close to dinner time, and we planned to have some leftover takeout Thai food from the night before. But Ellie started feeling sick on the way home.”

“We saw on your security camera that you had to carry her inside,” Jessie said. “She was in such bad shape that she couldn’t walk on her own?”

“She threw up when she was getting out of the car,” he said. “I could tell she was

really struggling and just wanted to get her inside. I think that's how the guy got in. I just kind of kicked the door shut and didn't even think about locking it."

Jessie could hear the creeping guilt in his voice. It was the same feeling of responsibility that Sarah Whitaker had felt when describing helping her husband inside. It wasn't justified in either case. But before she could tell him that, he pressed ahead.

"I didn't even see him until I heard this loud thump. I looked over and saw that Ellie was on the floor in the living room. Thinking back on it, I wonder if she was trying to get up to help me. When I went over to her, the intruder was right there. He subdued and tied me up before I really knew what was happening."

"Did he explain why he chose you or why he was doing this?"

"He said something about us flaunting ourselves at the movie," Vega said, "but I don't know what he was talking about. And when I pleaded with him to help Ellie, he said—and I remember this vividly—'you have to see it. You have to feel it. You have to understand.' I asked him what that meant, but that's all he said."

Jessie wanted to ask more about the 'flaunting ourselves' comment but remembering the incident seemed to be too much for Vega. His eyes got wet, and when he tried to speak, his voice cracked. He started to break down. The nurse came in a moment later. Her eyes were fixed on the monitor next to Vega. Jessie understood why. The man's blood pressure was sky high.

"We're going to have to end this for now," she said firmly. "Mr. Vega, I'm going to give you another sedative to calm you down, all right?"

She didn't wait for his answer as she pushed buttons and adjusted dials. Jessie and Ryan stepped outside. It was clear that the interview was over.

They walked silently through the emergency room, passing rows of pulled curtains as they listened to the symphony of beeps that defined the place. As they walked, Jessie could feel that familiar, unwanted anger rising in her chest.

Just as she had with Sarah Whitaker, she pictured Marcus Vega sitting helplessly, forced to watch the life leech out of the body of the person he loved. Her fist clenched at the thought of the kind of person who would do this, who would make two people suffer for hours, one dying a painful death, while their partner was made to witness it. She imagined what she would do if she got her hands on the perpetrator. Would she slap cuffs on the man or give him a little of his own medicine?

“We should head back to the station,” Ryan said, pulling her back into the moment. “Maybe Jamil and Beth have uncovered new info since we last checked in.”

“Sounds good,” Jessie said.

She hoped they had found something—anything—for her to channel her energy into. If she couldn’t find some productive way to direct it, she feared she might explode.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Jessie got half her wish.

By the time that she and Ryan returned to Central Station at 7:30, the researchers had collected a fair bit of information on the Vegas. Nothing about it jumped off the screen, but at least it was something to work with.

“Elena Vega was an interior designer,” Jamil said, when they arrived in the research office, “but Marcus Vega, like James Whitaker, worked in the investment world. He was a senior vice president for a venture capital firm based out of the Bay Area called Golden Gate Capital Ventures. He was their primary L.A. representative.”

“So we’re thinking that there might be some connection between him and Whitaker?” Ryan said hopefully.

“Unfortunately, we haven’t found any overlapping clients or co-workers so far,” Beth said. “We were just about to do the same thing we did with Whitaker and see if any of Vega’s clients had filed complaints against him. I thought that if they did, maybe they’d have the same lawyer or something.”

“That’s definitely worth looking into,” Jessie said, impressed with the idea, “why don’t we dive in and see if we can help?”

Beth handed her a file. She took it, sat down on the couch at the back of the office, and settled in to study some bureaucratic language.

Unlike James Whitaker, Marcus Vega didn't have very many complaints filed against him. Whether that was because his business practices were more honorable or simply that the VC world was more opaque, she couldn't tell. But in total, Vega only had eight formal complaints. She, Ryan, Beth, and Jamil split them up.

It only took about ten minutes for Jessie to determine that neither of her cases were worth pursuing. Each complaint was over two years old and ended with a settlement that likely satisfied the former client. While she waited to hear results from the others, she did a web search, hoping something might pop. Within a few minutes, she found something interesting.

About a month ago, Vega's firm had flirted with entering into a deal with a Southern California investor named Daniel Forrester. The only reason she knew that was because when the deal blew up, Forrester didn't file a complaint. Instead, he went to the local press to badmouth Vega and his team. That was a week ago.

"Jamil," she said, looking up, "can you check the databases for any criminal record for a guy named Daniel Forrester? He runs an investment firm based out of Hollywood called Forrester Holdings."

Jamil had started typing even before she completed the request. Beth and Ryan both stopped reviewing their files, curious as to what he might find. It didn't take long.

"Daniel Forrester, 46 years old, has run Forrester Holding for the last six years after bouncing around among several other firms. Public records indicate that his company had profits of about \$37 million last year. Divorced twice. Has one child, a son from his first marriage, who is now nineteen. Forrester has been arrested three times. Once for driving under the influence eleven years ago. Then for drunk and disorderly. That was at a Dodgers game eight years ago. Finally, he was charged with assault after punching a colleague at a bar six years ago. He was let go by that firm, Creighton Partners, and started his own shop a few months later. He pled down in each case and

never served time for any of the incidents. It seems like the guy he punched wanted to pursue the case. But from the looks of things, he backed off.”

“My guess is that the higher-ups at Creighton convinced the ‘punchee’ to back off to avoid any more bad press,” Jessie surmised.

“Well, whether he served time or not,” Ryan noted, “the guy’s clearly got a temper and apparently a grudge against Vega. Want to pay him a visit?”

“Absolutely,” Jessie told him, happy to have somewhere to focus the roiling pit of rage inside her that had yet to subside. She gave her file back to Beth and was getting set to head out when she had a thought. “Definitely keep looking for other potential folks who had beefs with Vega, but maybe one of you can see if Forrester has any connection to James Whitaker. That would elevate him on the suspect list.”

This time she was out the door first and Ryan was the one who had to chase after her.

“You seem pretty riled up,” he noted as they hurried down the hallway.

“Let’s take the stairs. I don’t want to wait for the elevator,” she said, shoving open the doors. “And yes, I’m looking forward to having a chat with Daniel Forrester. Let’s see if he wants to get disorderly with me,”

“Where’s that coming from?” Ryan asked as they started down the stairs.

Jessie paused before answering, not wanting to sound too vindictive.

“It’s just that whoever is doing this is repellent in any number of ways, and if it turns out that Forrester is our guy, I wouldn’t mind if bringing him in required a little extra force.”

Ryan put his hand on her shoulder to stop her.

“Okay,” he said with a frown, “I understand where you’re coming from, but you get that if he is our guy, then he’s incredibly dangerous and we should proceed with extreme caution, right?”

“Of course I do, Ryan,” she said. “This isn’t my first rodeo.”

“Just checking,” he said, seemingly unconvinced.

“Can I continue down the stairs now?” she asked sharply.

He held his hands up in the air, as if in surrender. She tried not to scowl as she started down again, but she couldn’t even fight that off.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

When they pulled up in front of Forrester's Hollywood office tower, it was just after 8 a.m.

Jessie, who was still quietly seething, hadn't spoken the whole drive over.

"Are we even sure he'll be here this early?" Ryan asked, clearly pretending not to notice.

"If he's not here yet, I don't mind waiting," Jessie said, getting out of the car. "Or we can just put some pressure on his assistant to tell us where he is."

"Or we could just ask politely," Ryan countered.

"That's an option too," she conceded reluctantly. "Let's go up."

They walked up the steps toward the giant tower near the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Vine St., stepping over multiple Hollywood Walk of Fame stars. Jessie's nostrils were hit by the scent of waffles emanating from the breakfast place adjacent to the tower. Something about it soothed her ever so slightly, and she found that her body, which had been squeezed into one big clench, relaxed a little.

When they reached the security desk, Ryan showed his badge. The guard behind the desk squinted at it. After several seconds, she seemed satisfied.

"Would you like me to call up first to let them know you're coming?" she asked.

"Actually, I'd rather you not," Ryan said.

“All right,” the woman said, clearly not interested in pursuing the issue. “Hold on, I have to swipe my card to give you access to the elevator.”

She walked over with them, peeking at Jessie intermittently.

“I’m sorry, but you look really familiar,” she said. “ Are you an actress or something?”

“I’m flattered, but no,” Jessie said, not indicating where else the guard might recognize her from, “but I do get that from time to time. I guess I look like someone.”

The guard seemed unconvinced by her answer but let it go. She swiped her card and pushed the button for the 26 th floor.

“Have fun,” she said as the doors closed.

The comment sounded ominous to Jessie. After all, they were headed to meet with a potential double murderer.

“You’re not going to punch the guy the moment that we see him, are you?” Ryan half-teased as the elevator shot up with the speed of an amusement park ride.

“I’ll do my best not to,” she said, before sticking her tongue out at him.

He smiled. She reluctantly did, too. They were okay for now.

The doors opened, and they headed down to the end of the hall. Jessie noted that not only was there a security camera above the door to Forester Holdings, but the door itself was made of reinforced metal, with a card swipe sensor and an intercom to the right of it. She wondered why the company required such involved security measures. Ryan buzzed the intercom.

“How may I help you?” asked a disinterested female voice.

“LAPD,” Ryan said, holding up his badge and ID to the overhead camera. “We need to speak with Mr. Forrester.”

“Do you have an appointment?” the voice asked.

“We don’t,” Ryan said calmly. “Did I mention that we’re with the police?”

“One moment please,” the voice said. After more like twenty seconds, there was a buzz, accompanied by the words, “come in.”

Ryan opened the door for Jessie. When they stepped inside, she was surprised by how small the space was. They were in a tiny waiting room with just two chairs and no table. The receptionist, a young, brown-haired woman with haggard eyes, sat at a glassed-in window that looked to be bulletproof. They approached it.

“Thank you,” Ryan said. “Where is Mr. Forrester?”

“He’s just finishing up a call with the East Coast,” the young woman said. “But I have the office manager coming up front to take you back. He’ll be here in a moment.”

They didn’t even bother sitting down. After less than a minute, the door to the right of the reception window opened to reveal a young man, likely no older than twenty-five. He was wearing an expensive suit, and his black hair was slicked back. His brown eyes were red-rimmed, and his rough shave suggested he’d hurried through the job.

“I’m Paul Slause,” he said expending his hand and shaking both of theirs vigorously. “I’m the junior vice-president here at Forrester.”

“I thought you were the office manager,” Ryan said.

"That too," Slaus said. "We're a small shop, so everyone wears multiple hats. Clea at the desk there is the receptionist and the human resources manager. Can I take you back?"

They nodded, and he held the door open for them. Going back appeared to be a quick process as the hallway was only about fifteen feet long with just three doors. There was an office to the right, one to the left, and one at the back, with the words Daniel Forrester, President and CEO, emblazoned on a gold nameplate attached to the door.

“May I inquire as to what this is in reference to?” Slaus asked as they approached the door. “We don’t typically get visits from law enforcement.”

“I suspect that Mr. Forrester would appreciate it if we kept this just between him and us for now,” Jessie said sweetly.

“Understood,” Slaus replied obsequiously, before glancing at a panel of lights above Forrester’s door. Two were green and one was red.

“What’s that about?” Ryan asked.

“They identify Mr. Forrester’s phone lines,” Slaus explained. “That way, we can check whether he’s available without having to buzz him and potentially interrupt a call. He hates that.”

“Red means he’s on a call?” Jessie confirmed.

“That’s right,” Slaus said.

“Hey Paul,” Ryan said, “how come your ‘small shop’ has security cameras outside a

reinforced metal door?"

"Oh, you know," Paul said sheepishly, "the world of finance can get messy. Sometimes people's feelings get hurt and they want to express that, not always in the most professional manner. So we take precautions."

"Do a lot of folks he deals with end up with hurt feelings?" Jessie asked.

"Who's to say?" Slausse half-answered with a shrug.

"You could say," she reminded him.

"Oh, look," he replied, pointing above the door. "The red light just turned green. Let's get you in there."

He knocked on the door.

"Come," Forrester shouted.

Slausse opened the door and poked his head in.

"Sorry for just butting in with this," he said meekly, "but there are a couple of folks from the Los Angeles Police Department here who would like to speak with you."

"What?" Forrester demanded, clearly not enthused by the prospect.

Ryan stepped through the open door, and Jessie followed.

"Thanks for making the time, Mr. Forrester," he said, as if the man had already agreed to an interview. "I'm Detective Hernandez. This is Jessie Hunt. This hopefully shouldn't take too long."

Daniel Forrester was a sight to behold. The man, who had stood up at their entrance, was physically imposing, easily six-foot-three and about 215 pounds. He was a little paunchy, but not horribly so. Like his vice-president/office manager, he was wearing an expensive suit and had reddish eyes.

What set him apart was his hair, both on top of his head and on his face. He had a wildly unkempt, grayish-black beard, which gave off late-era Charles Manson vibes, something Jessie could imagine being intentional. His curly, bushy hair shot a good three inches above the top of his head and looked like it hadn't been cut in a year.

The office wasn't large, but the man had done the most he could with it, covering the walls with diplomas and photos of himself with people she didn't recognize. He did have a nice view. His window looked south and offered an unobstructed panorama of the downtown skyline.

"Did we have an appointment?" he asked Slaus, either truly bewildered or effectively feigning it.

"No sir," Slaus said, "this is a walk-in."

Jessie found the description amusing but didn't comment on it. She could see Forrester's agitation and decided to short-circuit it before the man engaged in any time-wasting bluster.

"We've got some questions about a business acquaintance of yours, Mr. Forrester," she said, moving toward one of the two chairs across from his desk. "What can you tell us about Marcus Vega?"

Forrester's expression changed almost immediately from a confused frown to an outright scowl.

“You don’t want my opinion on that guy,” he growled, before looking up at Slaus. “You can go, Paul.”

Slaus shut the door as Ryan took a seat next to Jessie and added, “we do want your opinion. That’s part of why we’re here.”

Forrester sat back down behind his desk.

“Okay, Marcus Vega is a two-faced liar,” he said, his voice rising and his face starting to turn red. “He’ll spend months wining and dining you to make a deal, then drop you like a bad habit the second that things get complicated. But I don’t want to speak ill of the guy.”

“No, definitely not,” Jessie said sarcastically, egging him on. “Sounds like you’re not his biggest fan though.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” he said. “So what did he do—cheat someone else?”

“Did he cheat you ?” Jessie challenged.

Forrester took a moment to ponder the question before answering.

“Maybe not technically cheat, but he’s not a stand-up guy.”

“Why do you say that?” Ryan asked.

“Because we had a handshake deal and then he backed out of it like a weak-kneed little bitc—like a baby—because his overlords in San Francisco got cold feet.”

“Why did they get cold feet?” Jessie asked innocently.

Forrester looked briefly like he might not answer, but then did.

“They claimed I was too volatile to work with.”

“What would possibly make them say that?” Jessie wondered, sounding offended on his behalf.

“Just some stuff in my past,” he said with a dismissive wave, “from years ago.”

Jessie decided that now, when he seemed to think she was on his side, was the ideal time to pounce and see how he reacted.

“Were they concerned about the DUI?” she asked, “or was it the drunk and disorderly charge? Or maybe the assault on a co-worker?”

She smiled sweetly as his already red face turned a deeper shade of scarlet. He suddenly stood up again and pressed his palms flat on his desk, pushing down so hard that his knuckles turned white.

“Oh, I see,” he said acidly, “so this whole curious Pollyanna routine has been a front. You’re actually just as two-faced as Vega.”

He took his hands off the desk and squeezed them into tight fists. Jessie wasn’t sure if he was doing that in anticipation of getting physical or if it was just an involuntary response to being pushed so hard. Either way, she didn’t back off.

“I guess I am,” she said sharply, standing up herself. “You care to share what you do when confronted by two-faced cheats?”

The question hung in the air like a challenge. She waited to see if he’d accept it.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

“How about everyone sit back down?” Ryan suggested, trying to sound casual despite the tension in the room.

“How about you tell your lady friend not to cast aspersions on my character?” Forrester shot back as droplets of sweat magically appeared on his forehead.

“How about you answer the question I asked instead of acting like a pouty little schoolgirl?” Jessie demanded.

“Ms. Hunt,” Ryan said, his tone calm but his eyes intense, “let’s turn the temperature down and give Mr. Forrester a chance to answer your question.”

It was clear that he thought she’d pushed too hard, to the point of being counterproductive. And maybe he was right. She realized that she’d become less interested in studying his body language as he squirmed at her questions and more intent on getting him to make a mistake that would let her take him down.

Her nerve endings were jangling and she felt a strong desire to punch the man in the throat but she did her best to ignore, pretended like nothing was amiss, and sat back down. Forrester reluctantly followed suit.

“So where were we?” Ryan asked.

Jessie was happy to remind him.

“Mr. Forrester was about to explain why Marcus Vega backed out of their deal.”

The man, his face returning to a shade of bright pink, sighed exhaustedly.

“It was the fight that I got into a half dozen years ago,” he said. “he told me his bosses couldn’t risk doing such a big deal with someone who might punch one of them if things got hairy.”

“Didn’t they do the research on you before that point?” Ryan asked.

“They’re not the police,” Forrester replied. “I’ve done a good job of making that stuff hard to find unless you’re really looking. I tried to explain to Vega that there’s a context to everything, but he told me that it was out of his hands. The decision had been made.”

“Was there a context to you attacking Vega in the paper?” Jessie wanted to know, before adding. “I noticed that you didn’t mention the reason he backed out, that it was his boss’s decision. You just attacked his character. I also noticed that he didn’t attack you back.”

“So you’re on his side now?” Forrester asked, “the guy who cost me millions of dollars?”

Jessie looked over at Ryan to see if they were on the same page going forward. Despite the dustup earlier, his little nod indicated that they were. So she dropped the bomb.

“We’re on the side of anyone whose murder we’re investigating,” she said simply.

For a second, Forrester didn’t respond.

“Wait, what?” he said, either stunned or “stunned.” She couldn’t decide which.

“You weren’t aware that his wife was murdered last night?” she asked.

“I had no idea,” he insisted. “Why didn’t you lead with that? Wait—do you think that I killed his wife? Over some financial spat? You can’t be serious. I didn’t even know her.”

“We’re just doing our due diligence,” Ryan told him. “Is there a reason we should think that?”

