



The Perfect Poise (Jessie Hunt #44)

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Category: Horror

Description: In the elite world of the ultra-ultra rich, women are turning up dead in their mansions, behind their massive gates, in places where nothing should ever go wrong. Jessie is shocked at the wealth of this world, at how dysfunctional the seemingly-perfect are, and at what lengths they will go to cover up their past, and their lies....

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Chloe Baptiste was exhausted and annoyed.

As she walked out of the back of the Hancock Park art gallery and headed toward her car, she shook her head in agitation, making her razor-sharp brown-haired bob bounce.

Ordinary, everyday people assumed that her life was a dream, free from the concerns that regular folks faced. But that just wasn't true.

Just because her husband ran a media conglomerate and their personal wealth last year was estimated by Forbes magazine to be around \$110 million (which was low, to be honest), that didn't mean everything was ice cream and gumdrops for her.

For example, tonight she ended up spending over \$1.2 million on the two paintings she'd wanted, when she had come into the evening not planning to go over one million total. But when that arrogant plastic surgeon tried to outbid her on the second piece, she had no choice but to up her offer.

Now she'd have to explain to her husband, Laurent, why she'd let some self-satisfied boob-stuffer get the better of her. It wasn't a conversation that she was looking forward to. Laurent might have two private jets and five homes, including a castle in the French countryside, but he still appreciated a good deal. And Chloe hadn't gotten any tonight.

The only thing that mitigated her guilt as she made her way through the near empty lot to her Tesla Model X Plaid was the knowledge that she could make up the extra \$200,000 she'd spent tonight by the end of this week. Of course, that money would

come via her side business, the one that Laurent didn't know about and definitely wouldn't approve of.

Chloe was careful to keep her little side gig on the down low, partly because she didn't want to deal with Laurent's disapproval, but also because, strictly speaking, it wasn't legal. Despite the risk to the Baptiste name if her additional work ever came out, she had no intention of quitting.

That was because her life, despite the jet-setting, the gala receptions, and the stable of servants, was sometimes lacking in excitement. So, if she had to skirt the law a little to get a jolt of energy every now and then, it was worth the risk. Plus, when it came to this job, she was the boss.

Chloe approached the car and pulled the key fob out of her bag. She'd considered letting their driver, Mario, take her here tonight, but worried that if other bidders saw her pull up in front of the gallery in a limo, she'd look like a whale who was ripe to be fleeced. Of course, arriving in a \$90,000 vehicle wasn't exactly subtle. But at least she'd parked in the back.

Chloe pushed the remote and heard the familiar click of the doors unlocking. She was just reaching for the driver's door handle when she felt an odd sensation, one she wasn't very familiar with anymore: apprehension.

Though she couldn't place why, she suddenly felt as if she might not be alone in this parking lot. She quickly opened the door and was about to get in when she saw a shadow pass in front of her. It took her a second to process that it was actually a silhouette of someone behind her, illuminated in the parking lot lights.

She didn't even try to look back, instead hurrying to get into the driver's seat so she could shut the door. But as she slid into the seat, she felt a searing pain on the left side of her back, between the shoulder blade and the base of her neck. She gasped in

agony and looked down to see blood spreading across her cream blouse.

A surge of adrenaline shot through her body as she realized that she'd been stabbed. A moment later, the knife was ripped out violently. That was even more painful than when it had gone in. She felt a hand grip her arm and pull her halfway out of the car as she opened her mouth to scream.

Her shriek was cut short as she felt the knife punch through the back of her neck. She was too panicked and horror-stricken to realize that the blade had sliced through her vocal cords, along with part of her spinal cord.

The blood was spewing so wildly and quickly onto the dashboard and steering wheel that Chloe, who was quickly losing consciousness, didn't even register that she couldn't move any part of her body below the neck.

She didn't feel the knife as it was yanked out of her a second time. By the time it was brought down again, she'd already slipped into the blackness, a small kindness amid the carnage.

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Jessie Hunt was ready to go home.

This wasn't really her scene, though she had promised Ryan that she'd make an effort.

Ever since her brain surgery three months ago, Jessie had been mostly a homebody, not even wanting to go out to the movies, much less a couples' dinner.

But her husband, Ryan Hernandez, had insisted that they needed to get out of the house and be more social. It was one of his New Year's resolutions, and she'd reluctantly agreed to make it hers too. That's why they were currently having dessert at A.O.C. in West Hollywood with Karen and Mickey Bray.

Of course, it wasn't a traditional couples' dinner, considering that Jessie, Ryan, and Karen all worked together. Both Karen and Ryan were detectives with the LAPD, specifically Homicide Special Section, or HSS, a small unit consisting of five detectives and two researchers that specialized in cases with high profiles or intense media scrutiny—typically involving multiple victims or serial killers. Ryan ran the unit. Jessie was its assigned criminal profiler. They all worked out of downtown's Central Station.

Jessie had met Karen's husband, Mickey, at several department functions but never really interacted with him socially. A high school science teacher, he seemed like a likeable, decent guy who was easy to talk to. It was clear that both Brays were excited to be out tonight, especially on a weekday.

In fact, that was why Jessie hadn't tried to rush through the evening, despite her

inclinations. Since the Brays had gone to the trouble of getting a babysitter for their five-year-old son, a major expense in Los Angeles, she didn't want to short-change their night out.

But as she took a bite of her crème brûlée and the conversation gravitated to small talk about whether the Lakers would make the playoffs this year, Jessie found her mind wandering. The voices of the other three people at the table faded as her thoughts turned to more pressing concerns .

She was still worried about her best friend, Kat Gentry, who had been even more of a shut-in than Jessie of late. She had good reason. Less than six weeks ago, Kat's fiancé, Mitch Connor, was gunned down in an attempt on her life. Since then, she'd turned her grief over his loss into an obsession with a woman named Ash Pierce.

Though it clearly wasn't healthy, Jessie understood where her friend's fixation came from. Kat thought that Pierce, an assassin paid to torture and kill her, had hired someone to finish the job when she couldn't, and they'd gotten Mitch instead. It turned out that the killer had a different motive, but that didn't stop Kat from becoming consumed by Pierce, who was currently hospitalized, recovering from a coma that may or may not have wiped out her recent memory.

As Jessie took a sip of her coffee and nodded absently at what Mickey Bray was saying about the playoffs, it occurred to her that late evening caffeine wasn't likely to quell the cacophony of thoughts bouncing around her head. After all, Kat wasn't the only loved one on her mind.

Jessie's younger half-sister, Hannah, had just returned to college at UC Irvine last week, after finishing winter break. Hannah appeared to be doing well, all things considered. But Jessie could tell that her sister was keeping something from her. She wasn't inclined to push the issue, considering that Hannah seemed to be adapting to college, even making the Dean's List in her first semester as an eighteen-year-old

freshman. But a low-simmering concern for her was always present in Jessie's subconscious.

As if that wasn't enough, there was the ongoing issue that neither she nor Ryan had addressed since the start of the new year: kids. Ryan had lately expressed an interest in having them. Jessie, for reasons she'd shared with him privately and in couples' therapy, wasn't totally on board with the idea. He'd stopped pursuing the matter for the time being. And while she appreciated his restraint, she knew that it was still eating at him. Until she gave him a definitive answer one way or another, the topic would always be a source of silent conflict between them.

"It's really wild, don't you think?" Mickey asked, looking directly at her.

Since Jessie had no idea what he'd said just prior to that, she busted out a line she'd learned from a comedian who claimed it was a perfect non-responsive response.

"Can you believe it?" she replied, feigning amazement .

"Right," he agreed happily, before launching back into something about the NBA salary cap. She smiled politely as she took another bite of dessert and returned to her own concerns, most notably, Haddonfield.

Mark Haddonfield had once been a student at UCLA when Jessie taught a criminal profiling seminar there. But when the extremely unstable young man couldn't get into her class, his already fragile psyche was bruised beyond repair and he began to view Jessie, once his hero, as the cause of his disintegrating life.

He took his fury out on people that Jessie had previously rescued from serial killers, becoming one himself as he murdered them using the same methods that the original killers had. Eventually he came after Jessie too.

With help, Jessie eventually captured him. Unfortunately, Haddonfield had managed to post a manifesto online, calling on potential followers to pick up where he'd left off, and take out the people closest to Jessie. It was one of those acolytes who had shot Mitch when he dived in front of Kat to protect her. Soon thereafter, another acolyte went after Jessie's psychiatrist, Dr. Janice Lemmon. The older woman had survived, but Jessie had enough.

She made a deal with Haddonfield. If he retracted his manifesto, she promised to bring cases to him periodically, letting him "consult" with her from behind bars. His dream had always been to become her protégé. And if letting him see an occasional case file allowed him to maintain that illusion while keeping her friends and family safe, it felt like a small price to pay.

Haddonfield had lived up to his end of the bargain, recording a video that called on his followers to end their hunt. It was posted online immediately. And in the weeks since, there had been no new attacks. But so far, Jessie hadn't brought any cases to Haddonfield to review.

There were legitimate reasons to hold back. No case had felt worth the effort yet. Plus, she worried that if word got out about their agreement, there might be blowback, not just from the media and families of Haddonfield's victims, but from Kat, who could resent her working with the man largely responsible for Mitch's death.

But she had to visit him soon. If Haddonfield felt like she had played him, she had no doubt that he'd find a way to sic his dogs on her again. And once he felt that she'd betrayed his trust, it was unlikely that he'd call them off a second time .

"Jessie, what's up with that whole Costabile thing?" Mickey asked, snapping her out of her reverie.

“Mickey, no,” Karen groaned, clearly embarrassed by her husband’s question.

"What?" he said. "It was all over the news. Sorry. I didn't know it was off-limits."

“It’s not, Mickey,” Jessie said. “I think Karen’s just being protective because it was an intense situation, but that’s okay. What do you want to know?”

Mickey was referring to Hank Costabile, a former LAPD sergeant who’d been busted two years ago for corruption, as well as for trying to have Jessie killed when she found out about it. He’d served eighteen months in prison before being released due to a prosecutorial error at trial. But instead of enjoying his second lease on life, the guy chose to use his freedom to come after Jessie again.

“Well, for starters, Ryan’s not getting charged, right?” Mickey wanted to know

“No,” Ryan assured him. “I was cleared of any wrongdoing in the incident.”

Jessie silently noted that while that was the official answer, and it was technically accurate, it didn’t convey the entirety of the situation. For example, it didn’t include the fact that as Jessie had leapt onto a car to escape Costabile, who was chasing her with a knife, Ryan had slammed his vehicle into the one that the corrupt cop was standing on, sending him flying thirty feet into a chain-link fence.

Nor did his answer address the reason Ryan was investigated in the first place, which was the severe damage to Costabile’s face, a result of at least a dozen punches Ryan delivered once he got up and close with the former cop. Both Jessie and Ryan had testified to the L.A. Police Commission’s Office of the Inspector General that Costabile had been combative during his arrest, requiring extreme force. Because there was no surveillance video to contradict their claim and the board wasn’t inclined to look into the matter that closely, that was the end of it.

Of course, it wasn't the end of it for them. Jessie had seen the unrelenting fury with which Ryan had beaten Costabile. She also recalled how, for the longest time, she hadn't told him to stop.