“I didn’t kill anyone,” Forrester said forcefully, the beads of sweat now dripping down past his temples. “I didn’t even know it happened, I swear. When did she die?”

“That’s a good question,” Jessie said. “Where were you between 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. last night?”

Forrester thought about it briefly.

“I was at my spa,” he said, sounding relieved that he potentially had an alibi. “I like to go there to decompress after work some nights. I spent some time in the sauna and the steam room. I showered there too.”

“So,” Jessie said, certain that Ryan was thinking the same thing as her, “theoretically, you could have left your phone in locker at the spa so that it seemed like you were there, then gone somewhere else.”

“I didn’t do that!” he shouted, his face immediately darkening again.

"Okay," she said, moving on as if she'd barely heard his objection, "where were you on Sunday night between nine and eleven?"

“Why?”

“We’re just trying to get out of your hair here, Mr. Forrester,” Ryan said, convincing no one. The quicker you provide us with answers, the better for everyone.”

“Really?” he asked, “because this is starting to feel like harassment.”

Once more he rose to his feet, huffing deeply.

"Is there a reason you are standing up again rather than calmly answering our questions?" Jessie tweaked.

She could feel her blood starting to pump faster again and was tempted to get to her feet too. She noted that the man seemed to lose self-control when pushed even a little bit. That could lead to a verbal mistake or a physical one. She was fine with either.

“I was home on Sunday,” he said slowly, clearly forcing himself not to take her bait.

“Was anyone with you?” Ryan asked.

Forrester’s face sank into a mix of doubt and anger.

“I’m divorced twice over, man,” he said. “I’ve learned to enjoy my ‘me’ time in the privacy of my own home.”

“Where is home?” Jessie asked.

“I live in the Hollywood Hills.”

“Marcus Vega lived there too,” she said.

“I know,” he replied. “he told me that before turned into a snake—before the deal fell apart.”

The fact that he couldn't stop maligning Vega, even after his wife's death, was lost on no one.

"So you know where he lives," Jessie pointed out.

"Yeah, I know," he conceded, "but I've never been there."

"Not even a drive-by to stare daggers at the home of the man who screwed you over?" she wondered.

"Not even that."

"Are you willing to give us access to the GPS data on your phone and car to verify that?" Ryan asked.

"I'm willing to give you the phone number for my lawyer," Forrester said. "You can ask him for that stuff formally."

"So you're not willing to cooperate?" Jessie asked.

"I have been cooperating," he told her, agitated, "but it looks like I need to protect myself too."

"Let me ask you, Mr. Forrester," she said, "do you still use the same criminal lawyer from your other incidents, or have you changed it up?"

At that, Forrester turned to face his window. Jessie wasn't sure what he was planning and started to stand up in preparation of whatever came next. But before she could, Ryan gently put his hand on her forearm and shook his head. It took her a moment to understand why.

Forrester was inhaling and exhaling slowly. He appeared to be engaging in some deep breathing exercises in an attempt to remain calm. After several seconds of that, he spoke, still looking out the window.

“I didn’t have anything to do with Vega’s wife’s death,” he said firmly. “The GPS data will show you that. But you’ll have to go through the proper channels to see for sure. I don’t know if that means getting a subpoena or what. In the meantime, unless you plan to arrest me, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. I’ve got millions of dollars to make today. I’ve got to earn back what Vega cost me.”

Ryan gave Jessie a look that suggested he thought they were at a dead end, but she decided to take one more shot at egging Forrester into a mistake.

“You know,” she said quietly, “if you were really doing as well as you say, I would have figured you’d have a nicer workplace and more employees. It’s hard not to think renting this tiny office in a big, fancy tower is just a front to hide how poorly you’re actually doing. It feels a little like you’re a fake.”

Jessie saw his whole body tense up and she thought she might finally have pushed him to the breaking point.

“It feels a little like you’re a bitch,” he replied calmly, still not looking at her, “but I would never say that because I’m a gentleman.”

Now Ryan stood up and indicated that she should do the same. It was clear to him, as it was to her, that while Forrester might make disparaging remarks, he wasn’t going to implicate himself, at least not here and now.

“We’ll be in touch,” Ryan said. “In the meantime, don’t leave town.”

Jessie’s efforts to trip Forrester up had failed, but they had worked in another way,

one that she didn't love. As they left his office, her insides churned. She had a strong desire to turn back around, and body slam him into his window so hard that he crashed through onto the street twenty-six floors below. It required all of her self-control to keep walking.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Jessie was still nursing her anger well after they had returned to the station.

She was sitting on the couch in the research department, flipping through a list that Jamil had compiled of people who might have connections to Forrester and both victims. But she could feel Ryan's eyes on her. She knew that he could sense her frustration, and he was clearly doing what he could to mitigate it.

"I think we should put a tail on Forrester," he suggested, "just to be safe. We may not have anything on the guy yet, but if he turns out to be our killer and he does it again because we lost track of him, that would be inexcusable."

"I'll request a unit be posted outside his building," Beth offered.

"That would be great," Ryan said.

Something about the way he acknowledged that Forrester was still a credible suspect, even after they'd made no headway with him, comforted Jessie. Ryan wasn't the type to have officers assigned to watch someone just to assuage her. He clearly had his doubts about the guy, too.

Just knowing that calmed her down a bit. And the second she felt a bit of the tension escape her body, she found that she could think more clearly and make concessions that she couldn't have even two minutes earlier.

"I will say that Forrester doesn't seem like the type to kill people that he despised by prolonged poisoning," she said. "He strikes me as more of the stabby-shooty type."

“If it was him, maybe that’s why he went that way,” Ryan countered. “He knows what kind of reputation he has. Could he be trying to use an unexpected method of murder as a way to throw suspicion off himself?”

“That would be pretty clever,” Jessie said. “I don’t know if he has it in him. Then again, the guy was still showing active animosity toward Marcus Vega even after he ‘learned’ that the man’s wife had been killed. That indicates that he either has zero impulse control or he wanted us to be having this conversation—to make us question whether any man being questioned about a murder would express such antipathy to the victim.”

“So he’s either too explosive to have pulled this off,” Jamil mused, “or that’s the impression he wants to give.”

“That’s not the only thing that gives me pause,” Jessie said. “I can’t but think that even if Forrester was wearing a ski mask when he invaded the home, Marcus Vega would have eventually recognized him while sitting in their living room for hours. He’s a big guy. And they’d had enough conversations that Vega would have surely recognized his voice.”

“I don’t know, Jessie,” Ryan said. “The man’s wife was dying right in front of him. He might not have been that focused on the physical characteristics of the person responsible.”

Jessie couldn’t deny that. When people were in high-tension situations, their ability to notice details or retain them later was often questionable.

“I may have found something,” Jamil said, pulling Jessie out of her thoughts.

Jessie, Ryan, and Beth all stopped what they were doing. When Jamil found something, it was usually important.

“We’re all ears,” Beth told him.

"When Ms. Hunt pointed out that Vega might recognize Forrester's voice, a thought popped into my head. Have you ever seen the movie Throw Momma from the Train ?" he asked.

“You mean the movie based on the Hitchcock film, Strangers on a Train ?” Jessie teased. But even before she’d finished talking, she sensed where the brilliant, young researcher might be headed with this.

"Oh right, that's the old-timey movie they reference," Jamil said. "Well, in the movie I saw, this guy wants his writing teacher to kill his mother and offers to kill the guy's ex-wife. That way, they both have alibis for the murder they might actually be suspected of."

“Where is this headed?” Beth asked, confused.

“Let me guess,” Jessie ventured, “you’ve been looking for potential connections between Daniel Forrester and the man who had a grudge against the first victim, James Whitaker—Dr. Ethan Blackwell.”

“That’s right,” Jamil said, “and I found one.”

“What?” Ryan asked excitedly.

“Two years ago, Forrester had an emergency appendectomy,” Jamil said. “Guess who the anesthesiologist for the procedure was?”

“Really?” Beth asked. “It was Blackwell?”

“It’s right here in the file,” Jamil said with a shy smile.

“So the idea is that Forrester killed James Whitaker for Blackwell and Blackwell killed Elena Vega for Forrester?” Ryan asked.

“It’s just a theory,” Jamil cautioned.

“It’s not crazy,” Jessie conceded. “I could see Forrester wanting Elena Vega killed instead of Marcus just to make the man watch her die and suffer more.”

“And it would explain why neither victim’s spouse could ID the person in the mask,” Ryan acknowledged, “they might never have seen them before.”

“And it would give each killer an airtight alibi for the murder that he could be connected to,” Beth added.

Jessie agreed that there was promise in the hypothesis, but she did have some reservations. She tried to raise them diplomatically.

“That’s great work, Jamil” she said, before noting a caveat that she hoped wouldn’t dim his pride. “I know that when I had my brain surgery last fall, the anesthesiologist introduced himself before the procedure. But if this was an emergency situation, can we even be sure there was time for that sort of thing?”

“I’ll try to find out,” Jamil said, undaunted.

He turned back to the screen in front of him. Jessie was about to return her attention to her own file when Captain Parker walked in.

“Hi Captain,” Beth said amiably, “how did the event for your son go yesterday?”

“Fine, thanks,” Parker said, sounding mildly defensive.

Jessie noted that the captain had bags under her eyes, and she wasn't as put together as usual. Her clothes were slightly wrinkled, which was never the case, and her normally tight hair bun was a little loose.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

Parker nodded, before fixing her attention on Ryan.

"I've been a little out of the loop this morning," she said, her voice scratchy with exhaustion, "but I could use an update on these poisoning murders."

Jessie looked over at Ryan and could see his agitation. He clearly thought that the captain's dismissal of their concern for her was rude, but Jessie sensed there might be more to it than that. She decided to take the lead in answering Parker's question rather than have Ryan explain while his mood was turning sour.

She walked the captain through their investigation up to that point as succinctly as possible. Then she offered a few conclusions.

"We don't yet have anything definitive tying either of our strongest suspects to either murder," she conceded, "but the connection that Jamil just uncovered makes them both worth keeping our eye on."

"Do you think this 'trading murders' theory hold water?" Parker asked her directly.

"I have some reservations," Jessie admitted, "but it's as good an idea as we have right now. Having two different killers would answer a lot of our open questions. It would also explain both men's confidence—even cockiness—that their alibis would hold up, even if they don't seem rock solid at the moment. But right now, we don't have enough evidence to go after either of them hard."

“That’s all I needed to hear,” Parker said.

“What do you mean?” Ryan asked.

“We’ve got two victims of poisoning in the last two nights, and no solid suspects, just two persons of interest,” she said. “That’s why I’ve decided to hold a press conference. We need to warn the public about what’s going on.”

“Don’t you worry that going public with this will cause a panic?” Ryan asked.

"There's already a low-level panic going on," Parker said. "The press is reporting on one of these cases already. It's only a matter of time before they have the other one too. I want to set the terms of this thing before the situation gets out of control. I don't want any more poisonings, but I also don't want rich folks to start freaking out and shooting anyone who rings their doorbell while dressed in black. We need to get people to take precautions without losing their heads."

“When do you plan to hold this press conference?” Jessie asked, realizing that they were well past convincing the captain to change her mind.

"It's 9:45 now," Parker said, looking at her watch. "I'll get media relations to organize one for 11 a.m. That way, it'll make all the noon newscasts. But I won't be the one doing the press conference."

“Who will?” Beth asked curiously.

But Jessie already knew the answer. She realized that by choosing to brief Parker to protect Ryan from saying something he’d regret, she’d made herself a target. She was right.

“Hunt will,” the captain said with finality.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Jessie waited impatiently in the prison meeting room.

She wasn't sure if this was the best idea, but she was doing it anyway.

It was 10:13 now and with nearly an hour left until the press conference, she needed something to take her mind off the nerves that were jangling inside her. So she'd made the unusual decision to visit a serial killer—one who'd tried to kill her.

She figured that by focusing her attention elsewhere, her brain wouldn't spin out in multiple unconstructive directions. That was why she'd chosen right now to follow up on Mark Haddonfield's collect call from prison yesterday.

As she sat at the bolted down metal table waiting for the man to be brought in, she tried to guess what was so important that he wanted to see her. His trial was starting very soon. Maybe he was planning to plead guilty and thought that if he told her first, he'd get bonus points.

Or maybe he'd learned of some new threat against her and wanted to warn her. He'd done that once before. Now that he considered them to be on the same side, he wouldn't want any harm to come to the woman he viewed as his "partner."

Or it could be something more mundane. The deal they'd struck—that as long as she brought him the occasional active case to discuss, he'd instruct his acolytes not to hurt her or anyone she cared about—was pretty cut and dried.

But that didn't mean that he was above asking her to help him get some extra perks. She knew that he'd been beaten up a few times. It wouldn't stun her if he asked her to

put in a word with the warden to get a private cell.

She was about to find out. The door opened and a guard stepped in. He was followed by Haddonfield, who was manacled at the wrists and ankles.

On the surface, he didn't look all that different from the young man she'd first encountered a year and a half ago on the UCLA campus where she was leading a seminar on criminal profiling. He was still the same tall, skinny, now-twenty-two-year-old with pale skin, curly blond hair and glasses.

But in other ways, the five months that he'd been incarcerated after nearly killing her in her hospital bed on the eve of her brain surgery had taken a toll. His skinniness, bordering on gaunt, was only emphasized by his dark blue jail jumpsuit. That curly, blond hair had been cut short and his wire-rimmed glasses had, for security reasons, been replaced by ones with bookish, black, plastic frames. He still had a splint on the broken middle finger on his left hand, which he wouldn't explain but she suspected came from pissing off the wrong prisoner. He also had a puffy right eye. The last time she'd visited, it was the left one that was black.

A second guard standing behind Haddonfield guided him to the table and connected the hand manacles to a metal ring attached to the top of the table. Once they were secure, the guard stepped back by the door. The other guard remained closer to the table, just in case Haddonfield chose to do something rash.

"Thanks for coming, Jessie," he said, sounding like a little boy excited that there was a magician at his birthday party. "I wasn't sure you'd keep your promise."

She noted in the last month, he'd become more familiar, referring to her by her first name rather than the old "Ms. Hunt." He must have thought they were on more collegial terms, now that they "working together."

“I always keep my promises,” she assured him, before cutting to the chase. “What’s going on?”

“Well, that’s actually the issue, Jessie,” he said, resting his hands on the table. “Do you recall what you guaranteed me?”

And now it became clear to Jessie why she was here. She had assumed wrongly, that she didn’t need to assuage the guy’s apprehensions right now, but clearly she was wrong.

“I guaranteed you that I would periodically bring in a case to review with you,” she said calmly, “and to the extent that I could share any particulars, that we could work on solving it together.”

“And yet you’ve only brought me a single case, Jessie,” he reminded her, “one that I was crucial to solving.”

That was overstating it, but Haddonfield had been helpful in making her see the evidence from a different light, one that did ultimately help her catch the killer she was after. She decided not to contradict his interpretation.

She was about to reply when she saw that he was looking to the side and muttering something to himself. All she could hear was the tail end, when he angrily murmured, “I’ll make the decision on this one.”

“What was that?” she asked, confused.

“Nothing,” he said, shaking his head violently, as if trying to force something out of it before regaining some semblance of control, “do you agree with my assessment?”

“It’s true that I’ve only brought you one case so far,” she conceded, “but I figured

now wasn't a good time to bring you another one."

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because," she said, stunned that she needed to make this point, "your trial for committing multiple murders starts next week. I figured you'd be otherwise engaged."

"I'm well aware of that," he said with a pout in his voice. "But don't you see that with that hanging over me, I need something else to focus on?"

Jessie felt a sudden wave of uncomfortable recognition. She did see what he meant, because she was doing the exact same thing with him right now: using him to take her mind off a stressful, upcoming event. The realization that she and an unhinged serial killer handled their stress the same way, was to put it mildly, disconcerting.

Did everyone who constantly had vengeful feelings bubbling just under the surface handle their stress the same way? Of course, Haddonfield had gone much farther than Jessie ever did. He seemed to use murder as a means of releasing tension. She hadn't reached that point—yet. Her work with Dr. Lemmon had worked in that regard. But the contrast to date in how they handled stress didn't stop her from wondering just how different they really were.

"I guess I shouldn't have assumed," she said deferentially.

"Well, as long as you're here," he said, getting over it quickly, "do you have a case we can work on now?"

She briefly debated how best to deal with the question. Ultimately, she decided that with Haddonfield already a bit tetchy, she was better off just being honest.

“I am currently working a case,” she admitted, “but I’m not authorized to discuss it.”

“Come on,” he pleaded, “just give me a few details. Maybe I can break it open.”

“I can’t,” she said firmly, “but I can give you a heads up about something case-related before anyone else knows. Make sure to watch the noon news today.”

“Which channel?” he asked giddily.

“All of them.”

He broke into a huge grin. Apparently that answer satisfied him.

“Is that all?” she asked, “because I really have to head back.”

“I guess so,” he said, the frown starting to return before something else popped into his head. “Hold on, I wanted to tell you something. Guess who I’ve been seeing when I go in the prison transport bus for my court appearances?”

She shrugged. “I’ve put so many people in this place that the choices are limitless. You’ll just have to tell me.”

“You old gal pal, Ash Pierce,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. “Should I say ‘hi’ from you?”

“That’s okay,” Jessie replied, unamused.

“No?” he asked, clearly happy to be getting under her skin. “Or maybe I should ask her out. What do you think? We could share slices of toast in the courthouse holding pen before we’re sent to our assigned courtrooms.”

“Listen,” Jessie said, leaning in to make her seriousness clear, “This shouldn’t be a concern of mine, considering that you tried to murder me and have my loved ones killed. But you once tried to warn me about an attempt on my life, so I’m going to give you a piece of advice. Steer clear of Ash Pierce. You don’t want to be on her radar. If she knew that we were on speaking terms, she might try to kill you just for that.”

She stood up to go, noting that she didn’t seem to have extinguished his intrigue with the professional assassin. She decided that she’d done all she could. If Pierce gutted him on the bus ride to court, it wouldn’t be on her conscience.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Hannah tried not being a back seat—or in this case, a side seat—driver.

It was hard because she thought that Kat was much too close as she trailed Rex Stiller.

“I can feel your anxiety,” Kat told her, “but you can relax. This guy isn’t going to notice that we’re behind him. Hell, he couldn’t even keep his wife from suspecting that he’s having an affair. Do you really think that a manager for a trucking company suspects he has a tail?”

Hannah had to acknowledge that it was a fair point. So far, in the day and a half that they’d been following him, Stiller hadn’t given any indication that he thought anyone was aware of his existence, much less following and recording his movements.

He’d picked his nose in public, repeatedly scratched both his backside and his crotch while waiting in line for coffee and ate one meal as if he were feeding at a trough. He didn’t strike Hannah as the kind of guy concerned with who saw him or when.

“I hear you,” she said, “but I always like to err on the side of caution. It’s not like he’s going to peel out in his Kia Sorrento and leave us in the dust. I just don’t want him to notice that the same car with two chicks in it has been behind him as he’s driven all around downtown running errands.”

“Okay,” Kat relented, “If it will make you feel better, I’ll pull back a car length.”

“Thank you,” Hannah said as they pulled onto 6 th Street. “Hey, we’re getting into a kind of sketchy area here. The worst part of Skid Row is just another block south of

here, right?”

‘Yes, but I seriously doubt that’s where he’s headed,’ Kat said. ‘He’d get eaten alive over there.’

But only seconds later, Stiller turned right onto San Pedro Street and slowed to a crawl.

“I stand corrected,” Kat said. “We may have a problem here. While he might not notice someone trailing him on a crowded street, having just one other car behind him around here will stick out.”

The problem was exacerbated when someone pushing a shopping cart stopped right in front of Kat’s car as she tried to turn right. The man had a long straggly beard and hair that covered most of his face, but Hannah was able to see him smile mischievously, as if they were involved in a game that only he understood.

Up ahead, Stiller’s car was still moving, weaving carefully in and out of the crowds of people who milled about the street. So far, no one was playing the shopping cart traffic game with him.

“This is the first unconventional thing that he’s done in two days, and it looks like he’s going to get away,” Hannah said. “I’m just going to get out and follow him. He’s moving so slow that I should be able to catch up to him.”

She opened the door and jumped out.

“Hannah, no!” Kat called out. “You can’t go walking around here on your own. Some of these folks aren’t in the best headspace.”

“I’ll be okay,” Hannah said, not sure she believed it. “Just drive around to the other

end of the street and I'll meet you there.”

She closed the door before Kat could object and moved over to the edge of the street. She couldn't walk on the sidewalk because it was fully consumed by tents and other makeshift structures. Feeling eyes on her, she zipped up her jacket and pulled the hoodie over her head.

Up ahead, Stiller was still maneuvering through traffic. He was pretty adept at it, moving at about five miles an hour, often veering in wide arcs to steer clear of any human or constructed obstructions. No one seemed to be giving him the hard time that Kat had gotten.

Hannah tried to keep pace, walking as quickly as she could without drawing more attention to herself. By and large, she kept her head down to avoid making eye contact with anyone who might take offense, only looking up periodically to track Stiller's whereabouts.

After another couple of minutes of this, she saw that the man had pulled his car over to the left side of the street and come to a stop. He got out of the vehicle. As she weaved among the street's denizens, she noticed a plastic bag in his left hand.

He crossed the street and stepped onto the sidewalk, disappearing behind a bank of tents. Hannah, afraid she would lose him, broke into a jog. She couldn't help but wonder what a middle-aged middle manager was doing here. If he was scoring drugs or sex, there were less risky areas to engage in that kind of behavior.

She was just reaching the point where she'd lost sight of Stiller when someone stepped directly in her path. It was a tiny, wizened old woman with gray hair that reached her waist. She wore overalls that were several sizes too large for her and didn't appear to have anything on underneath them. She also wore an old L.A. Raiders baseball cap, which she removed and displayed elaborately as she bowed, as

if it was a top hat and they were at a 19th century ball.

“Young lady,” she said in a rasp, “unless you really need to be here, you really shouldn’t be here.”

“Thanks,” Hannah said, trying not to appear too startled. “I was just trying to find a friend.”

“Who’s your friend?” the woman asked.

“Um, his name is Rex. He just walked by here in a suit. Did you happen to see him?”

“No,” the woman said, “But I know him. He was probably going to see Randy.”

“Randy?”

“Yes,” the woman said, slowly turning her shriveled body and pointing at a narrow alley twenty feet away. “Randy lives in there.”

“Thanks,” Hannah said, not sure what else she was expected to say before departing.

The woman didn’t share the same concern for proper goodbyes. She put the cap back on her head and, her attention now on something or someone in the distance behind Hannah, wandered off into the street.

Hannah dashed over to the alley and peeked in. It was barely wide enough to hold the half dozen dumpsters that had been dragged in at some point. She scanned the collection of people in the dark passageway, most of whom were slumped on the ground.

After several seconds, she saw Rex Stiller. He was leaning over someone sitting on

the ground with their legs crossed. It was hard to be sure in this light, but the person appeared to be a male, probably in his twenties, though the scruffy beard and long hair made it hard to be certain about anything.

What she could be sure of was that Stiller was pulling several Styrofoam boxes out of the plastic bag and placing them on the ground beside the person she assumed was Randy. The two of them spoke, but Hannah couldn't make out any of it.

After several seconds, Randy reached down and grabbed one of the boxes. He opened it to reveal what looked to be French fries. Why was Rex Stiller bringing a homeless man what appeared to be lunch?

Before she could figure that out, someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned around to find two men staring at her, each wearing smiles that were lacking multiple teeth.

"Yes?" she said.

"You're pretty," said the taller and thinner of the two men.

"Thanks."

"I want to know you more," said the shorter one, who was bald and had a potbelly.

"I was just leaving, actually," Hannah explained. "Maybe another time."

"I want to know you more now," the shorter man insisted, reaching out and grabbing her forearm.

She looked down at her arm, then back up at the men. The taller one had started giggling uncontrollably, but the shorter one was staring at her with dead-eyed

seriousness. Fighting off the creeping hint of fear that was starting to seep into her chest, she stared back at him.

“You’ll have to know me more later,” she said forcefully. “Right now, I have to talk to Randy.”

“I don’t care about Randy,” the shorter man said. “I care about you.”

Hannah looked around. A crowd was starting to form around them. She realized that unless she nipped this in the bud, it could escalate quickly.

“What’s your name?” she asked the shorter man, forcing a smile onto her face.

“Grady,” he said.

"Grady, if you want to know me more, you have to behave like a gentleman," she said. "Instead of grabbing my arm, why don't you hold my hand? Then we can find a private place, just for us?"

Grady’s toothy grin got even wider at the suggestion. Next to him, the tall guy’s giggling had turned into a full-on, hyena-like cackle. Grady, unbothered, let go of her arm and extended his hand to grab hers. That was the moment she’d been waiting for.

Without any hesitation, she turned and shot past the assembling throng, darting into the middle of the street. Once clear of grasping hands, she turned west and sprinted in the direction of 7 th Street, the intersection she hoped Kat had found her way to.

After about ten seconds, she glanced over her shoulder. Grady was nowhere to be found. But the tall, cackling guy was right there, only about five strides back and keeping pace. She faced forward again. In the distance, she saw Kat's car easing into the intersection.

Hannah figured she could make it to the passenger door and maybe even open it before the tall guy got to her, but she doubted she could get in and close it before he caught up. That's when she decided she had to change her plan.

She was still a good twenty yards away from Kat's car when she suddenly stopped and spun around. She dropped into a squat and launched her shoulders at the tall guy, whose eyes turned to saucers when he realized that he couldn't stop his momentum.

Hannah slammed her hunched right shoulder into the man's groin. His rapid movement and the force of her thrust sent him toppling over her. He did a somersault in the air before landing hard on his backside. He sat there, clearly stunned, before shaking his head from side to side, like he was trying to extricate cobwebs from inside his brain.

Hannah didn't wait for him to get back up. Instead, she turned and continued her sprint toward the car. It was only then that she noticed that Kat had exited the driver's door and was pointing a gun in their direction.

"I don't think you'll need that," Hannah panted as she opened the passenger door and got in. Kat did the same.

"What the hell happened?" the private detective demanded.

"I'll explain later," Hannah said, looking over at the tall guy, who had managed to get to his feet and was still hobbling in their direction. "Let's just go!"

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

The crowd for the press conference was bigger than Jessie had expected.

It was being held on the steps of LAPD headquarters rather than at Central Station. Jessie understood the logic of it. Normally, she would worry about something like this creating a panic. But that was the risk that came with warning the public about a very real danger. The more pomp and circumstance the event had, the more media attention it would get and the more Angelenos that would be made aware of the threat they were facing.

They were already a little late. It was 11:07, but Chief Decker had been held up on a phone call and was just now making his way outside. As he approached them, Jessie realized that she hadn't seen the man in forever. She hadn't been there when he'd tried to broker a truce between Ryan and Captain Parker last month. In fact, the last time she'd spoken to him in person was before the new year.

Chief Roy Decker used to be Captain Decker—Parker's current position—back when he ran Central Station. Prior to being bumped up to chief he'd been Jessie's boss, and despite his outwardly surly demeanor, he one of the strongest advocates of HSS, and of her personally.

In some ways, he hadn't changed much. He looked a decade older than his sixty-one years, with a face comprised primarily of craggy peaks and valleys. A few gray tufts of hair still allowed him to claim he wasn't totally bald. And his sharp nose and beady, penetrating eyes still reminded Jessie of an eagle hunting its prey. But it was clear that being in charge of the entire department had taken its toll. He was more slouched, with tired eyes and somehow, an even more weathered energy to him than usual.

He walked up to her and gave something close to a smile. Next to her, Parker saluted.

“Good morning, Chief,” she said dutifully.

“Good morning, Captain Parker,” he said, before addressing Jessie, “and good morning to you, Ms. Hunt.”

“Good morning, Chief,” she said. “I assume it would be inappropriate to give you a hug, what with all the press in attendance?”

“It would,” he said, “but I appreciate the thought. Since I’m late, maybe we can save the heartfelt pleasantries for later and get going on this. Where’s Detective Hernandez?”

"Right here, Chief," Ryan said, from behind him. "I was just conferring with the security contingent. I thought the roped-off area for the general public was too close to the stairs and asked them to move it back."

“Great,” Decker said, “so now that we’ve got the whole team here, let’s review the plan. We’re just sharing basic details on the murders. Nothing that could lead to copycats or prevent us from identifying the killer later. Forceful but calm warning to the public to be cautious and vigilant. That all sound good?”

“Yes, Chief,” all three of them said in unison.

“And I understand that Hunt will be front and center for this?” Decker confirmed.

“She described the case status to me earlier,” Parker said, “and I thought she had a good handle on it. Plus, her semi-celebrity status might get more eyeballs on this thing, which means more people kept safe.”

“I like that,” Decker said. “You good with it?”

“I guess I have to be,” Jessie said.

"I guess you do," Decker agreed without a trace of sympathy. "Then let's get this thing started. I want it plastered on the noon news. Plus, I have another meeting at 11:30."

He nodded to the public information officer, who stepped to the podium and turned on the microphone. She tapped on it, making the speakers on either side of the stairs pop with static. The crowd quieted noticeably.

“I’m PIO Tanya Cantu,” the woman said crisply. “I want to thank you all for coming on such short notice. We have some important information we’d like to share with the public. To do that, I’d like to invite up one of LAPD’s premiere criminal profilers, Jessie Hunt. As some of you may be aware, Ms. Hunt works in our elite Homicide Special Section unit and has been instrumental in bringing multiple violent predators to justice, including Xander Thurman, better known as the Ozark Executioner, his protégé Bolton Crutchfield, as well as the Night Hunter, and more recently, Mark Haddonfield. So when she has something to say, it’s worth listening. Ms. Hunt?”

Jessie hadn’t been expecting such an elaborate introduction, and if she’d known it was coming, she would have shut it down. The last thing she needed was for some future killer to view outwitting her as some kind of challenge. Her celebrity status already made her a target, one who had turned her home into a veritable fortress. Now a whole batch of fresh crazies were more likely to want to say “hi.”

“Hello everyone,” she said, her voice booming louder than intended as she leaned into the microphone. She stopped for a moment, wondering if the echo she heard was from her voice bouncing off the walls of the surrounding buildings or from her fast-beating heart. The reporters at the bottom of the stairs all had the ravenous looks of

wolves, hoping to get a meaty story to chew on. Well, she had one for them.

“I’ll try to keep this short,” she began, now sounding more like her normal self. “We want to make Angelenos aware of a disturbing series of home invasion killings in recent days. We can’t get into too many particulars but what we can say is that the perpetrator has acted alone in each instance, that they have not forced their way in but snuck in while the victims—typically couples—were arriving home. During the invasions, the killer has worn dark clothing and a ski mask. We believe that the attacker is male. At this time, we’re not able to describe the method used to kill the victims, nor any additional physical details about him.”

The reporters began to balk in unison at that last comment, but Jessie held up her hand to quiet them.

“However,” she continued, “we can offer several recommendations as we continue our investigation. First and foremost, please don’t make any rash decisions. Just because someone you don’t know arrives at your door, don’t jump to conclusions and take matters into your own hands. If you have concerns, call the police.

“Having said that, here is what we believe you should do. First, be aware of your surroundings at all times, especially when you are returning home. If your house is gated or has a garage, make sure that it is closed before exiting your vehicle. When entering your home, move quickly and lock your doors immediately once you are inside. Obviously, keep your doors locked in general. And take particular note if someone in your household becomes ill while returning from an activity. The perpetrator has been known to use that vulnerability and distractedness on the part of the victim and their loved ones to gain entry while their attention is on the person in distress. Following these recommendations will vastly reduce your exposure to harm until we are able to bring this person to justice. Are there any questions?”

There was an almost immediate cacophony of shouts and wildly waved arms. Jessie

was relieved to see Officer Cantu step up to join her at the podium.

“Hold on,” she bellowed, “we’re going to do this in an organized manner.”

As Cantu explained the rules, Jessie noticed someone near the front of the crowd of journalists. What drew her attention to him was what he lacked. He had no microphone or camera, there was no press credential card anywhere on his clothing, and he wasn’t trying to ask anything.

The man was just staring at her, his eyes aflame, with what looked like a hint of drool at the edge of his mouth. Jessie pretended not to notice, glancing away before returning her focus to him. His blue eyes were still fixed on her, like he was in some kind of reverie.

Jessie guessed that he was in his early thirties. He had jet-black hair parted severely to the side. He wore black slacks and a buttoned-down, paisley dress shirt that looked like he'd snagged it from a garage sale, circa 1976.

Cantu called on the first reporter and Jessie tore her eyes away from the man, trying to focus on the question being asked. But even as she listened, her eyes regularly darted back to the man. Something told her that she better not lose track of him.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Officer Cantu ended the press conference ten minutes later.

Jessie, relieved, stepped away from the podium, without taking her eyes off the crowd. Ryan took her hand and gave it a supportive squeeze. She fought the urge to respond with a hug. They were still in front of the press, after all. Instead, she leaned in and whispered in his ear.

“Be casual when you look,” she said, “But there’s a guy in the second row—black hair parted to the right, purple paisley shirt, crazy eyes. You see him?”

“I do,” Ryan whispered back, “he can’t stop looking at you.”

“I noticed that too,” she said. “he’s not a reporter. He never took any notes, and he doesn’t have a press credential.”

“Could he just be a superfan?” Ryan wondered.

“Possible,” Jessie conceded, “but once folks clear out, I thought that maybe we could approach him for a chat.”

“That might be a challenge,” Ryan said. “It looks like he’s starting to leave.”

“Good job, Hunt,” Captain Decker said, startling her. She’d been so focused on the guy that she hadn’t noticed him sidle up to her. “Now we just have to catch the bastard.”

“Yes, Chief,” she said distractedly.

“Well, keep me updated,” he said, speaking more to Parker than her. “I have to be back upstairs in less than ten minutes for that meeting, but I want to know what’s going on.”

“Yes, Chief,” Parker said.

Decker, as usual, left without saying goodbye. Parker turned to Jessie and Ryan.

“Well done, Hunt,” she said. “Let’s get back to the station and see if your research team has come across anything new in our absence.”

"Actually, Captain," Ryan said, "Jessie and I want to follow up on a lead before we head back. Do you mind if we meet you there?"

I suppose not,” Parker said, though she looked a little put out.

Jessie couldn’t worry about the captain’s feelings right now. Her energy was focused on keeping the paisley guy in her sights.

“Great, we’ll see you back there soon,” Ryan said, before turning to Jessie. “Do you want to go for a walk with me?”

“That sounds good,” she said, joining him as he started down the stairs, making sure to move at an unhurried pace so as not to make the paisley man jumpy.

A reporter stepped up to her and shoved a microphone in her face.

“Don’t you think you owe it to the community to offer more specifics on the suspect?” he demanded.

Jessie had learned not to engage in this kind of informal back and forth. She kept

walking. Ryan, close beside her, simply said, “please direct any additional questions to the Media Relations Division.”

Once past the remaining press stragglers, they moved onto the sidewalk and wandered hand in hand, as if they were on a casual midday stroll. But both of them kept their attention on the paisley man, who was on the other side of the street, walking briskly away from them.

“At what point are we going to engage with this guy?” Jessie asked.

“Hopefully not yet,” Ryan said. “If he starts running now, we may have to also, and that means we’ll have a collection of reporters on our heels. Let’s hope our guy keeps his cool until we get a little further away.”

The young man seemed willing to do what Ryan wanted. He continued walking at a quick pace that was only mildly suspicious. It was only when he glanced back over his shoulder and saw the woman he’d just watched give a briefing walking on the same path as him, that he amped up his speed. He reminded Jessie of a second grader who really had to get to the potty but was hesitant to break into a run because it would look suspicious.

The paisley man was approaching the entrance of the Civic Center/Grand Park metro station, which had a giant escalator that went deep underground. As he got closer, he glanced back at them a second time. He was clearly nervous.

Jessie reminded herself that this could just be an unusual-looking fella who was understandably thrown by having two members of law enforcement trail him for several minutes. Or he could be something much worse.

As he disappeared down the escalator into the bowels of the station, Jessie broke into a jog, as did Ryan. When they reached the entrance, she looked down. To her

astonishment, their target was on his back, sliding down the extremely narrow metal railing along the edge of the down escalator. He was already two-thirds of the way down.

“That doesn’t reflect well on his innocence,” Ryan noted.

Jessie started to climb onto the railing, but he put his hand on her shoulder.

“No way,” he said. “You had brain surgery last fall. I don’t want you taking any unnecessary chances. I’ll do the rail surfing. You’re a runner. Do that.”

She hadn’t even opened her mouth to reply before he’d hopped on the railing and started down himself. Rather than take the escalator, which was filled with scattered riders, Jessie started down the stairs between the up and down escalators, taking them as fast as she could without losing her balance and toppling the rest of the way. She was only halfway down when Ryan reached the bottom and ran off to the left in the direction the paisley man had gone.