Normally mild-mannered, with warm brown eyes and a sweet smile highlighted by impressive dimples, he was like a wild man that night. He used every inch of his well-muscled, two-hundred-pound, six-foot-tall body to pummel Costabile into submission .

And the dark truth was, watching her husband do that to the man who'd threatened her life had awakened something that had been dormant in her for a long time, something she'd thought she'd finally learned to channel into a purely altruistic alternative.

She thought that she'd fully redirected her ferocious, bloodthirsty desire for vengeance, a trait she and her sister had both inherited from their shared serial killer father, into a passion for justice. But as she watched gleefully while Ryan nearly killed Hank Costabile with his bare hands, she realized that she wasn't quite as evolved as she thought she was.

"And you guys are both okay?" Mickey asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

"More or less," Jessie told him. "It's never fun to have a human wrecking ball charge at you with a switchblade. But we're at dinner with you guys, and he's still laid up in the hospital, so I'll take it."

"It wasn't just him, right?" Mickey confirmed. "There were people helping him?"

"That's correct," Ryan volunteered to take some of the pressure off her to answer every question. "A guard at the prison that Jessie was visiting just before the attack tipped him off to her location. And the desk sergeant at Central Station, a guy named

Crowley, was feeding Costabile real-time information on her status. Luckily we discovered both their involvement, although we suspect there may be others too.”

“Remind me, when does Costabile’s trial start?” Karen asked.

“No date has been set yet,” Ryan said. “The man is still in the hospital recovering from a shattered right leg, a punctured lung, a lacerated spleen, a torn labrum, and multiple facial fractures. But they’ll eventually retry him.”

“And I suspect the prosecutors will be more careful this time,” Karen added. “No mistakes that could lead to a conviction being overturned on appeal.”

“How long could he go away for?” Mickey wondered.

Jessie took a final bite of her dessert before answering. She’d wondered the same thing and checked with the D.A. for confirmation.

“If he’s convicted on everything they plan to charge him with, he’ll be inside for at least twenty-five years,” she said, “and potentially up to forty. Either way, he’ll be an old man when he gets out, assuming he does.”

“What does that mean?” Mickey asked .

“Convicted cops don’t tend to do well in maximum security prisons,” Ryan explained.

Mickey looked like he had another question, but before he could ask it, Ryan's phone rang. Jessie recognized the ringtone. The call was from Gaylene Parker, the captain of Central Station. She was also their boss.

“I’m sorry,” Ryan said, “I have to answer this.”

He got up from the table and stepped away. Jessie could hear him mumbling but couldn't make out his words.

"Parker?" Karen guessed sagely, referencing Gaylene Parker, the captain of Central Station.

Jessie nodded without a word.

Karen Bray was a veteran detective who'd had transferred to HSS from Hollywood Station after working a case with Jessie a few years ago and hitting it off. She had an unflappable air of professionalism to go with her keen sense of perception. She wasn't one to miss clues. And she must have known that there was only one person that would cause that kind of reaction in Ryan.

He returned moments later, and it was clear from his expression what was coming.

"I'm sorry to cut this short, but Jessie and I have to go," he said. "I'll get the bill on the way out."

"Don't be silly," Karen said. "We're splitting it. And since you're clearly in a rush, we'll get it. You can pay us back later. And don't forget, with all that Costabile work talk, it's deductible."

"Thanks, Karen," Ryan said.

"Care to tell me what this is about?" Jessie asked, standing up.

"No time right now," he said hurriedly. "I'll explain on the way."

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Jessie quickly learned that they didn't have to go far.

"There's been a murder in Larchmont Village," Ryan told her as soon as they left the restaurant.

Larchmont Village was a busy shopping district adjacent to Hancock Park, a wealthy, mid-city community. It was only a fifteen-minute drive away.

"Any details?" Jessie asked as she got in the car.

"Parker didn't have many to share," he admitted as he started the car and punched the gas, "just that the wife of some huge medial mogul was stabbed to death in an art gallery parking lot. They only discovered her body twenty minutes ago. They were going to call in Wilshire Division detectives but when they realized that this was such a high profile victim, the call was redirected to HSS. Since Susannah, Sam, and Nettles are all on cases, we were next up in line."

Susannah Valentine, Sam Goodwin, and Jim Nettles were the other three detectives that made up Homicide Special Section. Along with Jessie, Ryan, Karen, and researchers Jamil Winslow and Beth Ryerson, they comprised the entirety of the close-knit team.

Jessie didn't need to ask if the order to put HSS on the case, and specifically the two of them, had come from on high. She already knew the answer. The chief of LAPD, Roy Decker, used to be the captain at Central Station and HSS, and whenever possible, they knew he liked to call on his old unit, which he trusted implicitly.

Ryan put the cherry light on the roof and turned on the siren so they could get to the scene quicker. With that and the reduced traffic at 9:30 p.m. on a Monday night, they arrived at the gallery in less than seven minutes. By the time they pulled up across the street, there was already a phalanx of squad cars, along with an ambulance.

They hopped out and headed toward the back parking lot, where an officer held up his hand until Ryan flashed his badge. The officer stepped aside, and they rounded the corner to the back, where they found two more squad cars and a crowd of people surrounding one of the two civilian vehicles still in the lot. As they approached, a familiar face waved at them .

Sergeant Paul Delco, who had worked with them on a case in the past, was a rail-thin officer in his late thirties with crew cut brown hair and a scowl. Despite his expression, Jessie was glad to see him. In their previous experience together, he'd proven to be competent and professional.

“Thanks for getting here so quickly,” Sergeant Delco said as they met him about thirty feet from the silver Tesla where a woman could be seen slumped over the steering wheel. “As soon as the first officer on the scene told me the name he got from the victim’s driver’s license, I knew your team would want to be involved.”

“Who is she?” Ryan asked.

“Her name is Chloe Baptiste,” Delco said. “Her husband is Laurent Baptiste, the CEO of that big French film conglomerate, Groupe Passage. According to the gallery manager over there who found her, she had just purchased two paintings at an auction held here tonight.”

He nodded at a twenty-something woman in a flowing dress with frizzy blonde hair, sitting in the back seat of a squad car. The door was open, and her head was in her hands.

“Should we go talk to her now?” Jessie wondered.

“She’s not much good to chat at the moment,” Delco said. “I only got a few answers out of her before she broke down. She’s pretty messed up after what she saw. I would have been too.

Jessie could understand that. Even from this distance, the collection of blood that had pooled under Baptiste's car was sizable.

“She didn’t take the paintings with her when she left, obviously,” Ryan confirmed.

"Right," Delco said. "Per what the gallery manager said before she lost it—her name is Jane Birkett by the way—the pieces were to be delivered via armored truck later this week. Together, they're worth over a million bucks. Birkett mentioned that Baptiste said her husband would kill her for overspending on them."

“Where is he right now?” Ryan asked, intrigued.

“Apparently Chloe Baptiste told Birkett that he was in Europe for some kind of film festival,” Delco explained.

“We’ll need to reach out to him,” Ryan said, already pulling out his phone. “I’ll text Jamil and Beth ask them to get his contact information.”

While he did that, Jessie continued to pepper Delco with questions. “So Birkett is the manager here, but is she the gallery owner too? She looks young. ”

"No," Delco answered, looking at his notes. "The owner is a woman named Lena Ortega. But she left the auction a little early because of a migraine. Apparently, she was upset that she had to leave because she and Baptiste are friends."

“We’ll definitely need to talk to her too,” Ryan said, still typing into his phone. “I’m adding her to the list of folks we’ll need Jamil and Beth to get contact info for. I’d rather get that stuff from our people than bother Ms. Birkett with it in her condition.”

Jessie appreciated her husband’s sensitivity to the matter, but it occurred to her that they would still have to question the woman.

“I know she’s in rough shape, but we need to get a time frame from her—when Baptiste left the gallery, stuff like that.”

Sergeant Delco flipped to the next page on his pad. It was clear that he had gotten that answer too. Jessie remembered again why she liked the guy.

"I actually have that," he said. "Birkett was okay answering straightforward questions. It was only when I asked about finding the body that she fell apart. She said that Baptiste left the gallery just after 9 p.m. The auction had ended, but she stuck around to sign some paperwork related to her purchases. Birkett said that she closed up and left about ten minutes later. That's when she found her in her car like that."

Jessie looked over at the Tesla again.

When is the Crime Scene Unit getting here?" she asked. "I don't want to get too close to the vehicle until they've had a chance to go over it."

“Last update was that they should be here in the next ten minutes,” Delco said. “Same with the medical examiner. In the meantime, we have officers inside the gallery. The place has security cameras so we’re hoping they might provide something useful.”

“You’ll keep us updated on that?” Ryan asked.

“Of course,” Delco assured him.

Ryan turned to Jessie. “Do you want to see what we can determine about the body from a distance?”

Jessie nodded. They walked over to the vehicle along with Sergeant Delco, stopping ten feet from the driver’s side door. There was a purse on the ground near the door. Delco pointed at it.

“Our first officer on the scene checked the purse to get ID,” he said. “He didn’t do a thorough search but noted that there was over \$300 in cash in there, along with multiple credit cards. ”

“So likely not a robbery gone wrong,” Ryan surmised.

“I tend to doubt that,” Jessie muttered, looking at the woman in the driver’s seat.

Baptiste's face, slumped on the steering wheel, wasn't visible. Her brown, blood-matted hair clung to what remained of her neck. Her entire back and neck was a mass of deep punctures and oozing blood. From this distance, it was hard to determine the number of stab wounds, but Jessie guessed it was at least a half dozen.

"This was personal," she said. "Whoever did this didn't just stumble across Chloe Baptiste. They wanted to punish her."

Jessie didn’t know much of anything about Chloe Baptiste. She didn’t know if she was a good person or not. She didn’t know if she had children or gave to charity or was cruel and self-involved. But whatever her strengths or faults, no one deserved to die like this. Whoever was responsible had to pay.

Jessie caught herself. Her job was to seek justice, not retribution. It was a distinction

she'd briefly lost sight of when Ryan pounded Hank Costabile into oblivion. And it was one she found herself increasingly struggling to keep front and center of late. Her self-recriminations were interrupted by a buzz on Ryan's phone. He looked down at it.

"It's Jamil," he said. "He sent Laurent Baptiste's contact information along with their home address. It's only a few blocks from here."

"I say we head over there and see what we can glean from looking around," Jessie suggested. "We can call him on the way there."

"Sounds good," Ryan agreed, before turning to Sergeant Delco. "Please have CSU reach out to us once they have more particulars on the nature of the killing."

"Will do," Delco promised.

They started back toward the car. On the way, Jessie asked the question she knew her husband was already pondering.

"When you call the husband, are you treating him as a grieving husband or a suspect?"

"You already know the answer to that," he said. "Both—always both."

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Jessie was glad they waited.

Before calling Laurent Baptiste, she suggested they check in with their research team to get some more background information on the man. Better to know who they were dealing with before dealing with him. As they made the short trip to the Baptiste's home address, Jamil and Beth filled them in.