She got to the bottom twenty seconds later and dashed around the corner, alert for any surprises. Ryan was ahead of her by about fifty yards, down a long, curved tunnel hallway. She sprinted after him as he briefly left her sight.

She rounded the corner just in time to see him another thirty yards ahead, leaping over a turnstile, after which he continued down the stairs to one of the platforms. He must have seen the paisley man go down there.

She charged after him and was about to clamber over the turnstile herself when she paused and glanced back in the direction from which she’d come. It occurred to her that Ryan had been out of her view for a good ten seconds before she saw him again near the turnstile.

The paisley man had even more of a head start on Ryan. How much time had he had before Ryan rounded that corner? Fifteen seconds? Twenty? And had Ryan actually seen the guy go down to the platform or did he just assume that's where he went?

She looked around, scanning for any spot where the man could have hidden before Ryan came barreling around that corner. There were no obvious alternative exits. Nor were there any shops to hole up in. That's when she saw the restrooms off to the left.

If the paisley man knew this station well, he could have darted straight to the men's room without having to stop to think about it. There was no door to open. She guessed that he would have been able to get there in the time he had before Ryan rounded the corner.

She jogged over in that direction, debating how best to proceed. Did she want to ask someone coming out if they saw anyone meeting their suspect's description? Did she want to hunt down a metro worker? Or call Ryan? If she was wrong and he was currently chasing the guy down on the platform, a call from her could be dangerously distracting.

Of course, she could always just walk into the men's room. It would be an unconventional choice, but this was an unconventional situation. She decided to proceed and deal with the fallout later.

As she approached the entrance, she saw a familiar head poke out from around the corner. It was their guy. He saw her too and shot back inside. Without pausing to think, she followed him.

Once she rounded the barrier wall, she scanned the restroom. There were two men at urinals and one washing his hands at a sink. None of them were the paisley man. She stepped over to the other side of the restroom just in time to see the man dart into the last stall at the far end.

She dashed after him. The stall was handicapped accessible and had a larger door than the others, which was just slamming shut as she got to it. Without hesitation, she kicked it, hoping she'd arrived before he could lock it. She had.

The thing shot inward. She heard a thump as it clearly collided with the man before bouncing back toward her. A second sound was harder to identify. She unholstered her weapon and then kicked at the door a second time. Once she did, she understood the nature of the mysterious sound.

The man was lying on his back in the corner of the stall adjacent to the toilet. He must have slammed back into it, lost his balance, and fallen to the floor, where he was now. He had just started to scramble to his feet when she pointed the gun at him.

"Stop!" she shouted. "Stay where you are!"

Even though the safety was on, she felt her finger inching toward the trigger. Anger and adrenaline had her breathing heavy and grinding her teeth. She realized that some part of her was hoping he'd make a move.

He froze in his current position, which was on his knees beside the toilet. His black hair, previously so severely parted, was now plastered to his forehead. His eyes had the same intensity as at the press conference, but now had an extra dose of frenzy to them.

"Show me your hands," Jessie instructed as she moved into the stall, reminding herself not to do anything rash, "and explain why you ran from us."

"What's going on in here?" demanded one of the men who'd been at the urinals. "Why are you in the men's room?"

"Police business," Jessie snapped, keeping her eyes on the paisley man. "If you want

to be helpful, you can look around the mezzanine for an officer and let them know I could use some assistance.”

“How do I know that you’re who you say you are?” the guy asked.

Jessie snuck a quick glimpse at the speaker. He was in his forties, heavyset, with longish gray-brown hair, blue jeans, and a t-shirt for the band, Primus.

"Listen, man, this isn't chit-chat time," she instructed, "you can help or not, but either way, I need you to exit the restroom."

The man loitered where he was, so Jessie gave him a little incentive.

“Now!” she barked, briefly holding the gun to her chest so the onlooker could see it. That was enough for him, and he scurried out. She returned her attention—and her pointed gun—to the paisley man, who was still on his knees with his hands up.

“You didn’t answer my question,” she reminded him. “Who are you?”

The man made no attempt to get up or act in any aggressive way. But he also didn’t speak. Instead, all he did was slowly shake his head.

“Wonderful,” she muttered. “I guess we’re going to have to have this conversation down at the station. Shuffle out from next to that toilet, turn around, and place your hands behind your head. Do you understand?”

The man nodded silently and began to do as she asked, sliding on his knees out into the open space and maneuvering around to face away from her. He interlocked his fingers behind the back of his head and waited. She was about to get out her handcuffs when she heard a familiar voice.

“Jessie, are you in there?” Ryan called out.

“I am,” she shouted back, “and I’ve made a new friend. I’d love for you to meet him too.”

“Okay, coming in,” he announced.

She waited for him, happy to have the help, unsure if their hunt for the killer was finally over.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Jessie stepped out of the interrogation room.

She did her best to hide her frustration but sensed that it was coming through anyway.

She and Ryan had been “interviewing” the suspect for the last half hour. But the interview had largely consisted of them posing questions to the man, and him staring back at them in silence, while his eyes darted around like mad.

“Let’s give him time to stew,” Ryan said after following her out and closing the door. “Maybe Jamil and Beth have found something worthwhile that we can use when we go back in there.”

They walked down the hall to the research department, where they found the staff of two, as usual, hovering over their monitors.

“How’s it going in here?” Ryan asked.

Jamil didn’t look away from his screen, but Beth did.

“We were just about to check in with you,” she said. “We’ve got some updates.”

“We’ll take whatever you can offer,” Jessie said, “because the paisley man isn’t saying a word.”

“First of all, “ Jamil said, without looking up, “his name is Eric Sawyer, twenty-nine years old. As you discovered, he didn’t have any identification on him, but his fingerprints were in the system.”

“Because of the requirement to provide them to get a driver’s license?” Ryan assumed.

“Actually, no,” Beth volunteered. “He doesn’t have a license or a car, apparently. But he did have to provide prints for a past job.”

“What was that?” Jessie asked.

“As a medical researcher for Prostanica Pharmaceuticals,” Beth said. “They do research for the government. Apparently, he had to have a security clearance. Thus the required fingerprints, and likely a whole lot more.”

“Do we have access to that ‘whole lot more?’” Jessie wondered.

“We’re working on getting it,” Jamil said, “but as you can imagine, the federal government doesn’t share that information without a fight. It might take a while.”

“Even without any of that, this is promising,” Ryan said. “If he did research for a pharma company, it’s not unreasonable to assume that he would know how to poison people in doses that would have delayed effects.”

“Yes,” Jessie agreed, “but I have to say, based on my interactions with Eric Sawyer so far, he doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy who could even get a security clearance.”

“Probably not now,” Jamil agreed, “but he got his clearance four years ago. Things might have been very different for him back then.”

“Does he still work at Prostanica?” Ryan asked.

“No,” Beth said. “It looks like they let him go about a year ago.”

“Do we know why?” Jessie asked.

“The details are extremely limited,” Beth said. “All I can find so far is that it was ‘for cause.’ We can probably eventually suss it out, but these companies are pretty buttoned-up so it might take some doing.”

“I have my suspicions,” Jamil muttered, his attention on his computer monitor.

“Care to share with the class, Jamil?” Jessie asked.

“Right,” Jamil said, realizing everyone was waiting to hear what he’d discovered. “I’ve been going through Sawyer’s social media. It was pretty conventional stuff until about two years ago, when he started posting more regularly and more...outlandishly.”

“What does that mean?” Ryan wanted to know.

“Well, he went from posting about the movies he saw and how his workouts went to making more conspiratorial comments.”

“Like what?” Jessie pressed.

“Some of them were about Prostanica and what he believed was a plan by executives to cover up various suspicious drug trials, none of which he addresses with any specificity.”

“Could there be any merit to the allegations?” Jessie wondered.

“I haven’t found anything to support his claims, which are vague to the point of useless,” Jamil said, “though that doesn’t mean there’s nothing to them, I guess. But things didn’t end there.”

“How so?” Ryan asked.

“Soon after the Prostanica allegations, the comments become more generalized, about a larger plot by the government to secretly poison citizens to make them more docile. In addition, there’s a lot of surveillance state stuff. Some of it’s pretty out there.”

“Truthfully, it doesn’t sound all that different from what a lot of people post these days,” Ryan grumbled.

“Maybe not,” Jamil acknowledged, “but they are different in one important way. About six months ago, the tenor of some of his comments turned threatening, not just to others but to himself as well.”

“Was anything done? Beth asked.

“Yes,” Jamil said. “After a tip from a former co-worker and friend, authorities did a welfare check on him. He was combative and ended up being put on a 5150.”

“What’s that?” Beth asked.

“It’s a 72-hour non-voluntary hold at a psychiatric facility,” Ryan explained. “It sounds like he kind of spun out at some point,” Ryan noted.

“Yes, after losing his job, he ended up working at a compounding pharmacy. That lasted six months before he was fired. And that appears to be when things really escalated. There’s the online rhetoric. And in addition to that first psychiatric hold, he’s had three more in the months since.”

“To me, Eric Sawyer doesn’t sound like another garden variety conspiracy theorist,” Jessie observed. “It seems like something chemical might be happening.”

“You appear to be correct, Ms. Hunt,” Jamil said somewhat sheepishly.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Please don’t ask me for the details of how I accessed this information,” he said, “but the last facility he was held at doesn’t do as great a job as the others at protecting patient confidentiality. It looks like Mr. Sawyer was diagnosed with symptoms of schizophrenia, including marked paranoia.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Jessie said.

“So he’s got what sounds like some real mental instability,” Ryan said. “Has his behavior ever gone beyond threatening? Any violence or criminal activity?”

"Not yet," Jamil answered. "There's never been enough for an arrest. At one point, Prostanica filed suit against him for violating an NDA, but they withdrew it."

“Probably because they didn’t want their proprietary secrets litigated in open court,” Beth guessed.

“Regardless,” Jamil continued, “he has no record.”

“Maybe this is him moving on to the next phase,” Ryan suggested.

“Can we check his moments over the last few days?” Beth asked. “Obviously not a car GPS since he doesn’t have one, but maybe his phone?”

“He didn’t have one on him when we arrested him at the metro station,” Jessie said.

“That’s because he claims the government uses them to track us,” Jamil said. “It’s in several of his posts going back months.”

“Well, he’s not wrong on that one,” Ryan conceded. “We do it all the time.”

“Right,” Jamil said, “but he thinks the government uses them to track our brain signals and manipulate them.”

“Great,” Jessie sighed, setting that aside for the moment, “so we can’t confirm his movements. Ironically, his illness gives him an ironclad defense against most of the tools we use.”

“It’s like his paranoid concerns about how these tools might be used against him is working to his advantage now,” Beth noted meekly.

“A broken clock is right twice a day,” Ryan replied, unamused.

"There may be other ways to track him," Jamil said. "He ran into a metro station when he tried to escape from you. With no vehicle, we can assume he used a lot of public transportation. They all have cameras, which means we can use facial recognition to find his location at various times. It'll just take a lot longer than having his geolocation at our fingertips."

“We should definitely pursue that angle,” Jessie said, “though I have my doubts that it will pan out.”

“Why?” Ryan asked.

"Because I'm having trouble seeing how Sawyer could have followed the victims so closely," she said. "We know the killer snuck in soon after each couple got home, so he couldn't have been far behind them. But Sawyer couldn't have gotten a rideshare without a phone. And while the West Adams district where the Whitakers live is accessible by bus and the metro, the Vega's Hollywood Hills home is much harder to get to. In either case, how likely would he be to stay within range of them on a public

bus?"

"What about a cab?" Ryan countered. "He could have paid for those in cash or with a credit card."

"We can check that out," Jessie said, "But I'm not optimistic. The person who committed these crimes was in the restaurant with the Whitakers and in the movie theater with the Vegas. He had to be in order to poison the victims. What are the chances that he could get a cab in time to follow them home? He'd have to have one ready and waiting. That's not impossible, but it feels like a stretch."

"If he knew where they lived, he wouldn't have to be in such a rush to follow them," Beth ventured.

"But he'd have to get to their place fast," Jessie said. "Both surviving spouses said the killer entered their home almost immediately after they arrived. Could he have secured taxis and gotten them there that fast?"

"Can't hurt to run it down," Ryan said. "At this point, that seems like our most realistic option. Beth can you send Sawyer's picture to all the cab companies and see if any of their drivers recognize the guy? We can also run any credit card transactions he had, although I'm assuming he would use cash to avoid a record."

"I'll get right on it," Beth said.

Jessie stood up, pretending to stretch. But it was really an excuse to step outside. She motioned for Ryan to join her in the hall.

"What's wrong?" he asked once they were out of hearing range of the researchers.

"I know we have to run down all these leads," she said, "and we should definitely

hold Sawyer as long as we legally can. But I think our energy is better directed elsewhere. My impressions of Sawyer, based on what I saw and what Jamil told us, is that he's a pretty scattered guy. I feel like the surviving spouses would have taken note of that over the hours the he was in their houses. Our killer is cruel and perhaps deranged, but he doesn't come across as scattershot. He seems in control of his emotions and—to the extent possible for a double murderer—his faculties. It just doesn't fit.”

“Then why was he staring at you at that press conference?” Ryan asked, “and why did he run?”

"I don't know," Jessie admitted. "Maybe he was just extremely curious? Maybe he thinks I'm part of the secret cabal tracking his brain signals? Or maybe he is somehow involved in all this. But with him not talking, it's going to be hard to find out anytime soon and it's already 12:06 P.M. Time is starting get short. If he's not our guy, and if that Strangers on a Train theory involving Blackwell and Forrester doesn't pan out, then our killer could be out there, planning his next kill right now. We have to keep pushing. Lives may depend on it.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

He re-wound his DVR to watch it again.

He knew it was vulgar to play the press conference on repeat, but it wasn't like he was on television every day.

Well, technically, he wasn't on TV, only the "suspect." The authorities never mentioned him by name or even his description, which reassured him that despite what he felt were clear signs of his involvement, they were stuck.

He glanced over at the door to his office to make sure it was still locked. Of course, since no one but him could unlock it, nothing had changed. Relieved, he settled into his office chair to luxuriate in what was on the screen.

As he did, he felt comfortable for the first time in what felt like months. His life had been filled with one kind of stress for four months, and then all at once, it became consumed by an entirely different, but equally crushing, kind of pressure.

If someone had asked—but how could they?—he would have told them that participating in this experience with his victims was the first time he'd felt any sense of relief, even comfort, in what seemed like forever. He knew that he was going to have to act again soon. It was the only way to relieve his pain, even if it was a temporary reprieve.

It wasn't like he wanted to do these things. He knew he was inflicting untold emotional damage on the survivor who was left, bound and helpless, beside the lifeless body of their partner. But then again, that was kind of the point, wasn't it? These people had to be made aware. They had to know.

That's why the Whitakers were chosen. He'd seen the way they were in the restaurant, so lovey-dovey. It would have been adorable if it wasn't so sickening. Same for the Vegas in the movie theater. All that persistent hand-holding, even when there was no cause for it. That kind of arrogant display couldn't go unpunished. When it came right down to it, he never really had a choice.

Something on the screen in front of him caught his eye, and he paused the press conference, which was ending. How had he not noticed this before?

When the profiler stepped away from the podium, the handsome man with the dark hair to her left gave her hand a squeeze. She looked at him appreciatively. It was clear that those two were more than just co-workers. They were a couple.

And they were engaging in exactly the kind of display that had led him to take action against the other couples. Maybe the dark-haired man thought he was being sly, but to anyone paying close attention, his act screamed of romantic entitlement. And it would not stand.

He had been planning to go out the mall later today, in order to look for his next examples. But that was no longer necessary. He grabbed his laptop and typed two words into the search bar.

Jessie Hunt.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Hannah was still feeling the heat.

Even hours after the incident on Skid Row, she could still feel Kat's residual anger at her for just jumping out of the car and into danger.

They were in the detective's car again now, slowly driving behind Rex Stiller, who had just hopped in a rideshare outside his office and was being driven along South Hill Street. As Kat weaved in and out of traffic, Hannah sat in the passenger seat, hoping the woman's frustration would eventually subside.

"I already apologized," Hannah said, even though Kat hadn't spoken in ten minutes, which may be why she felt it was necessary. "I shouldn't have just leapt out like that. It was wrong and dangerous. Can you please let it go now?"

"I have let it go," Kat insisted.

"Well, it sure doesn't feel like it," Hannah said. "You've been giving me the silent treatment since 3 P.M."

"Maybe your guilty conscience has been so loud that you couldn't hear me talking," Kat replied drily.

Hannah turned to face her.

"Okay, first of all, you haven't said a thing, so that line is B.S.," she said, feeling frustration rise in her gut. "Secondly, 'guilty conscience' isn't really a thing with me, remember? I went to a psychiatric rehabilitation center for months because we

determined that I didn't have much conscience at all. I had to manufacture one to make sure that I didn't go out and murder the a-holes who pissed me off."

"Language, young lady," Kat interjected sarcastically.

"And lastly," Hannah continued, ignoring her, "if I hadn't chased after Stiller, we never would have learned that he was visiting 'Randy,' who we now know is his addicted, homeless son, Randall. The guy wasn't looking to score drugs or women. He was bringing his struggling son lunch. Isn't that information useful as we evaluate whether he's cheating on his wife?"

"Sure it is," Kat acknowledged. "Every piece of intel we can get is part of the picture. But just because the guy is a concerned father doesn't mean he's staying true to his marital vows. We contain multitudes, Ms. Dorsey."

"Yeah, well, please remember that the next time you try to shame me for being Super Detective."

Even as she said it, Hannah could feel a smile fighting its way to the edge of her mouth. She was having trouble staying angry. Apparently Kat was too, because she snickered softly, despite her best efforts.

"Truce?" Hannah asked.

"Truce," Kat agreed.

It turned out that the timing of their reconciliation was perfect. Just as they exchanged a pinkie finger shake, Hannah noticed Rex Stiller's rideshare pull over to the side of the road. He got out and started walking along the sidewalk, which was littered with a variety of street vendor stands, from food to souvenirs to fake designer purses.

“So what do we do now?” Hannah asked. “If we keep trailing him at five miles an hour, he’s going to notice us at some point.”

She knew what she wanted to do. This wasn't Skid Row, after all. It was a busy street market. She could trail him here without the likelihood of being accosted, or probably even noticed. But she was afraid to suggest it. Then Stiller unexpectedly turned off the sidewalk onto a walking path between two buildings.

“We’re going to lose him,” she muttered.

“Fine,” Kat grumbled. “You can follow him. But call me as soon as you get out of the car and keep me on the line.”

“Okay,” Hannah said.

“And stay well behind of him,” Kat insisted.

“Okay.”

“And if the crowd thins out, pull back,” she added. “Got it?”

“Got it,” Hannah said. “Can I go now, or do you have additional instructions to share while he gets away?”

“Go,” Kat ordered.

“Thanks, boss,” Hannah said, leaning over and giving the frowning detective a friendly peck on the cheek, “you’re the best.”

She got out and called Kat as she darted among the pedestrians who were perusing the street vendors’ wares. The call connected as she rounded the corner onto the

walking path. She put in her earphones as she scanned the area for Stiller.

“Do you have him in your sights?” Kat asked.

Hannah wasn't sure she did. Then she got a glimpse of the man about thirty yards up ahead. A moment later, he disappeared, turning left down another path.

“Hannah?” Kat said apprehensively.

“I’ve got him now,” she answered. “He turned up another path to the left if you want to head in that direction. I’m trying to catch up without running, which would look a tad suspicious.”

She reached the walking path intersection and found that this new one was much darker and narrower than the one she was currently on, which got a fair bit of sunlight. The buildings on either side of it were taller, blocking out much of the natural light and casting the pavement in shadows.

There were no vendors in this alley, just people milling about outside the back doors of businesses on the ground floor of the buildings. Most of them were chatting amiably while either smoking, drinking, or both. Rex Stiller was about halfway down the alley now and his pace had slowed considerably, as if he was no longer confident about his route.

“What’s going on now?” Kat demanded.

“I have to whisper,” Hannah said. “This alley is quieter and less crowded. Stiller is up ahead of me. It seems like he’s looking for a specific place. He keeps checking signs and addresses next to doors. I don’t think he’s been here before.”

“What kind of businesses are back there?” Kat asked.

"Hard to tell," Hannah said, peering at the doors as she passed them. "There are no windows back here, and most of the signs just have last names. There are address numbers next to a few, but that's it. I think one's a pot shop based on the design on the door, but that's just a guess. I will say this—almost all of them have cameras above these back doors, so whatever's going on inside them, security is a priority. Hold on, he's stopping."

Hannah stopped too and leaned against a brick wall, glancing down at her phone as if reading a new text so that if Stiller looked back in her direction, he wouldn't take notice of her. When she peeked up, she saw him talking over what looked like some kind of intercom. Then she heard a buzz. He opened a door and stepped out of sight.

She headed that way, ignoring the catcalls of two guys smoking weed in front of a dilapidated wooden door along the route. A woman with short, purple hair, wearing a black miniskirt and matching thigh high boots was sitting on a metal stool next to another door, vaping as she played absent-mindedly with her nose ring.

"I'm at the door that he entered," Hannah said. "It's reinforced-metal. There's a high-tech camera above the door, and another one across the alley pointed at the door. They're serious about their business. The address number is 224 ???, but I have no idea what street this is. There's no signage. I'm going to buzz the com and see if they let me in."

"Don't do that yet," Kat hissed over the phone, "let me see if I can ID the place based on the address number."

"I don't think I have time for that," Kat muttered quietly. "I'm starting to think the purple-haired chick vaping one door down might be a lookout for this place. If I just stand here, it's going to look really suspicious. I have to either buzz or leave."

"Then leave," Kat ordered. "You can always come back after I figure out what's

going on in there.”

“Come on, Kat,” Hannah whispered. “You know a standard Google search isn’t going to reveal anything about this place, and we don’t have time for a deeper dive. Besides, they’re going to be on high alert if I leave and come back. They might even think I’m a cop. I don’t really have a choice at this point.”

"Of course, you have a choice," Kat insisted.

“I’m going in,” Hannah said, ignoring her as she pushed the buzzer.

There was a long pause before an unfriendly male voice with a hard-to-identify accent spoke. “Yeah?”

“I’m interested in making a purchase,” she said, hoping she was being vague enough to keep the conversation going.

“Do you have an appointment?” the man asked gruffly.

At least now she knew that this was the kind of place that had appointments. But for what?

“No,” she admitted. “I’m a walk-in.”

There was no response. She wondered if the guy was just going to ignore her. But after a solid ten seconds, he spoke again.

“Step back from the door,” he instructed. “Put your hands in the air. Let Asia know if you have any weapons.”

The vaping woman stood up and walked over. As Hannah took out her earphones and

slid them into her pocket, she took note of the woman's tattoos, which covered both thighs and the exposed part of her neck.

"Hi, Asia," she said with a tight smile.

Asia didn't return it as she swiftly but thoroughly patted her down. When she was done, she looked up at the camera above the door and silently nodded. It buzzed. Hannah grabbed the handle and yanked the heavy door open.

She stepped inside as the door slammed behind her and found that she was in complete darkness.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

After the echo of the clanging metal door dissipated, she stood quiet and unmoving. After a few seconds, she sensed that she wasn't alone. She could hear what she thought was breathing.

"You are in a secured vestibule," the same male voice said over a speaker. "It serves as a metal and thermal detector, which we use as secondary security protocols. Remain still. The testing will be complete momentarily."

Hannah remained frozen in place. After fifteen seconds, a dim overhead light turned on and she blinked, trying to adjust. She squinted as she looked around. The man hadn't been kidding. She was essentially in what amounted to a completely enclosed, mirrored phone booth. There was a second buzz and a door in front of her unlocked and popped open slightly.

"You can enter now," the voice said.

She stepped through the door into a narrow hallway. There was a small glassed-in window to her right, like a ticket booth at an old-style movie theater. A man with long black hair and a bird's nest of a beard slid a piece of paper under the glass and said, "you're number four. Go to the end of the hall, take a seat, and wait for your number to be called."

Hannah grabbed the piece of paper, which as promised said simply "4." As she walked down the hallway, she considered sliding her earphones back into her ears but decided not to chance it. Kat would have to make do with silence for a while.

She reached the end of the hall and turned the corner, where she found three metal

folding chairs lined up against a wall. Rex Stiller was sitting in one of them, looking nervous. He glanced over at Hannah for a second before returning his attention to the man standing in front of the door at the far end of the room, which was otherwise completely empty.

She took some brief solace in the knowledge that their surveillance of him must have been pretty good. If he'd noticed her previously, he would have probably had a stronger reaction when she walked in. But her relief was quickly replaced by anxiety caused by the man that Stiller was staring at.

The guy was easily six foot five and 250 pounds. His head was shaved, and his scalp had multiple scars, as did his cleanly shaven face. He was wearing all black—black sport coat, black turtleneck, black slacks, and black boots that were meant to look like dress shoes but could clearly do much more damage.

Hannah also noticed a slight bulge under the man's sport coat at the right hip. Wherever she was right now, it required metal and thermal detectors, as well as a giant armed security guard who looked like he'd been in a war zone, a cage match, or both. What had she gotten herself into?

She wasn't going to ask, and the security guard obviously wasn't in a sharing mood. As a result, the three of them, including Stiller, remained quiet. As the silence stretched into minutes, Hannah's fingertips and toes began to tingle slightly. It occurred to her that her body's reaction to the situation was as close to nervous as she was capable of getting. It was refreshing and unsettling at the same time.

Then, the door behind the guard opened. Out stepped two men. One, in his thirties, was of modest build, with neatly trimmed brown hair and wire-rimmed glasses. He was wearing a gray designer suit.

The man beside him, likely in his sixties, looked like a long-time roadie for a rock

band. He was wearing faded black jeans and a tie-dyed t-shirt under a long-sleeved, unbuttoned denim jacket. He was mostly bald, with the little bit of gray hair on his head matching the color of his long, straggly beard. It took her a moment to realize that guy wasn't a roadie for a rock band but an actual member of one. Though she wasn't a fan, she recognized him as the lead singer of the popular 90s jam band, The Cherry Pits. She couldn't remember his name, but she knew he was pretty famous to older people.

"We'll have the item ready for you by Friday," the suited man, who also had what she thought was a vaguely eastern European accent said. "Someone will text you with the pickup time."

"Cool, cool," the singer said as he pulled a baseball cap out of his back pocket and put it on his head. "I'll wait to hear from you. But it has to be by Friday. We head out on the next leg of the tour Saturday morning."

"No need to worry," the suited man said crisply. "That's why you come to us. No muss, no fuss."

As the singer shambled down the hallway Hannah had just come from, she wondered exactly what item he needed and why it had to be ready by Friday. Exactly what kind of place was this? She didn't have long to ponder the question.

"Number three," the huge guy said.

Stiller stood up and walked over, handing the security guard his slip of paper. The man glanced at it and nodded to his much smaller boss.

"Mr. S?" the smaller, suited man asked by way of confirmation.

"Yes," Stiller confirmed.

The small, suited man glanced over at Hannah, and through his thin glasses frames, eyed her with a mix of suspicion and curiosity. But he said nothing to her, instead returning his attention to the fidgety man in front of him.

“Shall we go inside?” he asked Stiller, nodding at the adjacent room.

Before the man could answer, there was static-y squawking sound. Jessie noticed the security guard touch his ear. She realized something she’d missed earlier—he had a small earpiece.

“Everything okay?” the suited man asked the guard.

“Viktor wants me to come to the booth for a moment,” the guard said. “He says there’s a street cop walking the alley and he wants to know if it’s one of ours or if he should be worried.”

The suited man looked at Hannah again.

“She’s gone through the full body security check?” he confirmed.

“Yes, boss,” the guard said.

“Then go check. Make it quick. Mr. S and I will visit inside, and our lady friend will wait her turn. Won’t you, lady friend?”

Hannah nodded compliantly. The suited man led Stiller into the inner room. She heard a loud click as the door closed. Hearing it, the guard headed down the hall. The second that he was out of sight, she stood up and tiptoed over to the inner office door. Somewhere deep in her gut, she felt the slightest stirrings of what she assumed were nerves, but they weren't enough to deter her. She pressed her ear to the door.

“What are we looking for today?” she heard the suited man ask politely.

Hannah leaned in even closer, if that was possible.

“Um,” Stiller said, his voice hoarse with nerves, “earrings, diamond ones.”

“And I assume that by your presence here, you’re not picky about the origin of the stones?”

“Not if it means they save me thirty-five percent off the prices in the jewelry district,” Stiller said.

Now Hannah got it. This was an underground jewelry outfit that seemed to traffic in blood diamonds, which apparently didn't trouble the moral conscience of Rex Stiller. But that wasn't her concern at the moment. The issue now was: what was his plan for these earrings? To re-sell at a marked-up rate? Or were they for someone?

“It could be as much as forty percent off, depending on the stones you prefer,” the man said. “We’ll take a look at some options in a minute. But first, what universe are we talking about here? Are these for the wife? Or perhaps the sidepiece? They tend to have different tastes.”

This guy was doing Hannah’s work for her. She considered trying to record the conversation, but worried that if the guard came around the corner and saw her there with her phone, he might just shoot her then and there.

“There is no sidepiece,” Stiller said firmly. “They’re for my wife. She’s had a rough few months. We’ve had some trouble with our son that has been a source of stress. Add to that, I recently had a cancer scare. Since then I’ve been eating healthier and go to the gym after work—anything to make her less worried about me. But it doesn’t help. So I thought I’d try a more traditional way to brighten her spirits.”

“A lovely gesture,” the man said, “and one I’m sure will be effective. I have yet to meet a woman who didn’t like diamond jewelry. Shall we look at some options?”

So the guy wasn’t after drugs or sex after all. He just wanted to do something nice for his wife. Admittedly, it was via illicit means and at the price of the well-being of the diamond miners, often impoverished men, women and children in war-torn regions. But considering what his wife thought was going on, she might find this explanation far preferable.

Now that Hannah had her answer, she needed to get out of this place without drawing suspicion from the large man with the gun. But before she could come up with a plan, she heard footsteps. The guard was returning. She tiptoed back to her chair and sat down just as he rounded the corner.

He eyed her skeptically but said nothing as he returned to his spot outside the inner office door. As he squared up to his full height, with his back to the door, Hannah made a decision. To get out of here, she would go with an oldie-but-goodie, the “I’m a just a girl out of my depth” routine.

“You know,” she said, standing up, “I’m kind of embarrassed to say this, but after being here for a few minutes and seeing what a nice place you have here, I’m starting to think that I couldn’t afford the price of what I want.”

“Who sent you here thinking you could pay, if you can’t?” the security guard asked suspiciously.

“A girlfriend of mine,” she said, doing her best to sound like an airhead, “Her dad’s this rich banker type. I guess he used you guys in the past. The truth is, I gave her the impression that I’m more well off than I really am. And now that I’m here, I’m feeling really silly. And in over my head. I think I should just go.”

“What’s the rich dad’s name?” he asked.

"Oh, I don't think I should say that," she told him. "It's clear that you guys take confidentiality very seriously. And I know he does, too. I don't want to mess with any of that."

The man walked over to her slowly, his hand on his hip. She could picture what was waiting for her under there. For the briefest of seconds, she considered making a move to try to bring him down.

Maybe she could dive at his knees and take one out. But he seemed like the kind of guy who would be prepared for that. And he’d still have a gun. Even if she could temporarily incapacitate him, she’d have to run back down the hallway to the locked phone booth thing, where the guy behind the ticket window probably had a gun too. That plan was no plan at all.

The man came to a stop just feet from her and stared down. She could see the gun peeking out from under his jacket and wondered: if she moved quickly enough, could she snag it from him and shoot her way out? But she shoved the idea from her mind. It was even crazier than the first one.

“I think you’re right,” he said with contempt in his voice, “you should just leave. Go back the way you came. And never return here again, little girl.”

She didn’t need to be told twice. Nodding hurriedly, she turned and walked back down the hall as quickly as she could without actually running. The guard shouted something in a language she didn’t understand. Whatever it was, it made the ticket taker guy buzz the phone booth door. She snuck through and moved toward the large exterior metallic one.

But it remained closed. Had they changed their minds? She was about to turn back

around when she heard a nasty chuckle followed by a loud buzz. The ticket-taker guy had been toying with her, trying to freak her out. It had kind of worked.

She pushed the door open and stepped out onto the shadowy but infinitely brighter walking path. Asia was still sitting on her stool, only now she was biting her nails. Hannah gave her a forced smile and headed down the path in the opposite direction from the one she'd taken to get there.

It was only after she rounded the corner onto the adjoining street that she realized she'd been holding her breath this whole time. She took a giant gasp of air. And then another. It took a full minute before she felt something like her normal self again.

Only then did she pull out her phone to let Kat know she was still alive.

Jessie felt herself drifting.

She bolted upright to stop it and banged her shoulder against the passenger door of Ryan's car.

"Ow!" she muttered.

"What was that?" Ryan asked from the driver's seat.

"I started to fall asleep and that was my way of stopping it," she said grumpily. "Sorry if I'm fading a little but it's almost 9 p.m. and we've staking out Forrester for almost three hours now and I barely slept at all last night. Maybe you should be a better husband and keep me entertained so I stay alert."

"What would you like me to do?" he asked, mildly amused.

"My request might interfere with our surveillance plan," she teased.

He smiled.

"I appreciate that you've still got a little spice in you after sitting in a car all this time," he said, "but yeah, maybe we keep our attention focused on the job at hand for now. And just as a side note, you do realize that if this adoption thing happens, then having another human in the house, especially a little one, might complicate our flexibility in that area."

"We had Hannah in the house for two years and it didn't impact things too much,"

she said.

“That’s because she was always either in her room with her earphones in or out somewhere,” he reminded her.

“Fair point,” she acknowledged before she had an unrelated thought. “Hey, should we maybe check in with Susannah and Sam?”

She knew she was grasping at straws, but she needed to grasp at something. Despite all their efforts, including technical assistance from Jamil and Beth, they hadn’t come up with any new leads all afternoon.

That’s why they were sitting in Ryan’s car, across the street from Daniel Forrester’s impressive Hollywood Hills home. And it was why Detectives Susannah Valentine and Sam Goodwin were doing the same thing at the Beverly Hills mansion of Dr. Ethan Blackwell. This Strangers on a Train theory was the only one so far that hadn’t been completely dismissed.

While it was true that Forrester had no medical background, Blackwell did. And if he’d created the poisonous concoction, all Forrester had to do was slip it into whatever James Whitaker had consumed at the restaurant. He didn’t need any particular pharmaceutical knowledge.

“We can try,” Ryan said, “although I feel like if Susannah and Sam had any news, they’d have shared it.”

“Probably,” Jessie conceded, “ but it can’t hurt to make sure. Besides, it’ll help keep me awake.”

Ryan relented and called them. They answered on the first ring, which suggested they weren’t too busy either.

“What have you got?” Susannah asked excitedly.

“Nothing,” Ryan said. “Forrester hasn’t done a thing of note since he got home.”

“Are you sure he’s still there?” Sam asked. “Maybe he snuck out the back or something.”

“We thought of that,” Jessie said, “but we’ve been checking. There’s a tree across the street from Forrester’s place. When you climb it you can see into his kitchen and living room. We’ve been doing that every half hour—.”

“We’ve been doing it?” Ryan challenged huffily.

“Ryan has been climbing the tree every half hour,” Jessie said, correcting herself with a sheepish smile. “Forrester made himself some dinner. Since then, he’s been watching TV.”

"Things aren't much different here," Susannah told them. "I've gone up and peeked through Blackwell's window twice since we camped out here. Sam's gone over there once. The man has been immersed in some medical journal all night. His wife came into the room once, and he barely acknowledged her."

“Great,” Ryan muttered.

“Not to add to the bad vibes,” Sam said, “but I checked in with Jamil just before you called. He can’t find any evidence of Eric Sawyer taking public transportation or a cab anywhere during the times of death for the victims, much less near the crime scenes.”

“Why hasn’t he reached out to us?” Ryan demanded.

“I think he’s still hoping he’ll find something,” Susannah said. “He doesn’t like to disappoint you guys, especially ‘Ms. Hunt.’”

Jessie knew that was true. Jamil hated not having the answers, and since it was Jessie who had gotten him the job with HSS, she suspected that he often felt a special obligation to her. But sometimes there just wasn’t anything to work with.

“How long before we have to release Sawyer?” she asked Ryan.

“We can keep him until midday tomorrow if we need to,” he answered. “It couldn’t hurt. If there’s another poisoning tonight and he’s in custody, at least we can eliminate him from the suspect pool. But I think that at this point, we all doubt that it’s him, so maybe we let him go early tomorrow regardless.”