"We've been doing a crash course on the couple since you gave us their names," Jamil said over speaker. "Laurent Baptiste runs Groupe Passage, a French film conglomerate. It operates as both a mini-studio and an international distributor of both high-end awards fare and action blockbuster type stuff. The company also recently got into the streaming world. Their platform includes their entire back catalogue of films, as well as original TV programming. They also just got into sports, including some race car series, a bit of soccer, and tennis. All told, the company is valued at over \$6 billion, and his personal wealth is estimated to be between \$100-150 million. Articles describe him as being a UHNWI."

"I'm sorry, what?" Jessie asked.

"It means 'ultra-high-net-worth individual,'" Jamil explained. "It's a term that has come into vogue of late. It's a way of referring to the super-rich. The people who make these designations informally use a net worth of thirty million dollars as the cutoff to be considered a UHNWI."

"Okay," Jessie said, amazed. She was familiar with dealing with the rich. Many of their cases involved wealthy celebrities or business people. But this was a whole different level.

“It sounds like the Baptistes embraced that lifestyle too,” Beth added. “Looking at their holdings, they have multiple homes all over the world, a couple of jets, and at least one yacht. He’s currently at a film festival in Paris.”

“Are they both ultra-high-net people or is it just him?” Ryan wanted to know.

“It looks like he brought the bulk of the wealth to the marriage,” Beth said. “When they got married four years ago, Laurent was recently divorced. Chloe was an up-and-coming art buyer. In fact, that’s how they met. He hired her to represent him at a big auction in Milan. Since they hooked up, she can be seen on the pages of glamour magazines everywhere.”

“Any children?” Jessie asked.

“No,” Beth answered. “Laurent is more than double her age. He’s 66 and she was 32. He has three kids from his first marriage and two from his second.”

“Maybe he was all tapped out,” Ryan suggested jokingly as they pulled up in front of the Baptiste’s mansion. The squad car sent to accompany them parked right behind them.

“Very funny,” Jessie muttered. “You know that you’re about to call this guy and that he’s now a widower, right?”

“Just some gallows humor,” he replied, undaunted. “Now that we’re here, I guess I can’t stall any longer.”

“Just a heads up,” Jamil added. “I just spoke to the security company for the house. They’re ready to send a representative to give you access as soon as Baptiste authorizes it. If he balks, we’re ready to put the paperwork in requesting a search warrant.”

“Hopefully that won’t be necessary,” Jessie said.

“One last thing before you go,” Beth told them. “I’ve been trying to get in contact with the gallery owner, Lena Ortega, but all her calls go straight to voicemail.”

“According to the gallery manager, Ortega was suffering from a migraine,” Jessie recalled. “She may have shut everything off for the night. If we don’t hear back from her tonight, we’ll pay her a visit first thing in the morning. Thanks guys.”

After they hung up, Ryan motioned for the officers in the squad car behind them to pull up alongside.

“We’re going to call the husband to give him the death notification,” he explained. “Hopefully he gives us permission to access the house. If he gives us any trouble, we may need you guys to sit on the place until we get a warrant. For now, you can just park here. We’ll let you know what happens.”

The officers pulled in front of them. Ryan dialed the number that Jamil had given him for Laurent Baptiste. The first two times he called, he was sent straight to voicemail. The second time, he left a message.

“Mr. Baptiste, this is Detective Ryan Hernandez with the Los Angeles Police Department. It’s imperative that you return this call immediately. We have an urgent matter to discuss. ”

As he continued speaking, trying to convey the seriousness of the situation while still using vague generalities, Jessie glanced over at the mansion where the man spent at least some of his time.

The home, a giant, nearly-block-long Spanish Colonial style villa, fit what Jessie would have expected from a couple focused on film and art. She guessed that it was

about a hundred years old and had that distinctive old Hollywood flavor.

Despite the glamour of the place, Jessie wasn't starry-eyed. She'd had bad experiences with this neighborhood. Andy Robinson, a woman who would later go on to stalk and kidnap her, once lived just a block over. In fact, she's tried to kill Jessie in that very home.

"You think he'll call back?" Ryan asked after hanging up, pulling her back into the present. "He's in Paris, right? What time is it there?"

Jessie did some quick mental calculations. "It's almost 10 p.m. here, so that would make 7 a.m. there."

"Maybe he's still asleep," Ryan posited.

As if in response to his comment, the phone suddenly rang.

"This is Detective Hernandez," Ryan said the second he hit "answer."

"Detective," replied a youngish-sounding man with a light accent who definitely wasn't Baptiste. "This is Mr. Baptiste's personal assistant, Gerard. Mr. Baptiste is preparing for a speech. How may I help you?"

"I'm sorry, Gerard," Ryan said, "but for what we need to discuss, I need to speak with Mr. Baptiste directly. I understand that's probably unusual for him, but it's essential."

There was a long pause before Gerard spoke again.

"You are on speaker with Mr. Baptiste," he said, "go ahead."

Jessie could tell from his expression that Ryan didn't want to relay bad news with someone else on the line, but he didn't have much choice.

"Mr. Baptiste?" he said.

"Yes," replied a man with a thick but still mostly understandable accent. "This is he. What is this regarding, Detective?"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, sir," Ryan replied in a firm quiet voice, "but your wife, Chloe, has died."

They heard a stifled gag on the other end of the line and something in French that neither understood. A moment later, Gerard, sounding rattled, came back on the line .

"Are you sure this isn't a mistake?" he demanded, his tone quavery. "Mr. Baptiste wants to know."

"I'm afraid not," Ryan said. "She was found less than an hour ago in her car behind the Larchmont Gallery near Hancock Park. I'm sorry to inform him that she was murdered."

They heard something else in French. It sounded like Gerard might be translating Ryan's words for the older man. Baptiste spoke again. Even with his accent, his voice was obviously heavy with emotion.

"This cannot be," he insisted. "I refuse to accept it. You must present me with evidence that verifies what you say. Photos. How can I be certain that this is not some cruel joke?"

Ryan sighed.

“I’m able to give you the number for Central Police Station or you can look it up on your own. Our captain’s name is Gaylene Parker. You can confirm all this with her. I encourage you to do so if you have doubts. As to providing photos, I’m not able to do that, sir. They’re part of the investigation. And trust me, you don’t want to see them. They are...difficult to look at.”

“Why?” Baptiste demanded. “How was she killed?”

"I can't share any details of the investigation at this time, sir," Ryan told him, wincing at how he had to toe the official line. "Suffice to say, it was extremely violent. That's part of why I wanted to speak to you. Obviously, it's my responsibility to share this terrible news. But I'm also investigating the case, and I'm hoping that you can help. If—once you verify my identity with my superiors—you could tell me if there was anyone who might want to hurt your wife, anyone who had threatened her or expressed animosity, it could go a long way to advancing our investigation."

There was more back and forth in French, Gerard speaking in comforting, hushed tones while Baptiste alternated between anguished responses and angry howls. When someone finally spoke to them again, it was Gerard.

"We do not need to call your captain to confirm what you say," he said. "I'm looking online, and the story is already there. The gossip websites have photos from far away, and they name Chloe as the victim. One site says she was stabbed many times."

"I'm sorry that you have to see that, Mr. Baptiste," Ryan replied. "We try to keep the tabloids away, but who knows who might sneak around to get access to an unsecured crime scene. Unfortunately, those reports are accurate. Chloe was stabbed repeatedly and with a ferocity that suggests there may have been a personal vendetta at work. That's why I asked about anyone with a grievance against her."

“In this moment, I can think of no one,” Baptiste said, choking back tears. “I’m sure

some people do not love her. She has strong opinions and shares them with passion. But to anger someone to the point of violence? I cannot imagine such a thing.”

“Alibi,” Jessie mouthed to Ryan, hoping to get a sense of Baptiste’s credibility when he was asked an unexpected question.

Ryan nodded. “Mr. Baptiste, I was surprised to learn that your wife didn’t accompany you on this trip.”

“She was to come on Wednesday,” the man said. “I was needed here on Saturday for the festival’s opening gala, but she strongly said she must stay in Los Angeles for the gallery auction. Her friend is the owner. Now I am wondering if I should have demanded harder for her to come.”

“You can’t think that way, Mr. Baptiste,” Ryan told him. “That will take you down a dark path. I speak from experience. You had no control over what happened. But you can make a difference in terms of what happens next.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“The goal for me and my team is to find out who did this and bring them to justice,” Ryan explained. “It won’t bring Chloe back, but it will allow her some peace.”

“How can I help with that?” Baptiste asked.

Jessie smiled. When he wanted to be, Ryan was masterful at handling people.

“We are sitting outside your Hancock Park home right now. We’d like to search it immediately. It’s possible that there’s some clue inside, maybe a letter threatening her or fingerprints from someone who was stalking her and snuck in at some point. We won’t necessarily know what we’re looking for until we’re inside. We’d like your

permission to enter the house and begin that search.”

Jessie held her breath as she waited for the man’s response.

“Of course,” he said with barely a moment’s hesitation. “Gerard will call my butler, Phillipe, right now and instruct him to admit you. Take the time you need. But please keep me informed of what is happening. I will leave Paris when we hang up. As soon as the jet is ready, we will fly. I should be back there in less than twelve hours.”

“I wish you safe travels, sir,” Ryan said. “And again, my condolences. ”

After they hung up, he turned to Jessie.

“What did you think?” he asked.

Jessie shrugged.

“I mean, he sounded credible over the phone,” she acknowledged, “but you know I always prefer to be in the room when we question someone—look in their eyes, study their body language.”

“I get that,” Ryan agreed. “And I’m not holding you to this, but I’d love your initial profile of the guy.”

"Based on what he said and his vocal patterns," she replied, "which can be hard to discern considering his strong accent, I'm inclined to think we shouldn't put all our resources into targeting him. He sounded sincere and he has an alibi. Of course, we both know all too well that people hire professional killers all the time. He could have had a hit put on her when he knew he'd be out of the country and told the assassin to make it look personal. We'll need to check his financials, which I imagine will be a challenge with a guy like that."

“If there’s anyone who can untangle the financial data of an ultra-high-net whatchamacallit, it’s Jamil,” Ryan noted.

He was right. Jamil Winslow, the head of the HSS Research department was 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 small stature, physical fragility, and thick glasses gave the impression that he could be overlooked, but when he wielded his computer like a knight would a sword, he was formidable.

The other member of the team, Beth Ryerson, was no slouch either. While not a human supercomputer like Jamil, she had an incredibly sharp mind, which people tended to underestimate because she was an attractive, six foot plus former college volleyball star.

“Let’s ask them to get started now,” Jessie said. “Maybe by the time we’ve finished searching the Baptiste mansion, they’ll have uncovered something.”

“Let’s hope so,” Ryan said, “because right now, we’re grasping at straws.”

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:38 pm

They never even went home.

Jessie was plying herself with some early morning coffee as she walked to the Research department at Central Station and thought back on the horrible night they'd just had. It was 5:10 a.m., and she was feeling the weight of the last eight hours.

After spending four of those hours at the Baptiste mansion, along with two CSU teams, scouring the massive place, they left at two in the morning with nothing noteworthy to show for it.