Jessie was about to weigh in on that when she saw movement from Forrester’s property.

“It looks like his garage door is opening,” she said. “Maybe we’ve got something here.”

“It’s funny that you say that,” Susannah said, “because I’m looking through my binoculars and Blackwell just stood up. He tossed his journal on the table and is putting on his coat. He’s moving pretty quick.”

As if on cue, Forrester backed out of his garage in his orange Lotus, put the car in drive, and punched the accelerator, stopping just a foot in front of his slowly opening gate.

“Forrester seems to be in a bit of a hurry too,” Jessie said as the man peeled out of his driveway and shot down the residential street at over fifty miles per hour. “We’ll be in touch. Right now, we’ve got a chase on our hands.”

Jessie was impressed.

Ryan was doing his best to stay within visual range of Forrester's car without making his presence known. It wasn't easy. The man was zipping in and out of traffic, and in one case, ran a light that was a full two seconds in the red.

"Do you think he knows we're tailing him and is trying to lose us?" she asked.

"I doubt it," Ryan said. "If he knew there were police behind him, I feel like he'd be more observant of traffic laws, not less. Truthfully, if he is our guy and he's hunting for his next victim, he's not doing a very good job of keeping a low profile."

"I thought of that," Jessie said, "It's almost like he's intentionally drawing attention to himself. That would make sense if the next victim is on his personal list, and he wants an alibi while Blackwell does the deed. Maybe he wants traffic cameras to catch him speeding or running red lights nowhere near where the next killing occurs."

Before Ryan could offer a response, they saw Forrester round a corner they both recognized well. This stretch of the Westlake neighborhood was well-known as a spot where rich suburbanites would drive up in their cars to secure illegal pleasures, whether it be drugs or sex.

Rather than go down the street that Forrester had taken and put a spotlight on themselves, they drove just past it. As they did, they saw that the man had parked his car and was getting out. Jessie was stunned by the casual cockiness of the man, who seemed to have no concerns about leaving his shiny Lotus unattended around here.

“This guy is either after some garden variety illicit fun, or he wants us to think he is,” Ryan said as he quickly pulled over to the side of the street. “But there’s only one way to find out.”

They both jumped out and crossed the street as quickly as they could without actually running. By the time they reached the intersection, they could see Forrester wending his way among the throngs.

There were at least a dozen prostitutes working the sidewalk, but the man seemed uninterested, passing by without glancing at any of them. The sidewalk was crowded, and Jessie and Ryan had to step into the street briefly to avoid getting stuck.

This sort of scene was nothing new. Though the area was generally known for being a hotbed of illicit activity, the actual block where drugs and people could be bought changed regularly. It was a game of whack-a-mole, as a new location emerged, became popular for the night, only to have the cops get wind of the spot and come shut things down.

Jessie wondered how Forrester knew where to go. Was he a regular visitor to this kind of bazaar, who had just gotten a tip on the location and rushed out before it got shut down? Or was this all part of some ruse to keep them guessing while his theoretical partner in crime engaged in something far darker?

She pulled up the hoodie on her jacket as she darted in and out of the crowd. She didn’t want Forrester to look back and see her. Plus, she knew that she probably stuck out like a sore thumb, and she didn’t need anyone recognizing her from today’s press conference or her past TV appearances.

Ryan had pulled out a baseball cap and wore it low over his face. He wasn’t as immediately recognizable from the news as she was, but based on his general bearing, he was pretty easily pegged as a cop. They didn’t need everyone scattering

because they sensed the enemy was among them.

Forrester stopped about thirty feet ahead of them and began speaking to a swarthy-looking guy intentionally standing in the shadows. They made a quick exchange that Jessie thought included cash and a baggie. But it all happened so fast that she couldn't be sure.

"Turn around," Ryan admonished her under his breath.

Without questioning why, she did as he instructed. Ten seconds later, Forrester walked past them back in the direction from which they'd all come.

"Sorry to be so brusque," Ryan said, "but I could tell the transaction was over and that he'd be heading back."

"Do we think he was securing the poison?" Jessie asked. "This isn't the kind of pharmaceutical expert I figured he'd go to."

"It's definitely not," Ryan said as they fell into step well behind Forrester. "I recognized the guy he was doing business with. He goes by the name Philly Pat. He's a well-known dealer. Mostly traffics in heroin and cocaine. He definitely doesn't have access to the kind of chemicals that our killer used. My guess based on his behavior this morning—Daniel Forrester is a bit of a coke fiend. That makes more sense than the alternative."

"So you think he was just in the market for some run-of-the-mill blow?" Jessie asked as they finally cleared the multitudes.

They stopped moving there as Forrester got back in his car and drove right past them. He never even looked their way.

“It’s starting to make more sense than him being part of some elaborate murder trade,” Ryan said as they returned to his car, jogging now that they were out of Forrester’s sight. “We should see where Blackwell was headed in such a hurry before jumping to any conclusions, but I have a feeling that Forrester’s crimes may be more mundane than we hoped. Either way, I’m going to call in reinforcements to break up tonight’s street action.”

"Should we try to catch up to Forrester?" she wondered as they ran across the street. Cars were speeding by, and she had to move so fast that she nearly collided with a big dude in a black hoodie, leaning drunkenly against the fence near their car.

"Hey, clear out of here," Ryan ordered the guy irritably. "That is unless you want to get taken in for public drunkenness."

The guy offered a sloppy salute and turned around, walking down the sidewalk away from them.

They got in the car. Ryan sighed as he started it up.

“To answer your question, I think we can have officers sit on Forrester’s house to see if he does anything,” he grumbled as he took a sip of his coffee. “I’m starting to feel like we’re just spinning our wheels here.”

“I know what you mean,” Jessie agreed, “but let’s check in with Susannah and Sam before we get too down. There’s still a chance that Blackwell is our guy.”

But even as the words came out of her mouth, Jessie doubted them. If Forrester was just a cokehead out for a fix and not part of some elaborate dual murderer plan, then the chances that Blackwell was involved dropped dramatically.

And that meant their killer was still out there, possibly poisoning someone right now.

The thought made her shiver.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Hannah was losing her patience.

She'd already let Kat chastise her for her bad judgment multiple times today. She was starting to regret agreeing to crash at the woman's apartment tonight.

When she'd said yes, it was because Kat was so upset after this afternoon. She confided that when she lost contact with Hannah during her visit to the underground jewelry shop, she'd been legitimately concerned that Hannah was being sold into sexual slavery or cut up into little pieces. Hannah felt she owed it to her sometime mentor to show her a fun evening.

But it was almost 10 p.m. now, and after several good hours involving pizza and a crappy action movie, Kat was at it again, harping on how she'd put herself in an untenable position in that clandestine back-alley store.

"You could have been killed and I wouldn't have even known where to look for the body," Kat reiterated as they sat on the couch.

"Sure you would have," Hannah said, trying to lighten the mood. "I told you the place had a metal door and a chick with purple hair sitting nearby on a barstool. You almost certainly would have found my remains before they moved them somewhere else."

"That's not funny," Kat insisted.

"It's a little funny," Hannah replied with a smile. "Besides, my decision to go in there basically resolved our case. Now we know that Rex Stiller isn't cheating, that he in fact loves his family very much. Today we—or at least I—saw him bring food to his

struggling son and buy some sketchily sourced earrings for his wife. He's a flawed man who doesn't seem overly concerned with the moral implications of his jewelry purchase, but from what I can tell, he's not a bad person."

"Maybe," Kat muttered. "The fact that he was willing to go to a place like that doesn't reflect very well on him."

"But that's not our call to make," Hannah protested. "Our job was to determine if he was guilty of what his wife suspected him of. He wasn't. I know that as a private investigator, you're primed to look for the worst in everyone because you see it so often, but not everyone's bad. In this case, the guy turned out to be, all things considered, kind of a mensch."

"He's in the minority as far as I'm concerned," Kat said. "Most folks I encounter in this gig—and in general lately—are bad, plain and simple."

"I get that you see it that way," Hannah said, deciding it was time to bring up the issue she'd been keeping to herself all day. "And with what you've been through recently, I don't blame you for that worldview. But I have to say—I think that your fixation on Ash Pierce is curdling your perspective and making it hard for you to move on."

Kat looked at her sideways. Hannah girded herself. Things were about to come to a head.

"Why did you mention Ash Pierce?" she asked.

Hannah sighed, taking one last bite of pizza before facing the music she knew was inevitable.

"Because I learned from the best," she finally answered, "you."

“What does that mean?”

“It means that when we were surveilling Stiller’s office yesterday and you left briefly to go to the restroom, I slipped an AirTag into your change purse.”

“Why would you do that?” Kat demanded.

Her face turned beet red. Hannah couldn’t be sure whether it was more out of anger or embarrassment. Frankly, she didn’t care.

“Because, when you asked me to watch Stiller solo for a while because you had a ‘meditation appointment,’ something felt off,” she said forcefully. “So I did the sort of thing you taught me. And what do you know? Your appointment turned out to be going to the courthouse where Ash Pierce had a hearing scheduled. What a coincidence.”

Kat didn’t try to deny it.

“She tortured me, Hannah,” she said by way of justification, “and then she tried to kill me.”

“I’m well aware of that,” Hannah replied. “You know why? Because I’m the one who found you in the desert, beaten and tied up. I’m the one who stopped her. And need I remind you, she tried to kill me that night too, and multiple other times, before we finally stopped her together. It messed me up, but I’ve made a conscious decision not to let that experience define me. Maybe you should do the same thing.”

“I’ve tried,” Kat said. “It didn’t take.”

"Listen," Hannah said, leaning in close, "I understand that you're struggling. Like you said, you were brutally tortured. And then you lost Mitch. It's hard to know where to

put your feelings about those things. For a while, I wondered why you weren't pouring your emotional energy into tracking the trial details of the man responsible for your fiancé's death. After all, Mark Haddonfield's trial starts next week. But I think I know why you've fixated on Pierce."

"Oh really," Kat said defensively, "I'm all ears."

"It's because you know that Mark Haddonfield is never getting out of prison. There's an ironclad case against him and despite everything he's done, he's still just a gawky college dropout in over his head against the legal system. But Pierce is something different."

Kat didn't say anything, so Hannah continued.

"Ash Pierce was in Marines Special Ops, trained to both attack and evade," she said. "After that, she worked as an assassin for the military and the CIA. Once she got out of government work, she's made her living as a hitwoman, adept in deception and able to alter her identity. She tricked both of us, making us think she was an abused wife, so that she could get to us when we were most vulnerable. After she was caught, she escaped a prison transport. And when we finally took her down, she was injured so badly that she entered a coma which left her with amnesia, a claim I know you don't believe is legitimate. You're worried that she might escape again, or worse, beat the charges against her by somehow earning sympathy from a jury. You know that Haddonfield will die in prison. But you fear that one way or another, Pierce might outwit the system. So you're thinking of ways to make sure that doesn't happen—or do something about it if she does. How am I doing?"

Kat's silence told her she was on the right track.

"I'm warning you," she pleaded, "and I speak from experience: pursuing vengeance won't get you what you want. If you allow yourself to be consumed by her, she wins."

You have to let this go for your own sake.”

After a long pause, Kat spoke.

“I’ll try,” she said quietly.

Hannah wanted to believe her. She really did.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Jessie was lost in thought, trying to come up with some alternative theory that wouldn't lead them down another dead end. She circled back to something that Marcus Vega had said from his hospital bed, about how the killer didn't like them "flaunting" themselves.

It felt like there was more meat on that bone. She wondered if they should call Vega back to get more on that detail. Was it too late to call? Maybe she'd check in with his nurse when they got home.

Ryan clearly knew she was thinking because, after they'd checked in with the rest of the HSS team, he'd driven in silence most of the way home. She thought back on the group call they'd had only minutes earlier.

When they'd called in after getting back in the car once they realized Forrester likely wasn't their guy, they got more bad news from Susannah and Sam.

"We're at the hospital," Susannah said. "Turns out that Dr. Ethan Blackwell is on call tonight, and he had to come in for some emergency surgery."

"Are you sure he didn't get someone else to cover for him and sneak out?" Ryan asked hopefully.

"We thought of that," Susannah said. "Sam even went into the surgical department to double-check. He's still in there now, just in case, but he caught sight of Blackwell in scrubs, entering an operating room. We'll stick around for a while just in case, but it looks like the guy's here legitimately."

“Wonderful,” Ryan grumbled.

“One more piece of bad news,” Susannah added. “While he was waiting, Sam followed up on whether Blackwell and Forrester might have spoken before the latter’s emergency appendectomy. The nurses pretty much laughed in his face. They said they don’t keep records of that sort of thing and that besides, sometimes the anesthesiologist just pops in briefly to introduce themselves. Often, there’s no one else there but the patient. Basically, we’ll never know for sure if they met.”

“Well, it sounds like it might be moot, anyway,” Jessie said, disheartened.

After the call ended unceremoniously, Jessie and Ryan had agreed that there was no point in going back to the station tonight. They’d already called in multiple units to break up the illicit block party where Forrester had gotten his coke. There was nothing more to do tonight. So they headed home, hoping that they wouldn’t get a call about another victim sometime in the next few hours.

They were just pulling into the driveway, waiting for the garage door to fully open, when Jessie heard Ryan grunt softly beside her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said as he eased the car into the garage, “I just feel a little woozy. I think it might be because I haven’t eaten in hours. Between that, the coffee, and the lack of sleep, I feel like my body’s giving me a little payback here.”

“Well, maybe we can get a few hours rest,” she suggested. “Hopefully that will reset things for you a bit.”

“I hope so,” he said as he parked the car.

Once it was no longer in motion, his whole body seemed to slump. He groaned quietly.

“Jeez,” Jessie said, mildly concerned. “That didn’t sound good. Do you need to take something when we get inside?”

He nodded weakly.

“Maybe an antacid or something,” he rasped. “I feel like I have the worst heartburn ever.”

“Okay,” she said, getting out of the passenger seat and moving around to help him. “Let’s just get you inside and we’ll figure something out.”

She opened the door for him and was stunned to find that he needed her assistance to get upright. She threw his arm over her shoulder and guided him to the side door. She pushed the button to close the garage, then entered code on the panel to unlock the side door. It clicked. She opened it and then eased Ryan inside.

As she flicked on the light in the laundry room, she felt a strange shudder run up her spine. Something about this situation felt both alien and familiar at the same time. She looked over at Ryan, who was sweating profusely. His skin was ashen, and he appeared to be on the verge of collapsing.

And in a flash, she knew. He wasn't just tired or hungry or over-caFFEinated. Somehow, some way, he'd been poisoned.

Without explaining why, she pushed him toward the washing machine and spun around. She was already unholstering her gun as she reached out to close the side door. But she wasn’t fast enough. She barely had time to process what she saw in front of her. It was their own shovel from the garage. And it was coming toward her

face.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Looking back now, it was a close call, almost too close.

It had been hard enough for Nathan Prescott to track them from the police station to the home of the man they'd been staking out all night. Nathan was constantly worried that they'd notice him. But he'd been careful to park several hundred yards behind them, making sure to stay hidden behind an SUV that blocked their view of him while allowing him to keep tabs on them.

He didn't know if they were going to be there all night or eventually be replaced by other officers and go home. That was his hope. But neither had happened.

Instead, the man they were following pulled out of his driveway and sped off. They followed close behind, which meant that Nathan had to do the same thing. He'd had enough time to figure out who they were after. The man's name was Daniel Forrester. He worked in the world of investments, something Nathan wasn't super knowledgeable about.

He didn't know for sure why they were following Forrester, but he could guess. He assumed they considered him a suspect in the poisoning cases. If that was true, then they were way off base. After all, the man responsible for these murders was right behind them.

It had been extra challenging to keep pace with them as they tore across the city after Forrester, but it was essential that he maintain track of them. Unlike the man they were trailing, the home address for Jessie Hunt and Ryan Hernandez was not publicly available information. If he lost sight of them, he was unlikely to find them again tonight.

That would be bad. Based on the research he'd done on both Hunt and Hernandez in the last few hours, there was a very real chance that despite the precautions he'd taken on his home visits, they might still discover his identity. Everything he'd read suggested that those two, especially Hunt, almost always got their killer. Once they realized that Forrester wasn't their man, they'd turn their attention elsewhere. And Nathan wasn't so arrogant as to believe that they wouldn't eventually find him.

That's why he had to act first. He had to get to them before they got to him. Deep down, he suspected that even if he removed them as a threat, other detectives they worked with would pick up where they left off. But by then, it would be too late. He'd have completed his mission.

Nathan did his best to drive within the speed limit as he changed lanes. Any sudden movement in their rearview mirror might catch the attention of the people he was hunting, at which point they could turn the tables on him. As he followed them, he wondered if he'd be able to make them understand.

They had to. From what he could tell, it hadn't worked with the others. He thought that by having the survivor watch the show playing out in front of them, then at some point they would feel the truth, understand it. But mostly they'd just writhed around, trying to break free from their bonds, pleading for the life of their loved one.

But in today's world, it didn't work like that. Just because you wanted the person you loved to suddenly recover, to have the poison in their system magically disappear, that didn't mean it would happen.

It was what he had hoped for, even prayed for, as his beloved Kara wasted away, a kind soul crushed under the callous boot of cancer. He'd been with her at the end when no amount of medication could ease her pain. He could have turned away or left her hospice room. She was delirious with agony and probably wouldn't have noticed. But he couldn't do that.

So he'd forced himself to watch the show, to feel the loss even before it occurred, to understand the magnitude of what was happening. And then she died.

He'd felt empty for a long time after that, going through the motions as he accepted people's sympathies, trying to focus on his job as a pharmaceutical scientist as a way to distract him from the emptiness at home. And it had mostly worked.

As long as he kept busy, he was able to keep the gnawing pit in his chest under control. It was only when he was between projects or when people asked him to join them for social outings that it threatened to consume him.

He and Kara had been childhood sweethearts. They'd met in elementary school and started dating at fourteen. They were together until her death five years ago, when they were both 33. Nathan still regretted that they never made it to the 20th anniversary of their first date, sneaking in to see American Pie at the mall.

He didn't really have a conception of himself apart from her. Ever since she'd gone, he felt like half a person, more shadow than man, just marking time. And he'd come to accept that this was what his life was now. He didn't love it, but he'd learned to make his peace with it. That is, until last Saturday.