So they headed to Central Station to review what the crime scene unit and the medical examiner from the Chloe Baptiste murder site had uncovered. Unfortunately, it wasn't much more than they already knew.

The medical examiner had pegged the time of death as being between 8:30 and 9:30, which wasn't hugely useful considering they already knew from the gallery manager, Jane Birkett, that Baptiste had died between nine and 9:10 p.m.

Slightly more helpful were the details on the murder weapon. Because of the depth and width of the stabbing injuries, he determined that the weapon was a hunting knife approximately seven inches long. Chloe Baptiste had been stabbed a total of six times, but according to the M.E., she likely died well before the final blow.

They had also gotten a call from Sergeant Delco, who relayed what they'd learned from the art gallery's security cameras.

"I just sent you the parking lot footage we were able to pull," he told them. "it's not

the highest quality, which was surprising considering the gallery traffics in expensive art. But as you'll see it, it was good enough for our purposes."

Jessie and Ryan looked at the video that Delco had sent. It showed Chloe Baptiste approaching her car at 9:03 p.m. As she opened the door, a figure emerged from behind the only other vehicle in the parking lot. The person was clad all in black, wearing a ski mask with holes for their eyes but not their mouth or nose.

As Baptiste settled into the driver's seat, the assailant lunged forward and stabbed her with a gloved hand. After five subsequent blows, they turned and left, leaving Baptiste slumped over the steering wheel. They disappeared through a gap in some hedges at the back of the parking lot.

"The crime scene unit checked back there," Delco said, answering their question before they asked it. "They couldn't find any DNA on the hedge branches that the killer brushed against, nor on the other vehicle in the parking lot that they hid behind, which belonged to Birkett."

"There was nothing to speak of in the alley behind the lot either," he continued. "We don't know if the killer parked back there and drove off or walked to some other location, where they might have had a vehicle waiting. We've checked other cameras in the neighborhood, but they're all on major streets, and there are too many pedestrians in the area to draw any conclusions. No one we saw made it easy by wandering by in all black."

"We might have our research people review the footage to see if they can create a physical profile of the killer based on their size compared to the height of the cars," Ryan suggested.

"Feel free," Delco said. "I know you're team is pretty amazing. Having said that, we asked our tech people to hazard a guess. They estimate, based on the height of the

vehicles and the hedges, that the killer is between five foot seven and five foot eleven and somewhere between 140 and 180 pounds. They couldn't determine gender but based on the fluidity of movement they used, they guessed the person was under fifty."

"That narrows it down some," Jessie noted, "we'll see if our people can add to the description. Thanks very much, Sergeant."

The two of them walked down the mostly quiet hallway of Central Station until they got to the door for the Research department. It was closed and there was a handwritten signed taped to it, reading: Napping. Please don't wake until five.

Jessie looked at her watch. The time was 2:28 a.m.

"I think they've got the right idea," she said to Ryan. "There's not much more we can do until later this morning. How about we try to get a few hours of shut eye too?"

Ryan nodded in agreement. They silently trudged to the station's main conference room, which had several relatively comfy couches and blinds that could be lowered enough to block out most light.

Jessie grabbed a couple of blankets from the closet while Ryan settled in on the larger couch, lying on his side. Rather than take the smaller one, Jessie snuggled in beside him, letting him spoon her as she draped the blankets over both of them .

She could already hear Ryan's breathing get slow and heavy as she set the alarm on her phone for 5 a.m. By the time she put the phone on the floor by the couch, he was snoring softly. She closed her eyes and less than two minutes later she had joined him in slumber.

The alarm almost made her topple off the couch.

As Jessie reached down to turn it off, she heard Ryan snort behind her. She sat up and tried to get her bearings. Her head was heavy, and she wasn't sure the two and half hours of rest she got would make much difference. She got up, shook Ryan to make sure he didn't fall back to sleep, then went to the restroom to brush her teeth and throw some water on her face.

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

By the time she and Ryan walked into the Research department with their coffee at 5:10, Jamil and Beth were already hard at work.

"You guys get any sleep?" she asked by way of a greeting.

"I got a little," Beth said, looking up and offering them a wan smile, "but based on the soft typing I heard all night, I don't think he did."

Jamil, who hadn't looked up from his screen when they walked in, shrugged in embarrassment. He didn't try to deny the charge.

"Okay then," Ryan said. "Did that all-night cramming do any good?"

Jamil sighed heavily.

Not as much as I would have liked," he admitted. "Untangling the Baptiste's

financials is a real challenge, probably by design. There are a web of shell companies that sometimes lead to other shells and back again. It's probably something better suited for a forensic accountant, which I realize doesn't help us right now, what with a killer on the loose. But so far, nothing I've found supports the idea that Laurent Baptiste hired someone to kill his wife. ”

“Did anything suggest another reason she might have been killed?” Jessie wondered. “Any suspicious, regular payments that might indicate blackmail or bribery.”

“Nothing jumps out,” Jamil conceded, “but I’m only two-thirds through his holdings. I think that I might have more success looking at things through the lens of Chloe’s accounts. Maybe they’re less labyrinthian. I’ll dive into those when I get a chance.”

“Well,” Beth spoke up, “I’ve been going through some seemingly less complicated material.”

“What’s that?” Ryan asked.

“I’m reviewing a list of former staffers for the couple,” she explained, “seeing who was let go and if there were any grievances filed. I’m even checking the gossip magazines to see who might have had a beef with Chloe. From what I’ve uncovered so far, once she married Laurent and became a big deal, she proved to be...an alienating personality.”

“That was diplomatic,” Jessie noted. “Find any good beefs?”

“Mostly just anonymous quotes describing her outlandish exploits,” Beth answered. “But nothing rises to the level that might lead someone to murder.”

“Well, keep checking,” Ryan instructed. “Sometimes what seems like nothing to us can be the thing that sets an unstable person off.”

“What about Lena Ortega, the gallery owner?” Jessie asked. “Did you ever hear back from her?”

“No,” Beth said. “I stopped trying to contact her after you said she might have gone to bed because of her migraine. Should I start calling again?”

“No,” Jessie said, turning to Ryan. “I think that should be our first stop this morning. Maybe Ortega saw an interaction last night that could prove useful. Or maybe she left the gallery for reasons other than a headache.”

“You don’t think it’s too early?” Ryan asked, looking at the time.

“I guess we could get some breakfast first,” Jessie said, “but I don’t want to wait too long. With the night I had, I’m worried there might be a migraine in my future.”

As soon as she saw the worried expression on Ryan’s face, she regretted saying it. It had only been a few months since she’d had brain surgery to deal with the effects of multiple concussions. She’d been doing well ever since, but it was still a source of concern for both of them .

“Sorry,” she muttered. “I was just kidding.”

He nodded silently, though she could tell he was still a bit spooked. They left the Research department and were heading down the hall when Karen Bray rounded the corner with Detective Susannah Valentine beside her.

“You’re here early,” Jessie noted.

Karen nodded in exhausted agreement.

“Apparently the son of some big time movie executive died of an overdose last

night,” she said. “The detectives assigned to the case think it was an accident, but the film exec is insisting it was foul play. Chief Decker asked Captain Parker to have HSS take a second look and since you guys are on this Baptiste thing, we got the call.”

Beside Karen, Susannah looked disgusted. The detective, a voluptuous 29-year-old brunette with a sharp mind and a propensity to let her temper get the better of her, wasn’t wearing one of her standard body-hugging outfits.

“What are you so upset about?” Ryan asked, deciding not to tease Susannah about her more conservative attire for fear it might not be well-received this morning.

“Let’s just say that my night out with Drake lasted well into the morning and I wasn’t as well-rested as I might like when I got the call to come in.”

Drake was Drake Breem, a 41-year-old police sergeant in Manhattan Beach, a beach community where Jessie and Susannah worked a case over Labor Day weekend four months ago. Breem was assigned to help them. Susannah, who had been burned in the romance department, had taken a liking to the deeply tanned, weathered and wiry surfer cop with shaggy gray hair. But it was only at Jessie’s prodding that she’d agreed to meet the guy for a drink. They’d been seeing each other ever since and apparently spending evenings together that bled into the morning.

“You know,” Jessie teased, unable to hold back any longer, “when you use phrases like ‘let’s just say,’ people assume you’re going to be cryptic, but then you go and overshare.”

“What can I say? I’m happy,” Susannah replied unapologetically.

After years of getting leered at by seemingly every male member of the LAPD, Jessie was glad to see the often edgy, combative detective enjoy herself a little with an older

guy who didn't seem so caught up in her physical attributes. Instead of giving Susannah more of a hard time, she turned her attention to Karen .

"Everything go okay after we left the restaurant?" she asked.

"Sure, until we got home," Karen said. "Turns out Calvin bit the babysitter when she tried to make him go to sleep. She locked him in the bedroom until we got back."

"Jeez," Ryan muttered under breath.

"I know," Karen said. "It was bad. He broke the skin and really left a mark. Mickey ended up taking her to urgent care to get it looked at, and I spent half the night trying to get Calvin to stop crying."

"Because he felt bad?" Jessie asked.

"No, because he knew he was going to get punished and worried we were going to send him away to live with my sister. He hates her, so we sometimes threaten him with that. I guess he took it more seriously than we expected."

"I'm sorry," Jessie said, even as she felt Ryan tug at her shirt.

"Maybe you can commiserate later?" he suggested. "We've got to talk to a witness."

"Go ahead," Karen said. "And don't worry about me. That's what my therapist is for."

Jessie and Ryan left the other detectives and headed down the hall to the elevator.

"We weren't in that much of a rush," Jessie said while they waited for it to arrive.

"Why did you want to get out of there so quick?"

Ryan glanced over his shoulder.

“Too many ears here,” he said. “I’ll tell you when we’re out of here.”

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They were halfway through breakfast at Swingers Diner on Beverly Blvd. when Jessie found that she couldn't contain herself any longer.

She'd been turning over what Ryan had said in her head for fifteen minutes now, and she knew that if she didn't get her feelings off her chest, it would mess up their whole dynamic for the day.

"I have to tell you something and you have to promise not to get defensive about it," she said after swallowing a bite of her breakfast egg sandwich.

"This sounds ominous," he replied before taking a chomp out of his pancake.

"Do you remember what you said about Karen's son, Calvin, when we left the station earlier?"

"Uh-huh."

"About how you didn't want to stay and hear about him biting the babysitter because it made you uncomfortable?" she said.

"I remember."

"And you told me that was because, when Karen and I went to the restroom at dinner last night, Mickey told you how Calvin had seen Karen put her weapon in her gun safe and later on got a hammer and tried to smash the safe open so he could get to the gun?"

“Jessie, that conversation was a half hour ago,” he replied. “You don’t need to recount it for me. I’m the one who told you.”

“So you also recall saying that listening to more horror stories about their kid was too depressing at that hour of the morning.”

“I do recall that,” Ryan assured her before taking another bite of pancake.

Jessie shook her head in disbelief.

“Don’t you see the irony in that?”

Ryan, whose mouth was full, shook his head that he did not.

“Okay,” she said, aware that she was opening a can of worms. “You haven’t brought this up in a while, which I appreciate, but I assume that you still want to have children, right?”

“Very much so,” he answered .

The topic was a major bone of contention, one they’d agreed to set aside for the time being. Ryan was enthusiastic about the idea of having kids. Jessie, who had experienced personal trauma as a child as well as a miscarriage caused by her unhinged ex-husband several years ago, was far more circumspect about the prospect. Ryan had, for the time being at least, deferred to her desire to hold off for now, if not forever.

“But Ryan,” she said, unable to keep a hint of condescension out of her voice, “you do know that children grow up? They don’t stay cute, little babies. They eventually become five-year-olds with issues of their own who send babysitters to urgent care and try to smash a safe so they can get to a gun.”

“The thought has occurred to me,” he conceded.

“And yet, when a friend and colleague of ours reaches out about the challenges she’s facing with her young son, you couldn’t get away from the situation fast enough. Can you see how that might give me pause? How I might wonder how you’d respond if our theoretical future child had some kind of emotional problem that was hard to navigate?”

"Here's the thing," he said, clearly not feeling the guilt she hoped he would. "That's Karen's son. I wish her all the best, and I don't want anything bad to happen to him. But Calvin's not my kid. With mine, it wouldn't just be a disturbing anecdote, it would be personal. So of course I'd be invested. Just because I don't want to discuss the minutiae of her childrearing situation doesn't mean I wouldn't be laser-focused on ours. I'm just tired right now and didn't want to be bummed out. Is that such a big deal?"

Jessie slumped back against the cushion of their banquette.

“I’m truly not sure,” she said, and she meant it.

“I have a question for you ,” he said. “Does your question for me mean that we can now discuss the prospect of having children openly again?”

“No, it most certainly does not.”

“When do you anticipate that changing?”

"I'll get back to you on that," she said, unable to hide the irritation in her voice. "Right now, I'm tired and don't want to get bummed out."

"Fair enough," he replied, holding his hands up in a sign of surrender before returning

to his pancake.

Jessie tried to push the issue out of her mind. It was important, but right now they had something bigger to deal with. They were in the middle of a murder investigation and as soon as they finished breakfast, they had a witness to interview.

** *

By the time they pulled up at Lena Ortega's West Hollywood house, it was almost 7 a.m. Jessie knew that it was still pretty early to call on someone, but these were unusual circumstances. They walked up the path to the cute, Hansel and Gretel-style cottage house. Ryan waited until his phone officially read 7:00 before ringing the doorbell.

After sixty seconds without a response, he got restless.

"You don't think something happened to her or that she's maybe trying to sneak out the back?" he asked.

"Maybe," Jessie replied, "or she could just be struggling with a migraine and moving slowly at seven in the morning. How about we ring the bell again and give her another minute before breaking the door down?"

Ryan gave her a wry smile.

"So should I just assume you're going to be this snarky all day?"

Before she could tell him that he should, someone called out from behind the door.

"Who is it?" a woman asked in a tired, agitated tone.

"LAPD, Ms. Ortega," Ryan said, holding up his badge and ID so she could see them through the peephole. "We need to speak with you."

There was a long pause during which Jessie thought the woman was going to question their credentials, but just when she thought she'd have to cajole her, Lena Ortega unlocked and opened the door. The woman was in her forties with grayish-black hair that hung limply at her shoulders. She was wearing sweats and had dark circles under her eyes. Jessie recognized Ortega's wince at the sunlight in her eyes. It was the same one she often succumbed to when she was in the throes of her worst headaches.

"Whatever this is, let's do it inside," she said. "I'm not feeling the best right now."

She ushered them in, closed the door behind them, but pointedly didn't invite them beyond the foyer.

"What is this about?" she asked tersely.

"Ms. Ortega, we have some questions about the auction at your gallery last night," Ryan began cryptically.

"Was something stolen?" she demanded before cringing at her own volume .

"No ma'am," he said. "We'll get to the nature of the crime we're investigating momentarily. Right now we're trying to clarify some details. It's our understanding that you left the event early."

"That's right," Ortega said. "I suffer from migraines, and one came on in the middle of the auction. I took my medication and tried to tough it out, but it was too late. I had to leave right away. I barely made it home. In retrospect, I should have just gotten a rideshare instead of driving."

“How are you feeling now?” Jessie asked.

“I’ve been up most of the night dealing with it, though it’s subsided slightly in the last hour. Now, can you please tell me what this is about?”

“I will in just a moment,” Ryan promised. “But first, do you recall when you left the gallery?”

They already knew the time because of the surveillance footage, but Jessie understood what Ryan was doing. He wanted to see if Ortega would be forthright. She shook her head.

“The event started at 7:30 and think I lasted about halfway through, but I couldn’t tell you for sure.”

That jibed with the video, which showed her pulling out of the parking lot at 8:21.

“Ms. Ortega, would you like to have a seat for the rest of our conversation?” Ryan asked.

"No, thank you," she said. "As soon as we're done here, I plan to go straight back to bed so anything that prolongs your stay is something I'd like to avoid. Sorry to be so blunt."

“All right then,” Ryan said. “We’re here investigating the murder of Chloe Baptiste. She was killed in the parking lot of your gallery last night.”

Lena Ortega’s eyes widened, showing just how red they were from her long night. She stumbled slightly and looked like she was about to lose her balance. Jessie reached out and grabbed her forearm.

“Steady,” she said quietly.

The woman gulped hard as she looked straight at Jessie.

"Are you sure?" she asked, as so many folks did when confronted with news like this. Part of Jessie continued to be surprised that people would question such a thing. But she understood that it was their way of processing the impossible and, in some cases, hoping to will away the truth.

“We are,” she assured her sadly. “She was positively identified. ”

“Jesus,” she whispered. “How did she die?”

“She was stabbed multiple times,” Ryan answered.

“Oh god,” Ortega said, “Laurent is going to be destroyed.”

“We’ve spoken to him,” Jessie told her. “He’s on his way back from Paris now. In the meantime, as difficult as it may be, we need your assistance.”

“How can I help?” she asked weakly.

“We understand that you and Chloe were friends,” Jessie said. “The more we know about who she was and the nature of her relationships, the better chance we have of catching her killer.”

Ortega swallowed hard before responding.

“Okay. What do you want to know?”

Jessie found it incredibly uncomfortable to have to ask these questions standing in the

foyer of the house, as the woman they were speaking to looked on the verge of collapse. But Ortega had agreed to answer those questions, a decision she might reverse if she had second thoughts when they switched rooms. So she pressed ahead.

“Let’s start with what Chloe was like,” she said. “We heard that she could be difficult sometimes.”

Ortega took a few steps back so that she could lean against the far wall. She pinched the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger as if trying to squeeze the migraine out of her head manually, sighed deeply, then finally answered.

“First off, you should know that Chloe was a great friend, super loyal. She was a huge supporter of my gallery before she ever met Laurent and became a semi-celebrity. And that didn’t change afterward. She didn’t need to help out some tiny gallery in Larchmont Village, but she did. In fact, she was supposed to join Laurent for that film festival in Paris but delayed going so she could be here for me and my artists. She wanted to bid up several of the pieces to help us out.”

“That does sound very loyal,” Jessie agreed. “So why the bad reputation?”

"Well," Ortega said with a shrug, "she could be tough sometimes. She didn't suffer fools, and she viewed a lot of people as fools. Plus, she was known to play hardball when it came to artists and works."

“What does that mean?” Ryan asked.

“Okay, well sometimes she would wine and dine artists she liked in order to get discounts on pieces.”

“Is that against some rule?” Ryan pressed .

“No, but occasionally what she did before auctions might cross a line,” Ortega said. “For example, she might badmouth her competition, spreading rumors about them so that the artist would be disinclined to show their work at a gallery that was friendly to the competition. Anything to undermine another potential bidder was fair game. She’d do whatever was necessary to get an advantage.”

“How far would she go?” Jessie asked.

Again, Ortega sighed. When she replied, it was reluctantly.

“She wasn’t above blackballing artists or galleries who didn’t give her preferential treatment. Some artists and owners resented her. Others loved her, but they were all scared of her.”

“Including you?” Jessie wondered.

“It never came to that,” Ortega said. “Like I told you, she was a big supporter, and we were always on good terms. But yeah, in the back of my mind was always the concern that if I did something to upset or disappoint her, she could crush me.”

“Did she ever crush anyone so badly that they might have wanted payback?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Ortega said. “Yes, she could make people’s lives uncomfortable, but I never encountered anyone who said their career was ruined by her. Being on Chloe’s bad side was a hindrance, but not a death knell.”

“Before you left last night,” Ryan pressed, “did you notice if she upset anyone during the auction?”

“I guess,” Ortega said. “She beat out Garrett Leach for a piece. They both bid pretty high, but he eventually had to beg off when the price went past seven hundred

thousand. He didn't seem happy. Then again, Garret never seems particularly happy."

Suddenly Lena's Ortega's eyes widened. It was clear that she had an idea.

"What?" Jessie asked.

"This is crazy to say," Ortega told her, shaking her head. "So much so that I hesitate to mention it, but it occurs to me that Garrett might be pretty adept with a knife."

"Why do you say that?" Jessie asked.

"He's a plastic surgeon."

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Kat Gentry felt guilty.

Then again, she always felt guilty these days.

Right now, it was because she'd convinced Dr. Janice Lemmon to meet with her well before normal practice hours so she could have her therapy session prior to anyone else arriving. So Lemmon, 70 years old and recovering from injuries, had traipsed to her downtown office at 7:30 instead of at nine, when she usually had her first session.

Kat decided not to address that source of guilt this morning. She already had enough on her plate, what with feeling responsible for the death of her murdered fiancé, Mitch Connor. In addition, she felt the ongoing shame of leaning too heavily on Jessie, Ryan, and Hannah, among others, for emotional support, as well as largely ignoring the clients of her private detective agency.

But none of those things was what had her in here this morning. Instead it was the topic that she'd refused to address with Lemmon in any of their prior sessions, the one that consumed more of her mental and emotional energy than anything else these days. She was finally going to talk to Lemmon about Ash Pierce.

As she settled into the cushy leather couch in Lemmon's office, she looked across at the older woman in the worn, floral high-backed chair, trying to decide how best to broach the subject. The psychiatrist might find it odd that Kat had been coming to see her for weeks and never brought this up.

Then again, Kat knew that Janice Lemmon wasn't surprised by much. Though she looked meek, with her tiny body, thick glasses and tight, little gray ringlets of hair,

Lemmon 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 of that game for over a decade, the woman was still sharp as a tack. It was hard to get anything past her.

That's why Jessie had suggested that Kat see her in the first place. Lemmon had been the go-to therapist for Jessie for over a decade, since she was in college. She was also helping Jessie and Ryan work through their relationship issues. And to keep it all in the family, she also periodically saw Hannah to help her with what everyone euphemistically called her "anger management issues."

But until today, Kat had been hesitant to broach the subject of Ash Pierce. Even if it was a no-brainer topic to address, she had good reason to avoid it. After all, Pierce was the hitwoman who had kidnapped and tortured Kat in the desert, very nearly killing her before she was rescued by Hannah. That was after Pierce tricked Kat into thinking she was an abused wife who needed help getting free of her husband, who it turned out, didn't exist.