It was bizarre to think that barely 72 hours ago, he never could have conceived of killing someone. But now he was responsible for two deaths and would soon be culpable for another. Life was strange.

Nathan noticed that Detective Hernandez had started to slow down. He glanced around and realized that he was in a residential neighborhood in the Mid-Wilshire part of town. He eased back on the accelerator as the car ahead of him turned onto a side street. Before making the same turn, he shut off his headlights. He didn't want to announce his presence.

He'd gotten lucky earlier, and he didn't want to take any unnecessary risks now. Back when the couple had pulled over to the side of the road and chased after Forrester on foot, Detective Hernandez had been in such a rush that he'd forgotten to lock his door.

So after Nathan parked a few spots behind them, he waited until they were far down the other street before getting out and walking over to the driver's side door. He was prepared to jimmy it, using a technique he'd learned on his phone while they were staking out Forrester's home.

But he tried the door handle just in case. Sure enough, it opened easily. Not wanting to push his luck, Nathan moved as quickly as he could, removing the top of Hernandez's coffee cup, and squirting in the requisite amount of the mixture that he knew would get the job done.

Then he made a choice that could have upended everything. He decided to stick around. He wanted to see the detective take that first sip of coffee once he returned. Unfortunately, that didn't happen. When the couple came back, he made sure that his hoodie covered his face and that he weaved slightly so that he looked like just another drunk vagrant among the many who populated this area.

But Hernandez had ordered that he leave the premises. Of course, he had no choice but to comply, so his back was turned when the man got in the car. As a result, he couldn't properly time when the detective took his first sip.

He had waited until Ryan Hernandez's car had reached the end of the block before turning around and rushing back to get in his own vehicle, which was parked two spots behind where the detective's had been. Then he got in and started following them again.

But over the course of the drive here, he'd definitely seen him take a few sips, so he

knew the process had started.

He pulled over to the side of the residential street as Hernandez eased his vehicle into their garage. Glancing at his watch, he saw that it was 9:54. He noted that it had been twenty-two minutes since the couple had gotten into the car and nineteen since Hernandez had taken what might or might not have been his first sip of the laced coffee.

Nathan smiled. The effects should start kicking in right about now. He got out of his car and began jogging in their direction.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Jessie blinked, trying to get the blood out her eyes.

After several seconds of confusion, she was able to discern her situation. She was lying on her back in the hallway between the laundry room and the breakfast room. She was dazed but didn't think she'd lost consciousness when the back of the shovel made contact with her head.

Looking up at where she'd shoved Ryan against the washing machine, she saw that he was no longer there. She could hear him groaning in the distance, now more intensely than before. She also noted that someone had closed and locked the laundry room door.

Ignoring the throbbing in her cheekbone and blood dripping off her face, she rolled onto her side. A few more blinks and things became clearer. A man dressed all in black, including a ski mask, had dragged Ryan into the breakfast room. He was pulling out zip ties.

She allowed herself a moment to process the horror of the situation. Somehow, without their knowledge, the man they'd been after had been hunting them right back. Now, they were in the same situation as the prior victims. Jessie thought back to the warnings she'd given to the public at the press conference and realized that she'd ignored all of them. She wanted to get angry with herself, but there wasn't time for that. Ryan was in danger.

Jessie rolled onto her stomach and pushed herself up onto all fours. She took a moment to evaluate herself. She didn't think she had a concussion. She didn't feel any of the typical symptoms.

The man must have heard her moving because he looked up just as he was grabbing Ryan's left wrist. Instead of continuing what he was doing, he started toward her.

Still foggy, she forced herself into a standing position. The man grabbed the shovel, which was resting against the kitchen counter, and gripped it with both hands as he approached her.

Jessie's legs felt wobbly, but she did her best to focus, waiting for him to make his move. When he raised the shovel above his head, she leapt, taking him by surprise. She slammed into his chest as the shovel came down hard on her lower back before slipping from his grasp and landing on the floor.

She winced in pain but kept propelling herself forward until she smashed him into a kitchen cupboard. Plates came tumbling out, crashing onto the counter and then to the floor below, where they shattered. Even though her back was screaming at her and she could barely see through her blood-soaked eyes, she brought up an open palm from her free right hand, hoping to connect with the man's lower jaw and get him to release the bear hug he had her in.

But the man saw it coming and swayed left, avoiding the contact. Her palm missed by an inch as it shot up in the air. The man wasted no time in responding. He flung himself forward, and his forehead hit her nose. In addition to the sting from the impact, her blood-filled eyes were now watery too.

The man released her from the hug and reached out for her neck. She tried to avoid him but lost her balance as she stumbled back, colliding into the butcher block in the middle of the kitchen. She couldn't see him clearly, but when she felt his fingers dig into her neck, she knew where he was. Even as she began to struggle for air, she tried to stay clear-headed.

She reached out, grabbed the man by the hips, then brought up her right knee as hard

as she could. When his grip on her throat relaxed, she knew she'd hit paydirt. She thrust her forearms upward, knocking his hands loose. Then, praying that the fuzzy image she saw in front of her was the man's head, she smashed the side of his cheek with her palm. She knew she'd landed a good blow as the fuzzy image stumbled away.

She looked down at her hand and saw that she was holding the ski mask. She must have ripped it off the man's face without even realizing it. It didn't really matter as she couldn't see his face clearly anyway.

She turned in the direction of Ryan, who was still slumped on the floor by the breakfast table. He looked to be trying to shuffle himself in their direction but could only move a matter of inches. She desperately wanted to go to him, to ease his suffering, but until the man was subdued, that wasn't an option.

She turned back around to finish him off. Her vision wasn't clear, but she could still make out what was happening. The man had gotten hold of a rolling pin—the one that Hannah had used the other night when she was making a pie for them.

Before she could act, he swung the pin at her. It connected with her lower ribs, making her double over involuntarily. But that only lasted a moment. The man, hands gripping the ends of the pin, thrust it under her chin and jammed it upward as he backed her up against the counter.

He pressed the rolling pin against her trachea. With her head lodged against another cupboard, she couldn't writhe away or move her head at all. Again, air became hard to come by. She tried to gasp, but nothing came in. She extended her arms to the side, preparing to box the man's ears, but when she tried to bring them up and inward, she found that she couldn't. She had no strength. She had no air.

And then her bloody, watery vision went black.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Ryan pretended that everything didn't hurt.

Instead of focusing on how his entire body seemed to be burning from the inside out, he tried to shuffle on his backside toward the man attacking his wife. If he could get close enough to trip him, maybe that would give Jessie enough time to regroup and get the advantage back.

But since the two of them had started fighting, he'd only made it about a foot. And now, as the man used a rolling pin to press the life out of his wife, Ryan found that moving even an inch was impossible. And then it was too late.

The man released his grip on Jessie's neck, and she dropped heavily to the ground. She was unconscious—or worse. Ryan ordered himself not to believe the worst as he watched the man methodically drag her over to the butcher block. He pulled out a zip tie, attached it to her wrist, and then to a leg of the block.

“Don't worry,” the man said. “She's still alive. I can hear her breathing. You should be less worried about her than yourself. She's here for the show. And you're the show.”

Ryan wanted to kill the guy but knew that was a pipe dream. Breathing was hard. Thinking clearly was becoming more difficult with each passing second. And if his situation was anything like the prior victims, he estimated he had about an hour and a half left to live.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

When Jessie woke up, she found herself zip-tied to the butcher block.

Ryan was curled up in a ball at the base of the breakfast table. He wasn't tied up. The man must have figured he was no longer a threat. She tried to ascertain the intruder's location, but it hurt too much to turn her neck. A moment after she realized that, the pain in her forehead, cheek and ribs all joined the party too. Her nose and lower back weren't much better.

"I was worried you'd miss all the fun," a male voice said from somewhere behind her.

He stepped into view, and she saw their assailant. He hadn't put the ski mask that she'd ripped off back on. That wasn't a good sign. It meant that he didn't care that she could identify him.

And she definitely could. The man had light brown hair and matching eyes, which were badly bloodshot. He had several days of stubble. Like the survivors had said, he was big—over six feet tall and 200 pounds. Jessie guessed that he was bigger than Ryan.

He was wearing black pants and a black hoodie that looked vaguely familiar. It took her a moment to get why. She recognized the outfit. This was the man who'd loitered drunkenly by their car when they came back from chasing Daniel Forrester. Apparently, he hadn't been drunk at all. He was waiting for them, and had been, she suspected, stalking them.

"So," she asked, her voice hoarse from the rolling pin to the neck, "did you put the

poison in his coffee when we ran off down the street?”

“I did,” he answered calmly. “After spending all evening watching you two stake Forrester out, I was beginning to wonder whether I’d ever get the chance. But your husband there was so excitable when you two went after the guy that he forgot to lock up. That’s a bad habit.”

Ryan suddenly inhaled deeply, like he’d been stabbed. Then he exhaled with what sounded almost like a whinny. She could tell that he was in agony but doing his best to hide it.

“I guess we should get down to business,” the man said. “It sounds like hubby there won’t be with us that much longer.”

Jessie set aside the terror she felt at what was happening to the man she loved. Strangely, if she was going to save him, she had to divorce herself from any empathy for him. It could cloud her judgement.

She looked at the clock on the wall. It was 10:03 p.m. She thought back to when they first returned to the car after following Forrester. She recalled Ryan calling for officers to break up the block party at 9:34. By then, he’d already had at least one gulp of coffee.

That meant that the poison had first entered his system about twenty-nine minutes ago. Based on what the survivors had told them, he probably had around ninety minutes left. She figured that she needed to get the antidote in him well before then to guarantee that he’d recover.

Doing the math in her still-fuzzy brain, she estimated that she had somewhere between a half hour and forty-five minutes to get out of this situation so she could get her husband medical care. And right now, she had no idea how to do that.

“What is this all about?” she asked, trying to stay calm and keep the criticism out of her tone.

The man didn’t answer, instead pulling out a breakfast room chair and settling into it.

“Oh come on,” she said, doing her best to keep her voice even, “it’s too late for the silent treatment. I know that you kept telling the other spouses that they needed to ‘watch the show, to feel it, to understand.’ But you’ve already gone well beyond that with me, what with your explanation about how clever you were earlier. You may as well come clean. Why are you doing this?”

“It’s up to you to understand,” he said, sounding irked by her assumptions.

“But I’m not going to,” she insisted. “Just like the other survivors, the worse off my husband gets, the more panicky I’ll become, begging you to let me get help for him. I’m not going to be engaging in any introspection, so I’m never going to ‘understand.’ Whatever lesson you’re trying to teach me, you need to spell it out more clearly, because I’m not getting it.”

“What makes you think you’re going to survive this?” he asked.

“What?”

"Just a moment ago, you said 'just like the other survivors,'" he noted. "But they never saw my face, so I could afford to let them live. Why would I do that with you when you could ID me, especially when you're a cop?"

“I’m not a cop,” she told him.

“Whatever you are, you signed your own death warrant the moment you pulled off that ski mask.”

Jessie let that sink in. And after she got over the initial panic, another emotion snuck into her system: hope. Maybe she could get him talking after all.

“All the more reason to tell me then,” she said. “If I won’t be around to tell the authorities what you said, you may as well reveal your big secret. Why are you killing people and making their loved ones watch? What happened to you?”

The man put his head in his hands, seeming to sit with that for a few seconds. She took that unobserved moment to look around. Her eyes fell on a decent-sized shard of glass from one of the broken plates. It was close enough to grab. She was about to reach for it when he raised his head again. Looking at his expression, she knew he was going to come clean.

“My wife died,” he said. “She had lung cancer. Never smoked a day in her life, by the way. From the moment we found out until the day she died, it was less than four months. We started dating freshman year of high school. She was my world.”

As Jessie listened to him, she tried to find some of the empathy that she'd deliberately chosen not to give her husband in this moment. Under normal circumstances, it wouldn't have been hard. But this man, widower though he may have been, was killing people.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” she forced herself to say. “I’ve been through a lot of emotional pain in my life, but nothing like that. I can’t imagine how difficult it was for you both.”

“But you see,” he said. “You can imagine, because it’s happening to you right now, just on an accelerated timeline. You get to feel everything I did—the fear, the helplessness, the guilt that you couldn’t do anything to stop it—it’s all here for you right now.”

Now, she understood his motive, at least partly. But she felt like she was missing important pieces of the puzzle. So instead of saying what she wanted to say, which was that he was a sadistic bastard, she tried—as he wanted—to understand.

“When did your wife—what was her name?”

“Kara,” he said mournfully.

“When did Kara pass away?” she asked.

“Five years ago.”

Jessie tried to hide the shock she felt. If his wife had died five years ago, why was he only going on this spree of poisonings now? She framed the question as delicately as she could.

“You managed to deal with the pain of her loss for a long time,” she noted carefully.

“What changed?”

The man sighed deeply and stood up, turning away from her and looking out the window. In that moment, Jessie decided that she needed a backup plan that didn’t involve talking down a man who was slowly killing her husband.

So, with her free hand, she grabbed the nearby shard of broken glass plate lying on the floor. It was small enough to hide in her palm but was also—she hoped—thick enough to do what she intended. She turned her body slightly to hide what she was doing, and with her eyes still on the man, began cutting at the zip tie with the piece of glass.

She stopped briefly when he spoke again, waiting to see if he’d turn around. He didn’t.

“I went to my little brother’s wedding this weekend,” he explained. “It was on Saturday. They held it at a lovely resort in the mountains just outside Boulder, Colorado. I was, at his insistence, his best man. I had to stand next to him as he exchanged vows. I had to give a toast at the reception. I had to fake being happy for them.”

He started to turn around. Jessie stopped cutting at the zip tie.

“I’m really sorry,” she said quietly.

“And they didn’t make it easy for me,” he continued, walking back over and sitting down again. “They made no accommodation for my situation. My brother never asked if I was comfortable playing such a big role in everything. His new wife even pointed out one of the bridesmaids and said I should ‘hit that,’ as if I was that kind of guy. She seemed to think she was being supportive and helpful, but the callousness was hard to bear. They just didn’t seem to care, or even notice, that I was still in pain. They didn’t feel what I felt. They didn’t understand. And when I realized that, something inside me snapped.”

He put his head in his hands again. Jessie used the opportunity to cut into the zip tie a little more. She felt it give slightly and allowed herself a quick glance. The thing was sliced halfway, still not enough to break free.

“What did you do?” she asked, more to prevent silence than because she was curious. She already knew the answer to that question.

“I wanted to kill both of them that night,” he said. “But of course, I didn’t. I went back to my room and stewed. It ate at me all night and the next morning at the goodbye brunch, where they were all over each other. And then, on the flight back here that day, I had a moment of perfect clarity.”

He looked up at her.

“What?” she asked.

"I work as a clinical scientist for a major pharma company," he told her. "Late last year we ended a drug trial early because we discovered that when the medication was combined with a specific compound found in certain foods and drinks, the interaction caused a milder version of what your husband is experiencing now. It wasn't deadly, but it was poisonous enough to cause illness. It was simply too dangerous to pursue. But I still had all the research. So when I got home, I went into the lab and intentionally combined the medication with the compound in a concentrated liquid. And then, that night, I went to dinner. That's where I saw James and Sarah Whitaker."

“And that’s where you poisoned him?” she asked, trying not to dwell on how close they’d been to the answer when pursuing Eric Sawyer. They’d had the right general profession, just the wrong person.

The man nodded.

"They were flaunting themselves," he said defensively. "So when he went to the bathroom and she started checking her phone, I walked by their table. I pretended to trip and bumped into it. As I steadied myself, I used a dropper to inject the liquid into his drink. She didn't even notice. It was even easier the next afternoon at the movie theater in the dark. Those folks were being unbelievably handsy."

“What does that mean?” Jessie asked. “Like they were going at it right there in the theater?”

“No,” he said, looking at her with complete sincerity. “They were holding hands.”

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Jessie's heart dropped into her stomach as she realized just how far gone the man was.

He had killed a woman and made her husband watch because the couple was holding hands at a movie. Before she could even think of an appropriate response, he continued.

“And then I saw you on TV,” he said, matter-of-factly, as if picking her was the most natural thing in the world. “And now we're here.”

Jessie thought back to the press conference. She vaguely remembered Ryan giving her hand a supportive squeeze as she stepped away from the podium. Had that been enough to set him off? It must have been.

The man glanced away from her and over at Ryan, who had stopped his quiet, pained inhalations.

“Let's check on your man, shall we?” he said. “I don't want you to miss the big finale because we're being so chatty.”

He knelt down and bent over Ryan, checking his pulse. The moment Jessie felt sure it was safe, she resumed cutting, this time with more force than before. She knew the extra movement might draw the man's attention, but she was running out of time. The man was just rolling Ryan onto his back when she felt the plastic break. His wrist came loose from the tie. She was free.

“He's still with us,” the man said, looking up again, “but I'm not sure for how much

longer.”

“I thought it took up to two hours for the poison to cause death,” Jessie said worriedly. “That was the timeframe with the prior victims.”

“That’s true,” he conceded, “But this is an imprecise science. For obvious reasons, no studies have been done. And I have a confession to make.”

Jessie’s blood ran cold as she asked, “what?”

“I gave the detective here a higher dose than the others,” he said sheepishly. “I figured that an important guy like him would be missed—as would you—if you were out of contact with your colleagues for too long. So I decided to expedite the process. Sorry about that.”

Jessie used every ounce of restraint she had left to avoid screaming at the man. She needed him to feel comfortable, in control. Other than the element of surprise, his overconfidence might be the only advantage she had left.

“Could you please see if he’s conscious?” she pleaded.

“Why?” he asked, genuinely perplexed.

“Because if these are our last moments together,” she explained, “I want to tell him how I feel.”

The man, still kneeling next to Ryan, thought about it for a moment. Then, with whatever remained of his humanity, he nodded.

“Okay,” he said, and leaned over to gently shake Ryan.

“Hey Detective,” he said quietly, “your wife wants to share some last words.”

Ryan moaned softly. He was still alive.

That was when she moved. Ignoring the pain that immediately shot through her body, she grabbed onto the side of the butcher block and pulled herself to her feet. The man looked over in surprise. When he saw what she was doing, he started to get up as well.

Jessie put him out of her mind for a second as she tried to think. The shard of glass in her hand might be useful if she jammed it into his eye or neck. But it was too small to truly incapacitate him unless she got him in the exact right spot. And right now, weak and stressed, she didn't trust herself. She needed a blunter weapon.

That's when her eyes fell on the rolling pin. It was resting on top of the butcher block, where the man must have left it. As he charged toward her, she grabbed it and swung as hard as she could.

He raised his arms to block the blow but was a little too slow. The body of the roller connected with the left side of his head at the eye socket. She knew she'd made solid contact because, as his weight slammed into her, she heard a crack right before he began to scream.

Their shared momentum sent them toppling over the top of the butcher block before they landed in a heap on the floor on the other side. Jessie's body shouted at her in protest, but she hadn't felt anything break.

The man was on top of her, but he appeared stunned, holding his hand to his eye as he screeched in anguish. She was still holding the rolling pin. Clutching it in both hands, she swung it again, this time aiming for the man's jaw.

Again, she made clean contact as his chin snapped upward. After a moment of silence, he started screaming again and she understood why. It looked like his tongue had been partially severed by his own teeth.

She didn't wait to see if he'd get over it, quickly shoving him off her. As he slid to the side, she re-gripped the roller and took aim at the crown of the man's head. Then she swung. The contact made her forearms shiver, but she also heard what sounded like another crack. She thought she might have fractured the man's skull.

He dropped onto his back, clutching his eye with one hand and the top of his head with the other. His tongue was left to fend for itself.

She scrambled to her knees and launched herself at him, slamming her kneecaps into his solar plexus. A giant gasp escaped his lips. She let her legs slide down so that she was straddling him just below the waist. After taking a giant gulp of air, she looked down at the man just beneath her.

His face was mangled and bloody, but she felt no sympathy for him. All she felt was rage. She wanted to hurt him, to make him pay, to make him suffer. She lifted the rolling pin high above her head and brought it down, hitting the man square in the left cheekbone. It offered a satisfying crack as it caved in.

She lifted the pin again. This time, she brought it down on the man's neck. The crunch of his trachea when she hit it filled her with pure joy. The man was already gasping for air because of the knees to the gut, but now he engaged in some kind of bloody, raspy gurgle. Jessie loved it.

She lifted the rolling pin above her head once more, but this time she turned it vertical, so that one of the handles was pointed downward. She squinted, aiming. If she brought it down just right, it would enter his mouth, go through the back of his throat, and, if she was lucky, hit the spine at the base of his neck. She wondered if she

could really make it happen. As she wrapped her fingers firmly around the top of the pin, she decided to find out.

“Stop!”

The shouted word startled her.

She looked off to her left to see Ryan, his head craned toward her, his eyes cloudy but horrified. He swallowed hard and in a much weaker voice, he repeated, “stop.”

Then his body went slack, and his eyes closed.

Jessie vibrated with shock. It was as if, for a moment, she stepped outside of her body and looked down at herself. She was straddled over a barely conscious man, about to thrust a rolling pin handle down his throat in the hopes that it might come out the other side.

She was, until just this moment, an unthinking ball of fury, consumed with inducing as much pain as possible, unconcerned with anything else, including her own husband’s welfare.

She’d gotten so caught up in destroying the man that she’d completely forgotten that Ryan’s life hung in the balance, that if he didn’t get help soon, he wouldn’t make it.

She felt all the anger drain out of her as her shoulders slumped. The man’s garbled screams were barely audible to her as she pulled out her handcuffs, slapped one on his wrist and the other to a leg of the very butcher block he’d tied her to.

She slowly got to her feet and made her way over to her cell phone, which was resting on the breakfast table next to Ryan’s. She called HSS. Beth answered.

"I need EMTs to our address ASAP," she instructed. "The killer poisoned Ryan and followed us here. I need you to get Dr. Amelia Roth here, too, with the antidote. Tell her that the killer gave Ryan a more concentrated version of the poison, so she needs to use whatever dosage will work. Ryan is unconscious and in bad shape."

"Got it," Beth said, her voice quavering ever so slightly. "You're on speaker, so we all heard. Detective Valentine is calling for EMTs now, and Jamil is calling Roth. But Jessie, are you okay?"

"The suspect is incapacitated and handcuffed," she answered. "I'm not in any imminent danger."

"I understand," Beth said. "But are you okay? How are you?"

Jessie thought about it for a second.

"I don't know," she answered.

It was the truth.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:48 am

Jessie tried to keep quiet.

As she rolled over in the small cot that the nurses had put in Ryan's hospital room, she did her best to avoid waking him up. Not that he'd been awake much at all over the last 48 hours.

He'd been unconscious when they first brought him in, though he was intentionally woken up periodically to check on the whether the antidote was working. It was, but that didn't stop the pain, so after doctors were able to confirm that he was improving, they would immediately sedate him again.

The process had been going on for close to two days. Ryan had received what they hoped was his last course of both the antidote and sedation eight hours ago, at four in the morning, so he might wake up at any moment.

He'd come a long way from that first night. Dr. Roth said that he should make a full recovery. In her decidedly caustic, undiplomatic way, she'd also noted that because of the concentrated dose of the poison that he'd received, he was about fifteen minutes from being too far gone to help when she arrived.

Jessie hadn't been able to see him in those first few hours. That was for two reasons. The first was her own medical issues.

During the course of her kitchen brawl with the man, who she'd since learned was named Nathan Prescott, she'd suffered multiple injuries, including a bruised lower back, gashes to her forehead and cheekbone, a swollen nose, bruised ribs, and an aching windpipe, along with a strained neck.

Nothing required surgery, though the lacerations on her face did necessitate stitches. After being evaluated and treated, which took a couple of hours, she thought that she'd finally be allowed to join Ryan. Instead, she was questioned by Captain Parker in conjunction with a pair of detectives from Wilshire Station. After they got the basics of what had happened, the detectives began to press her.

"I'm just trying to understand," the shorter older detective asked, "why you didn't just subdue the assailant by pulling your weapon on him?"

"I'm sorry," Jessie said defensively, "but Prescott took my weapon after hitting me in the face with a shovel. After I freed myself from the zip tie and he charged at me, did you want me to go searching for the gun rather than defend myself with what I had available?"

"I guess we're wondering," said the taller, younger detective, "why you didn't look for it after initially subduing Prescott."

"What constitutes 'initially subduing' to you, Detective?" she challenged. "The man had poisoned my husband. He had assaulted me with a shovel and tied me up. All I had at my disposal was a rolling pin. So I used it as best I could until I was confident that he was no longer a threat."

"I think you did that pretty effectively," the older detective said with a smirk. "The man has fractures to his skull, eye socket, and jaw, not to mention that he had to have his tongue sewn back on."

Jessie, who had very deliberately chosen not to think about the last moments of her fight with Prescott until now, could feel anger bubbling up inside her as she listened to him.

"Oh, would you rather I checked on the guy's boo-boos after each of my attempts at

self-defense before moving on to the next one?" she snarled. "I wasn't aware that my survival was a secondary priority to the discomfort of the man who murdered two people and tried to kill me and Detective Hernandez. You just let me know the new department rules for self-defense when all I have is a rolling pin, and I'll be sure to follow them."

"All right," Captain Parker had said, "why don't we all give it a rest? Ms. Hunt, you've just been through a volatile situation, but maybe you could rein it in just a little. And Detectives, I know you're just doing your job, but it sounds to me like you're impugning the motives of the victim here. Nathan Prescott entered Ms. Hunt's home after poisoning her husband. He assaulted her and forced her to watch while her husband lay near death. When she got free, he attacked her. I think your tone is out of bounds."

"I disagree, Captain," the older one said. "We're just trying to get a clear picture of how events transpired."

"I think you've got a clear enough picture," Parker said. "If you have any more questions, you can pose them in a formal setting with her union representative present. Right now, Ms. Hunt wants to see her husband, who, I might remind you, is an LAPD detective who almost died tonight. This interview is over."

Parker then helped Jessie to her feet and led her out of the room and down the hallway.

"Thanks, Captain," she had said once they were clear of the detectives.

"I'm just keeping an eye out for my team," Parker deflected. "You didn't deserve the full-court press in there. But I can't promise there won't be more questions down the line. Prescott is a murderer, but he's in pretty bad shape. That makes folks nervous, even if you did nothing wrong."

Only after issuing that warning, did Parker send Jessie off to Ryan's room, where she'd spent most of her time since. She'd gotten occasional breaks, when Hannah, Kat—who had given her a big hug upon arriving—or a member of the HSS team would take her place so she could get a checkup on her injuries or run home for a quick shower and change. But other than that, the last two days had been spent mostly in this small hospital room.

Right now, the cot was killing her back, so she decided to sit upright. Maybe she could get a quick catnap that way. She felt her eyes starting to get heavy when she heard a noise that made them snap open. It sounded like a grunt. She looked over at Ryan. His eyes were open.

“Hey,” she said, getting up and moving to the chair next to his bed, “welcome back to the land of the living.”

“Was I that close to leaving for good?” he asked, his voice scratchy but surprisingly strong.

She grabbed the cup on the tray next to him and held the straw to his lips.

“It's water,” she said. “Sounds like you could use it.”

He nodded appreciatively and took a sip.

“To answer your question,” she told him, “it was touch and go there for a while. We don't need to get into all the particulars right now, but let's just say that you were less than an hour from having your ashes scattered somewhere.”

“I don't want to be cremated,” he said drily, thankfully playing along with the lighter tone she'd purposely adopted. She didn't want to discuss this too seriously, or she feared she might lose it completely.

“Noted,” she said, even though she already knew his wishes and was teasing him by pretending not to remember.

“How are you ?” he asked. “No offense, but you look a little rough around the edges.”

“The stuff you see looks worse than it feels,” she said, before pausing and adding, “actually it feels as bad as it looks, and the stuff you can’t see is worse. But I’ve been assured that nothing is broken and that I’ll be good as a used car in a week or two.”

“What about your head?” he asked, not playing along anymore. “I saw you get hit in the face with that shovel. Did they check for a concussion?”

She could hear the concern in his voice and understood why. Her surgery last fall was a result of swelling on the brain caused by multiple concussions in a short period of time.

"I was assured that I didn't get one," she said. "In this instance, it seems that the soft mush of my face took the brunt of the blow."

“I’m glad,” he said quietly.

She offered him another sip of water, which he accepted greedily. After he was done, she put the cup down. She could sense that he had another question but waited for him to ask on his timetable.

“What happened with the guy?” he finally said.

“His name is Nathan Prescott and he’s here,” she said, “in a different wing though. His condition is described as serious but stable. He’s under guard until they’re able to transport him to the jail. They think it will be several weeks at least. I won’t bore you

with all the details right now, but suffice to say, he's been charged with a laundry list of crimes. It's not going to go well for him. In addition to matching that partial print at the Whitaker house to him, he basically confessed to me while we were waiting for you to kick the bucket. He's not getting out."

Ryan nodded. He looked like he had another question about the case, but then his attention was diverted to something behind her.

"Who sent the flowers?" he asked.

"Everyone," she answered. "Even Chief Decker stopped by with some. But the biggest bouquet is from your favorite lady, Captain Parker. She's been coming by twice a day to check on you."

"That's very nice of her," he said.

"Especially under the circumstances," she agreed.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Jessie shared what she had only learned herself yesterday.

"Do you remember how Parker was in and out of the station earlier this week because of some event for her kid?" she asked.

"That sounds vaguely familiar," Ryan said.

"Well, it turns out it wasn't a school play or anything like that," she explained. "He'd been having panic attacks at school. At one point, he even locked himself in a bathroom stall and wouldn't come out. So she's been dealing with that, trying to get him help while still managing Central Station and HSS."

“Jeez,” he said. “I guess I should cut her a little slack.”

“It might be a nice gesture,” Jessie said. “And I think she’ll do the same thing for you. Maybe we all try to give each other a little grace.”

“I like that,” he said, before looking at her quizzically. She could sense that he knew there was something else. Sure enough, he asked, “what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” she said quietly. “it’s just the thing with Parker’s son, it made me re-evaluate the whole adoption thing. I mean, are we really ready to open ourselves up to that kind of vulnerability? What if the child we get is really struggling emotionally and we aren’t able to help.”

“Jessie, I think that dealing with those kinds of struggles is what’s called ‘parenting,’” he said with a smile, before his face turned grim. “But there’s a bigger issue we need to address before we can seriously embrace adopting.”

“What?”

“I saw you with that Prescott guy,” he said, “once you had him under control, you didn’t stop. You were so full of rage. Before I called out to you, you looked like you were about to jam that rolling pin down his throat. I worry that if I hadn’t yelled at you, you would have killed him. In fact, when I woke up, I was afraid to ask, because I thought you might have.”

As she listened to him, Jessie could feel her face—along with the entire back of her neck——grow hot with shame.

“I didn’t though,” she said, not conceding anything. “I cuffed him. I called for backup. He’s alive, not more than two hundred yards from this room.”

“I understand that,” Ryan said. “But you were so angry. It reminded me of Hannah before she got things under control. I mean, if I hadn’t managed to stay conscious long enough to shout at you to stop, would that man be dead right now? Would you be under investigation for murder?”

Jessie looked at him. She wanted to reassure him. But the truth was—she didn’t have an answer, at least not one he’d like.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:49 am

Mark Haddonfield could feel eyes on him.

He'd sensed them earlier, in the courthouse holding area, but pretended not to notice. Now that he was on the prison bus returning him from the courthouse to Twin Towers Correctional Facility, he couldn't ignore it anymore. Despite the shackles that locked his arms against the seat in front of him, he twisted his head around to look at the person in the seat behind him. She stared back at him. There was a twinkle in Ash Pierce's eyes.

"What?" he demanded.

"It's just that we've been on this bus together multiple times and I thought that I should maybe introduce myself. My name is Ash."

"I know who you are," he said guardedly.

"And I know who you are," she replied warmly. "Mark Haddonfield: the man responsible for a string of murders, all of them people originally saved by Jessie Hunt. I have to say, you really taught her a lesson. The way she treated you, you were entitled to do a hell of a lot more than that."

"I did do more than that," he said proudly. "Even from behind bars, I managed to have her best friend's fiancé gunned down. I almost got her psychiatrist taken out too."

"And yet, curiously, it seems like those attacks have waned of late," Pierce said, tilting her head in mock intrigue. "I have to wonder why that is."

He shrugged as much as his shackles would allow.

“I couldn’t tell you,” he replied, which was technically true. The deal—in which he called off his acolytes from pursuing Jessie Hunt’s loved ones in exchange for getting to work cases with her—was confidential. He wasn’t supposed to mention it to anyone, certainly not the woman who had tried to kill both Jessie’s sister and her best friend.

“Well,” she said slowly, almost reluctantly, “the old me, before the amnesia, would have probably congratulated you on snuffing out Kat Gentry’s fiancé. I supposedly wanted to kill her myself, and I suspect that eliminating her future husband probably caused her great pain. But that was the old me. The new me is just trying to get by as best I can.”

Mark had heard about Pierce’s memory loss. He didn’t know if it was legitimate or not, but he knew that she was using it as part of her defense against the charges she faced. He wished the idea had occurred to him.

“I wish you well with that,” he said cautiously. He sensed that despite being shackled on a prison bus with four armed guards nearby, she wasn’t someone to be trifled with, not even by someone with his track record.

"Thank you, Mark," she said. "May I call you Mark?"

“I guess,” he said.

“You know what occurs to me, Mark?” she continued.

“What?”

“Both of us are in a tight spot these days,” she told him. “If we’re convicted, and let’s

be honest—that's the likeliest outcome for both of us—then we're going to spend the rest of our lives in cells less spacious than the ones we currently inhabit at Twin Towers. That doesn't sound fun."

"I'm trying to make my peace with it," he said.

She leaned in slightly and lowered her voice.

"What if you didn't have to?" she purred.

"What?"

"In my prior life, I was apparently pretty good at getting out of tight spots," she said. "They tell me I did it in the military and later in the CIA. And though I don't remember it, I'm on trial, at least in part, for killing four guards while escaping from a prison transport vehicle. So I guess those skills are there, even if I don't have recall of them."

"What are you suggesting?" he asked.

"I'm not suggesting anything," she said, sounding slightly hurt at the accusation. "I'm just musing on the fact that I apparently have a skill set that could help the two of us change our unfortunate circumstances. And we both know that you have the craftiness, toughness, and unflinching will to do what needs to be done when the time is right. I just wonder what we could accomplish if we put our two skill sets together."

The bus came to a stop at the entrance to Twin Towers. As the gate slowly creaked open, he thought about her non-proposal proposal. He had to admit that he was intrigued. This was the first time in forever that he had allowed himself to think of a life outside of prison.

But the methodical, practical part of him knew better. They were two of the most high-profile prisoners in the whole system. The idea that the people securing them would let down their guard long enough for them to get free was almost certainly fool's gold. Which meant that they'd probably have to kill their way out.

And while he didn't have any objection to that, per se, he was skeptical about how successful they'd be. Ash Pierce might be a former CIA assassin, but he was a failed college student. He doubted that he'd fare as well as her when things got rough.

You're right to be worried, his Jessie told him, this one can't be trusted any more than the profiler can.

Mark nodded in silent agreement with his unseen advisor, the one who had guided him through so many trials and tribulations over the last year and a half. He had to be very careful here.

Another prospect occurred to him. If he was that dubious about the chances of escape, maybe his best bet was to tell Jessie Hunt about Pierce's gestating plan. He'd surely win brownie points, which could translate into a nicer cell, better meals, and maybe even more visits. She'd be in his debt. And having Jessie Hunt in your debt was always a good place to be.

This situation would require some more thought.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:49 am

Ash Pierce kept a straight, sullen face as the bus pulled into the underground garage. They always removed the male prisoners first, then the women. So she waited patiently as the men were individually unshackled from their bus seats and then led out.

As Haddonfield shuffled down the center of the bus, he glanced back at her. She didn't make eye contact. Unlike on the drive over, the guards were paying attention now. Any indication of a personal connection between the two most infamous killers in Los Angeles would raise alarm bells. She didn't need that.

But she'd laid out the bread crumbs for the kid. Now, she'd see what he did with them. The truth, which he didn't know—which no one but her knew—was that her memory had returned weeks ago. She was the old Ash Pierce, with all her original memories and skills intact, not to mention the moral ambivalence that had made her so good at her job: killing.

However, Haddonfield reacted to her idea, it would create chaos. If he agreed to work with her, she could use that to her advantage. If he went to the authorities, maybe even to Jessie Hunt herself, she could deny his allegation and claim that she was being railroaded by the LAPD, which would help her at trial.

Either way, Mark Haddonfield, though a prodigious killer himself, could be a useful idiot. And she intended to use him.

Ash Pierce lowered her head. She didn't want anyone to see her face. She didn't want them to see that she was smiling.