Later, Pierce had escaped from a prison transport truck and tried to hunt down Hannah as payback for besting her that night in the desert. Luckily, before Pierce could take her down, Hannah, Kat and an Israeli bodyguard named Gila Jabarin had combined to defeat the assassin in a hospital boiler room.

In the process, Hannah had stabbed Pierce in the neck. Kat, for reasons she still couldn't totally explain, gave Pierce CPR until help arrived. The woman survived but ended up in a coma for a month. When she finally awoke just over seven weeks ago, she claimed to have no memory of her time as a hitwoman. That was why Kat was here this morning.

"I sense that something's different today," Lemmon said, pulling Kat out of her memories and back into the moment. "Are we finally going to get to the issue that

you've been dancing around since our very first session?"

Kat, as usual, was amazed by the woman's perception.

"How did you know?" she asked.

Lemmon smiled with a mix of maternal warmth and mischievousness.

"You forget who you're dealing with, Katherine," she teased. "Why don't you just dive in? It'll be easier that way."

Kat glanced down at the glass coffee table between them and caught a glimpse of her face in the mirror. She took note of the multiple facial burn marks and the long scar that ran vertically down her left cheek from just below her eye, remnants of her time as an Army Ranger in Afghanistan. She still remembered how Mitch used to lovingly trace the scar with his finger, like it was a sculpture he was admiring.

"Okay," Kat said, pushing that memory out of her mind and closing her eyes. She felt like she was about to do a trust fall. "I can't stop thinking about Ash Pierce. She should be paying rent for all the space she takes up in my brain these days."

"How so?" Lemmon asked.

"I know she wasn't responsible for Mitch's death, even though I thought so at first," Kat explained. "That was the work of Mark Haddonfield's minion. But she's responsible for so much of the bad in my life. And now, when she's finally supposed to pay for what she did, she's on the verge of evading justice."

"How is she doing that?"

"I feel like she's snowing everyone with this amnesia claim."

“What are you worried will happen if people believe her?” Lemmon asked.

“Take your pick of bad outcomes,” Kat replied. “She could lull the contingent of officers guarding her into complacency and escape. Alternately, she could be playing the long game, hoping to get sympathy from a jury at her trial for—you know—murdering at least a half dozen people that we know of.”

Kat noticed, as Lemmon clearly had too, that her voice got high and angry at that last line. Lemmon smiled gently.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course,” Kat told her.

“What if she’s telling the truth?” Lemmon wondered. “What if she really did lose her memory?”

Now it was Kat’s turn to smile.

“That’s the real reason I’m coming clean,” she admitted. “I’m not just trying to get this off my chest. I need your help.”

“What do you mean?” Lemmon asked.

“I think you know what I mean, Dr. Lemmon,” Kat said. “Other than Jessie Hunt, you are the most celebrated criminal profiler in Southern California history.”

“Garland Moses might take issue with that,” Lemmon noted, referring to Jessie’s mentor, the crusty profiler who was murdered by her psychotic ex-husband a year and a half ago.

"I mean, who's still alive," Kat said, correcting herself. "You were Jessie before Jessie. Before you retired and started your psychiatry practice, you worked with the LAPD and FBI. And I've heard that you also worked with other more secretive organizations that you're not allowed to talk about."

"What's your point, Kat?" Lemmon asked, neither confirming nor denying anything .

"I want you to meet with Ash Pierce and see if you find her amnesia claim credible. I'd ask Jessie, but she's too close to the situation. After all, Pierce tried to kill her sister and her best friend. You don't have that baggage."

"While I'm flattered," Lemmon said, "even if I thought it was a good idea. It's a non-starter. Neither the LAPD nor Pierce and her lawyers would agree to it."

"I doubt that's true," Kat countered. "I suspect the department and the D.A. would welcome your input. Even if there was resistance, you have enough contacts to circumvent opposition. And I don't think Pierce would be a problem either."

"Why not?"

Kat smiled broadly.

"Because she's trapped," she said. "Her lawyers might protest, and I suppose she could hide behind that. But she knows who you are and what kind of credibility you have. If she really has amnesia, then she has nothing to lose by talking to you. You'd actually bolster her claim. And if she's faking, she knows how suspicious it would look, like she has something to hide."

Lemmon sat quietly for a moment, pondering.

"What about my infirmities?" she finally asked. "Going into a hospital room with a

serial killer in my condition could make me very vulnerable.”

She pointed to her cane by the couch and bandage on her head. The first was to help her navigate the weakness caused by a herniated disc some months ago. The latter was the result of the attack she suffered at the hands of Mark Haddonfield’s murderous lackey. Luckily, Lemmon had her taser handy to deal with that guy or her injuries could have been worse.

“Don’t give me that,” Kat said, having none of it. “You took out that guy who came after you like it was nothing. And I bet that cane is a pretty handy weapon when you want it to be. Besides, Pierce will be guarded and handcuffed. You’re just making excuses.”

Lemmon smiled, as if amused by Kat’s evaluation of her combat skills.

“Even if I agreed to do it and there were no objections,” she mused, “there’s a bigger concern, at least for you.”

“What’s that?”

“What if I couldn’t determine if she was telling the truth, or worse, what if I found that she was. ”

Now, it was Kat's turn to sit quietly. When she responded, she voiced a certainty she wasn't sure she truly felt.

“You’re Dr. Janice Lemmon,” she said, “legendary profiler and respected psychiatrist. Whatever you determine to be true, I’ll accept.”

Lemmon shook her head slightly.

“You say that now, when you’re sure that my conclusions will validate your suspicions,” she said softly. “But I’m not sure you’d be as sanguine if your assumptions were upended.”

Kat shook her head forcefully.

“Your word is gospel, as far as I’m concerned,” she said.

"I'll think about it," Lemmon said before pulling out her legal pad and pen, as if to officially indicate a change in topics. "Now let's get back to you. I hear you've been putting clients off for weeks now. When do you plan to start taking cases again at your detective agency?"

Kat took a sip of water as she tried to focus on the question. But in reality, all she could think about was Lemmon. The woman presented herself as an older lady muddling through her twilight years. But Kat knew better.

Janice Lemmon was as competitive as anyone. That was how she’d stayed at the top of both of her professions for so long. And there was no way she’d allow herself to be bested by Ash Pierce in a one-on-one battle of mental gamesmanship.

Kat was certain that she’d accept the challenge. Lemmon was going to meet with Pierce. And then the truth would finally come out.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:38 pm

Jessie tried not to laugh at the cliché of it all.

As she and Ryan sat in the waiting room of Garrett Leach's plastic surgery office, she couldn't help but notice that everything she'd learned about the man reinforced the typical image people had about guys like him.

His practice was in Beverly Hills, on the top floor of a gleaming ten-story office tower. The entire waiting area was defined by glass and metal, with a futuristic—and, to Jessie's eyes, antiseptic—vibe.

The walls were covered with photos of what she assumed were past patients, almost all of them women. The images included full-body shots that looked like magazine photos, close-ups on faces, and in three cases, only enhanced chests, without the accompanying bodies.

From the looks of some women in the waiting room, Jessie suspected they'd visited Leach on multiple occasions. Others shifted nervously in their seats, suggesting this might be their first time here.

Upon Jessie and Ryan's arrival, the receptionist had told them they were lucky that the doctor was even here, as most of his Tuesday mornings were spent at the hospital doing procedures. But because of a conflict, he'd switched things up and would be in surgery this afternoon instead.

It was 7:45, and they'd been waiting for five minutes now. Jessie, who had decided to let their "having kids" semi-argument go for the time being, could sense Ryan's agitation in the seat beside her and knew that if they weren't called in the next sixty

seconds, he was going to get up again. Since she didn't want their interaction with Leach to start combatively, she decided to pre-empt him and got up herself.

"Be right back," she whispered to Ryan before approaching the reception window again, where the gorgeous young blonde they'd spoken to earlier offered a plastic smile.

"Hi again...Cory," she said pleasantly, looking at the nametag on the woman's top. "I believe my partner informed you that our meeting with Dr. Leach involved police business. You recall that, right?"

"I do," Cory said with a whiff of sarcasm .

"Great," Jessie said, leaning in so that she wouldn't be overheard and glancing back at Ryan. "Then you should probably know that he isn't the most patient detective on the force. Most of the time, he'd just walk straight to the back and find the person he was looking for without waiting to be called. We're getting close to that moment right now, and I know that neither of us wants a scene that might upset current or potential patients. So I highly recommend that you make the doctor available, like, immediately. Am I being clear?"

Cory, whose plastic smile had slowly turned into a nervous frown with each word Jessie said, nodded silently and picked up the phone.

"Hey, Kelly," she said quietly. "Those police people I mentioned are getting anxious. I need to you come get them and take them straight to Dr. Leach."

Jessie smiled plasticly back at Cory as the receptionist listened to Kelly's reply. After a moment, she hung up.

"That was his head nurse," she said. "She'll be right up."

Cory was right. Less than thirty seconds later, a brunette, just as beautiful as Cory, approached them in scrubs.

“Hi,” she said warmly, as if there was no battle of wills going on, “are you the folks with the city?”

Jessie admired the careful vagueness of her question.

“We are,” she said, indicating that Ryan was with her.

“Come on back,” she said, opening the door for them.

They stepped inside and Kelly led the way, moving quickly, as if she didn’t want too many people to notice their presence. At the end of the hall, she opened another door, this time to what was clearly Leach’s office.

“Please have a seat,” she said. “The doctor is just wrapping up a consultation with a potential patient. I’ll make sure he’s right in.”

“Please make it quick,” Ryan growled. “We’re tired of waiting.”

“Of course,” Kelly said before closing the door.

Jessie surveyed the office. Like the rest of the practice, it was pristine to the point of sterility. The desk had only a closed laptop and one manila folder with a pen resting on top of it. While there were no pictures on the desk, there were many on the walls, interspersed between his various degrees and certifications.

In every one, Leach stood beside someone either beautiful or famous. There were some of him next to models at events, others on the golf course with sports figures that Jessie recognized but couldn’t name, and a few from fishing trips with a couple

of well-known actors .

In every photo, Leach looked immaculate, as if he'd taken a moment before each one to check his hair and attire so that everything was in place. In addition to the photos, there were three large paintings, one on each wall, that Jessie gathered he'd picked up at auctions like last night's.

"Seems like Garrett Leach likes to be seen with pretty people," Ryan noted.

"Yep," she agreed. "He strikes me as the kind of guy who enjoys keeping up appearances. Can't imagine he liked being shown up last night."

Ryan was about to reply when the door opened, and Leach walked in. He looked just like his photos. In his mid-forties, with perfectly coiffed silver hair, bronzed skin, and zero wrinkles, he reminded Jessie of a middle-aged Ken doll.

"Let me guess why you're here," he said, closing the door without introducing himself. "It's because of Chloe, right?"

Jessie and Ryan exchanged a look that they both understood to mean: I guess we're starting this now . She shrugged, and he smiled.

"That's right, Dr. Leach," Ryan said. "We have some questions for you."

"Yeah, I heard the news when I woke up this morning," Leach said as he walked over and sat at his desk. "I figured you'd want to talk to everyone who was there at the auction last night, but you guys are getting an early start."

"We've actually been at it most of the night," Ryan said, "but we're glad to get the opportunity to clear up some things that are unresolved."

He took a seat in one of the chairs facing the desk, and Jessie took the other.

“Well, I’m happy to help,” Leach said. “I just ask that we make this as quick as possible. I’ve got eight more patients to see this morning, and I’m already behind.”

“How well did you know Chloe?” Ryan asked, not commenting on the request to make this “quick.” Jessie knew he wouldn’t be rushed.

“Moderately,” Leach said, unable to hide his disdain. “We traveled in similar circles. She actually came to see me once about a possible procedure, but ultimately went another way.”

“Were there any hard feelings?” Jessie wondered.

Not on my part,” he said. “I wished her the best, even though she didn’t ultimately make the best choice of surgeons. But that’s none of my concern. ”

“So you knew her pretty well when you were both bidding on that piece last night?” Ryan confirmed.

“Yes, we regularly crossed paths in that world,” he said, nodding at the paintings on the walls. “As you can see, I’m a connoisseur.”

He seemed to be waiting for them to congratulate him on his taste, but Jessie had other ideas. It was time to make this guy a little uncomfortable.

“And she outbid you on the piece you wanted,” she noted, allowing a sharpness into her tone that flirted with taunting.

“That’s right,” he acknowledged, his voice suddenly tight.

“That must have been frustrating,” she continued blandly, as if she didn’t know that she was stirring the pot.

“Why do you say that?” he asked, clearly trying not to sound irritated.

“Well, we checked your finances on the way over here,” she told him. “You make a really good living. Ninety-five percent of the population would envy you. But it’s not really in Chloe Baptiste’s universe, is it? I mean, you’re not one of those ultra-high-net-worth people like her.”

“What’s your point?”

“I guess I’m just wondering if it got frustrating to know that if she showed up at an auction, you’d never be able to outbid her on a piece that she cared about.”

She watched him quietly seethe and imagined what a man like that would do if he was angry and had access to a sharp knife.

“I never thought about it that way,” he insisted. “Tastes differ. We didn’t always bid on the same pieces.”

Jessie smiled politely, as if that answer was satisfactory. Then she went in for the kill.

“But you really wanted that piece last night, didn’t you?”

Leach stared at her for several seconds without replying. When he finally did, his tone was guarded.

“I feel like I’m being interrogated here. Am I a suspect in Chloe’s murder?”

“We’re just being thorough, Dr. Leach,” Ryan said dismissively, as if the man was

being dramatic to even ask the question. “Didn’t you think we’d pursue all angles with everyone at the auction last night? But as long as you bring it up, maybe you can tell us where you were last night right after auction ended at 9 p.m. We didn’t see you leave on the gallery’s surveillance video. ”

Leach's eyes narrowed, and for a moment, Jessie thought he might be about to ask for a lawyer. But then he broke into a grin that was made creepy by the lack of laugh lines on his face.

“I did leave, but I could understand why you might have missed it,” he explained. “You see, I left the event about fifteen minutes early with a female friend I met there. We really hit it off. In fact, she was being playful and put her giant derby hat on my head. I was still wearing it when we left. Just look on your video for the older guy in the navy suit and ridiculous hat walking out with the girl much too young for him. That’s me.”

Jessie did vaguely recall a couple matching that description leaving but hadn’t made the possible connection.

“So this young woman can vouch for your location after you left?” Ryan pressed.

“Yes, our location was initially my car, and when that location proved insufficient for our needs, we went to my house. Her name is Tiffany something. I have it in my phone. Just give me a minute.”

As he scrolled through his contacts, Jessie looked over at Ryan. He was clearly thinking the same thing as her. Though they couldn’t be sure yet, it was looking like Leach wasn’t their guy. That meant the murderer was still out there.

The thought gave Jessie a sudden pit in her stomach. Then she got a text from Captain Parker. Reading it, the pit only got deeper.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:38 pm

Hannah Dorsey walked out of her Intro to Inductive Logic class and headed to her meeting.

She was moving briskly, partly to fight off the chill in the mid-January air, but also because her meeting was at 10:15 at a coffeehouse across campus.

It was 10:05 and she had a half hour before her next class, Art in Context: History, Theory and Practice, started. The winter quarter at UC Irvine had only started a week ago and she already felt the pressure. Her current classes were more challenging than in the fall, to the point that she wondered if what she planned to do next was even a good idea.

She was already juggling so much. It was enough for most people to just navigate freshman year at a top school like UCI. But Hannah had bitten off a lot more than just that. She was also steering her way through a flirtation with Finn Anderton, a fellow freshman that she'd initially despised before her feelings had changed. Finn, a fraternity member, had been a suspect when Hannah's friend—and now roommate—Lizzie Dempsey, was being anonymously harassed. When Hannah eventually uncovered the culprit, it turned out not to be Finn and their initial animosity had morphed into...well, she wasn't sure quite what.

But that was the least of her challenges. Much of her winter break had been spent caring for Kat Gentry, the best friend of her older sister, Jessie. Kat's fiancé was recently murdered, and Hannah had decided to stay at Kat's apartment to help her through those first, difficult weeks afterward.

She didn't mind the task. After all, she and Kat had become friends too. Last summer,

Kat had invited her to be an intern of sorts at her detective agency. The two of them spent many hours in Kat's car, surveilling people while eating crappy food and talking about everything and nothing. They'd gotten close.

So it seemed like a no-brainer to help out. She was out of school for several weeks. Jessie couldn't crash with Kat because of her case load. So Hannah had stepped in. And it appeared to help. Even though Kat hadn't yet resumed case work at her detective agency, she was talking more openly and getting out more often. She'd even confided to Hannah about her obsession with Ash Pierce. And at Hannah's urging, she was going to tell Dr. Lemmon about it too.

But there was another reason Hannah had offered to help Kat, a less altruistic one. It was the same reason she was dashing across the quad right now. Hannah had an itch, and unless she got to gently massage it on occasion, it would end up throbbing to the point that she'd scratch it bloody.

The itch was her never-ending desire for vengeance, something she'd come to view as a kind of bloodlust. She suspected she'd inherited it from the serial killer father she shared with her sister. She knew that Jessie, who had admitted to similar feelings, had found a way to control them. She had turned her ferociousness into something constructive: profiling the people who harmed others and bringing them to justice.

That was harder for Hannah, who didn't have a professional outlet for her urges. In one instance, her desire to punish wrongdoers had led her to shoot a man dead. Admittedly he was serial killer intent on harming her, Jessie, and Ryan. But he was also elderly and handcuffed at the time she'd killed him. Despite that, the act had given her thrill. And afterward, Hannah found that the incident awakened a desire to recreate that feeling. The fact that the shooting was declared self-defense by authorities only made her more brazen.

When she eventually confessed her dark desires to both Jessie and Dr. Lemmon,

they'd convinced her to admit herself to a facility where she could work on curbing those yearnings. They officially admitted her to deal with "anger management issues," but the three of them knew why she was really there.

It had worked, at least in one major way. Hannah learned that to keep her demons at bay, she had to do what Jessie did, find a productive outlet for her need to punish the guilty.

She'd found it in some measure by continuing to do for others what she'd done for Lizzie. Word had spread among students that if someone needed help with a problem that they didn't want to take to the school administration or the campus police, Hannah Dorsey might be able to help.

That was why she was hurrying to the Student Center's Starbucks right now. She had agreed to meet with Clayton Callum, a sophomore from her Exploratory Data Analysis class. He'd mentioned that he'd heard about what she'd done for Lizzie, and for another student and basketball player named Reggie Calderone who was wrongfully accused of cheating. He was hoping she could help him out too but said he was embarrassed to explain his issue. Intrigued, she agreed to meet him for coffee and see if she could help.

When she walked into the Student Center, it was 10:12. She was three minutes early, but Clayton was already there, sitting at a table in the corner. Hannah caught his eye, waved, then ordered a drink. Once it was in hand, she joined him.

He stood up to greet her and she took him in more closely than she'd done before. Clayton had longish black hair that hung down in his blue eyes. He wore gray cargo pants and a striped rugby shirt that hung off his wiry frame. Hannah, at five foot nine, was about an inch taller than him.

Even though she felt no need to impress the guy, she gave herself a half-glance in the

glass window of the place to make sure she was presentable. She was wearing blue jeans and a thick navy sweater to fight off the mid-morning cold. It hid her once-painfully-skinny-but-lately-proudly-athletic build. Her blonde hair was tied back in a loose ponytail and her green eyes, the same shade as her sister's, were well-rested, something she didn't expect to last long now that school was back in full swing.

Satisfied that she looked like a credible amateur campus sleuth, she walked over to him and took the open chair.

"Thanks for meeting me," Clayton said, leaning in as if they were spies rather than students.

"Sure," she replied. "I'm happy to hear what's going on, but you should know my workload this quarter is pretty heavy, so I'm not sure I'll be able to help you out."

"I understand," Clayton said. "I appreciate you taking the time."

"So what's going on?"

"Okay," he said, his voice dropping to an unnecessary whisper in the crowded coffeehouse where no one was paying any attention to them, "there's this girl in two of my classes. We're both business administration majors. Her name is Dana Douglas. Do you know her?"

"I don't think so," Hannah said.

"Okay, anyway, she was in one of my classes last fall too," he said. "She seemed nice enough, although we didn't really talk that much. But because of our last names—Callum and Douglas—we were seated next to each other in Principles of Accounting this quarter. She's been especially chatty since then. It was a little annoying because sometimes I couldn't hear the professor, but I didn't think much of

it until last Friday.”

“What happened then?”

“A series of things all in a row that I didn’t even notice at first. One thing was that there’s this group project in Intro to Marketing. We were put into groups of three. Dana wasn’t in mine at first. This other girl named Bridget was in it, but she got sick, like so sick with food poisoning that she had to go to the hospital, so Dana took her place in our group. No big deal, right?”

Hannah shrugged. He didn’t seem to be really asking for her opinion. Sure enough, he continued without waiting for a response.

“But then I was returning to my apartment that same day—I live in an on-campus one with three other guys—and I saw her darting down the stairs just as the elevator door opened to my floor. When I got to my door, I found this had been slid under it.”

He handed over an open envelope. Inside was a black and white photo printed out on computer paper. It was of him sitting in a study nook in what looked like the main library on campus, Langson, hunched over his laptop. Typed below the photo in all caps was one word: HOT!!!

“So you think this girl has a crush on you?” Hannah asked, handing back the envelope.

“If I thought it was only that, it wouldn’t be a big deal,” Clayton said. “I’d just politely tell her I’m not interested and move on. But I’m a little worried.”

“Why?” Hannah asked.

“Well, for one thing, I heard from a guy I know that she got fixated on someone else

last year. Supposedly, it got so bad that he ended up transferring at the end of the year."

"Hold on," Hannah said. "This person didn't go to the administration to complain. He just up and left school?"

"The guy I know said that this other dude decided it wasn't worth it to go through the hassle. He just wanted to get clear of her."

"What was this dude's name?" Hannah asked, realizing that her disbelief was starting to bleed into her tone. She had to rein that in.

"I don't know," Clayton said. "It didn't occur to me to ask, but I can go back to the guy I know and try to find out."

"That would be great," Hannah said, more supportively. "Is there anything else that has you concerned? "

"Well, there's what happened to Bridget. What if that food poisoning thing wasn't an accident? What if Dana did something to her so that she could be in our group?"

Hannah tried to hide her skepticism better than earlier as she asked her next question.

"Has she behaved oddly in your group meetings?"

"No, but we've only had one so far and there was another guy from class there for it, Van," Clayton said. "We have another one scheduled for tonight in a study room at Langson but Van texted us that he had a wedding in Connecticut this weekend and his flight was delayed. He won't be back until after midnight. I was going to postpone the group meeting but before I could, Dana texted that we should go ahead with it anyway, so we don't fall behind. I was going to make up some excuse, but then I

thought that it might be a good chance for you to see things for yourself."

"What do you mean?"

"I thought if you were nearby during the meeting, maybe you could listen in on our conversation," he suggested. "I could try to get her to come clean and see if she'd admit to this stuff."

"Then why do you need me there?" Hannah asked. "Why not just record her yourself?"

"Is that allowed?" He said. "I thought it might be illegal."

"In general it is, since California is a 'two-party consent' state when it comes to recording conversations," Hannah conceded, referring to what she'd learned from Kat during their multiple surveillance outings, "but there are exceptions. If you're recording to gain evidence related to certain crimes or if you believe your personal safety is at risk, that can sometimes pass muster."

"That's good to know," Claton said, "but all the same, I'd feel more comfortable if you were there. What if I call her out and she threatens me, turns the tables and accuses me of stalking her or something? If I don't have a witness, it's just a 'he said, she said,' situation. I worry what she might be capable of."

"You know Clayton, if you're this concerned maybe you should just go straight to campus police and ask for their help. Then if something escalates, you at least have a record to build on."

"Listen," he said, leaning in extra close. "I'll do that if you say I should. But the whole reason I came to you first was because I was hoping to avoid the embarrassment."

“What do you mean? ”

“Come on,” he said, his tone pleading, “I know it’s not very modern of me to so say this, but it would look pretty lame for me to go the campus cops saying some petite co-ed has me scared. They’d laugh me out of there. I thought you were the option for people who didn’t want to go through official channels. Plus, there’s the other part.”

“What’s that?”

“It could be embarrassing for her too,” he whispered. “If this is legit, I didn’t want to ruin the girl’s life. I just want this to stop before it turns into full-on stalking. I thought you might have a softer touch than the cops. I don’t need you to confront her and demand answers. I was hoping we could sort this out this without anyone official needing to be involved, you know?”

Hannah looked at her phone. It was already 10:21. She needed to leave now so as not to be late to her next class. She sighed.

“I’ll look into it,” she told him as she stood up, “see what I can find out. Then I’ll get back to you.”

“You don’t want to do the library study room thing?” he asked, surprised.

“Like you said, I don’t want to ambush her if it can be avoided,” she said, throwing her backpack over her shoulder. “We can consider that option down the line. I’ll be in touch.”

“Okay,” he standing up and offering a weirdly awkward half-bow maneuver, “thanks for this.”

“I haven’t done anything yet,” she replied, “but you’re welcome.”

She turned and headed off to class. Her first instinct was to think that Clayton Callum was paranoid. But as she had learned the hard way, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean someone's not after you.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:38 pm

Isabella Moreno wasn't used to being this nervous.

As a world-famous fashion model who started her career at sixteen, she had become accustomed to people gawking at her. But this was different.

After a decade in the industry, she was launching her own fashion line for the first time. As she left Monica, Monica!, the Beverly Grove boutique belonging to her fashion designer friend, Monica Bertoni, she finally allowed herself to breathe.

She looked at the time. It was 11:17. She thought that her fifteen-minute pitch to Monica had gone well. She took the elevator down to the parking level and used the alone time to allow her body to recalibrate.

Monica had invited her to come pitch her line as a practice run for going to the bigger designers, one of whom might agree to partner with her. She'd envisioned something like "Isabella by Dior" or "Isabella + Versace."

Of course, she didn't really need their help to make her dream a reality. Her father, Carlo Moreno, was the chairman of Moreno Venture Capital, or MVC, which was valued, at least according to CNBC, at between \$3-3.5 billion. His personal wealth was estimated at half that. Isabella had access to about \$250 million of it without having to get Daddy's authorization, not to mention another \$18 million she'd earned all on her own through modeling and endorsements.

So she could make this fashion line happen on her own. But the endeavor would be more credible, and generate more buzz, if she could partner with a respected design house.

As she studied her image in the elevator mirror, loosening her silk top so that her curves weren't so prominent when she got out to walk to her car, she acknowledged to herself that she had choices. She had an offer on the table from One Nite Only, the lingerie company that had exploded after she started modeling for them five years ago, when she turned twenty-one.

But as lucrative as that deal was for her, she wanted the imprimatur of one of the big names for this line. She hadn't graduated from Parsons while modeling to end up being called a joke or a nepo baby. She'd worked hard to establish her credibility outside of her looks or Daddy's influence. Though she loved him dearly, she wanted something that she could call her own. She deserved this moment. But she had to play it just right.

The elevator dinged and the door opened. She was just stepping forward to get out when someone leapt in from out of nowhere and slammed her back into the corner. They were dressed all in black and wearing a ski mask.

Isabella's right hip slammed into the metal railing of the elevator. Despite the pain and the fear, Isabella tried to remain calm. This wasn't the first time she'd been mugged. It had happened twice in New York.

"I don't have any cash," she said, keeping her voice even, aware that panic would only escalate the situation.

"I'm not interested in money," the person said, their voice muffled somewhat by the mask, which covered their mouth.

Then, before Isabella could fully process it, the mugger pulled out a long, serrated hunting knife. It was only then that she realized the person was wearing gloves too. Everything became clear at once. This wasn't a mugging or even a rape attempt. Her attacker was prepared. Their face was hidden, and their hands were covered. This was

planned.

Isabella tried to reposition herself in the pose that she'd learned from the self-defense expert her father had hired for her back when he worried regularly that she might be kidnapped for ransom. But before her fists were even up in front of her, the knife flashed before her eyes.

She knew it must have gotten her neck, because she saw her own blood spurting wildly against the elevator door and ceiling. She watched a second knife swing come at her, but it missed, mostly because she had lost strength in her legs and collapsed to the ground. She felt terror start to take hold and tried to scream, but it only came out as a gurgle.

She lifted her hands to cover the spot where the blood was shooting out, but as she did, she caught a glimpse of the knife coming down in the direction of her chest. The last fully formed thought she had before they would stop forever was a surprise to her.

I want my daddy.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:38 pm

“Remember not to let her get to you,” Jessie warned as she and Ryan made their way to Captain Gaylene Parker’s Central Station office.

“I won’t,” Ryan promised unconvincingly.

"You know she has to be as frustrated as we are," Jessie continued, "and will probably make unreasonable demands because of the pressure she's under. Just let her say her piece, and then we'll get back to work."

"I know, Jessie," he said, sounding irritated already, which wasn’t a great sign. “I’ve been through this before.”

She dropped it, not mentioning that the reason she was prepping him was because it hadn’t gone so well the last time they were in this situation. She didn’t anticipate that this would go much better.

Garrett Leach, their only suspect in the Chloe Baptiste murder, had turned out to be a dead end. His young friend, Tiffany, had enthusiastically and descriptively vouched for his whereabouts the night before. And with GPS data to back it up, he was off the hook.

That meant they were back to being suspect-less over twelve hours into the investigation. It was 11:45 a.m., they had been up much of the night, and even after stopping in to see Jamil and Beth in Research, they still only had a bunch of disconnected names to follow up on, none of whom had a clear motive to harm Chloe.

There were disgruntled employees at her mansion, but even the ones who were vocal about it had been well-compensated for their mistreatment at Chloe's hands. And none of those employees had worked for her for over two years. This crime felt more immediate. They found several artists and gallery owners who felt undercut by Baptiste. But all of her "victims" were wealthy in their own right. No one's career had been derailed.

In the worst case that Jamil could locate, one gallery owner who'd been blackballed by Chloe Baptiste had lost \$3 million in sales, dropping his income for that year to \$27.2 million. Apparently that kept him just below the unofficial \$30 million threshold for UHNW individuals, but at that level of wealth who was counting? Besides, the guy lived in Chicago .

They stopped in front of Captain Parker's office, where her administrative aide, Officer Shaniqua George sat at a small desk.

"I'll let the Captain know you're here," Officer George said. "Why don't you take a seat?"

She nodded at the two folding chairs against the wall of Parker's office. Jessie felt Ryan stiffen next to her, and she knew why. As they sat down, she took his hand in hers and squeezed.

Ryan was clearly thinking back his own time as captain of Central Station and how differently he operated as its leader. He didn't have any administrative aides and most of the time, his office had an open door policy.

But he wasn't in a position to complain about the change. After all, as Jessie made sure not to remind him in moments like this, he'd resigned as captain three months ago. His reasons were myriad, including despising the administrative part of the gig. He hated the paperwork and the constant meetings. But that wasn't all of it.

He also missed being in the field, leading Homicide Special Section, the unit he'd created and led for years. Finally, he'd found—they'd both found—that being Jessie's boss and her husband, was untenable. Yes, he was still the lead detective for HSS, of which she was a member, but that wasn't the same as running an entire station, often having to keep the person he was closest to in the dark about goings-on. Neither of them were great at maintaining the personal and professional boundaries required to make the whole thing work.

He'd only ever taken the captain job in the first place to help out Roy Decker, who had himself been promoted from captain of Central Station to the chief of LAPD in the wake of a scandal. Chief Decker had beseeched Ryan to take over at Central, saying that he needed people he could trust until was more entrenched as chief.

Ryan, to his credit in Jessie's opinion, had waited until his distaste for being captain was finally matched by his confidence that Decker was on solid footing. Only then did he step down, even recommending Parker for the job. She had run Vice at Central, and Ryan had always admired her no-nonsense approach.

Parker's impressive resume was well-known. A forty-four-year old mother of two, she had worked her way up from street officer to an undercover detective with the Vice unit, where she often posed as a prostitute. Eventually she was promoted to head up the unit, which she led for four years before becoming captain at Central. But what neither Jessie nor Ryan knew until they were under her command was that her blunt style also had a component of micro-management that was, to put it mildly, grating.

Jessie had hoped that Parker's supervisory intensity would dissipate once she got more comfortable in the job, but so far that hadn't happened. That created constant tension with those who were used to a more relaxed person in charge. Ryan chafed against it most intensely, but Jessie wasn't immune. And she knew that at least some of the other members of HSS felt similarly.

“You can go in now,” Officer George said, snapping Jessie out of her thoughts.

They stepped into the office, which had undergone a complete, and to Jessie's eye, welcome redesign. The walls, which had until recently been covered in forty-year-old peeling wallpaper, had been re-painted. The hard-backed metal chairs for visitors had been replaced with cushioned ones, and the ratty couch along the back wall was gone in favor of a new, plush replacement. Jessie continued to hope that eventually Parker would settle into being captain—as nicely as the physical office had adjusted to the change—and cut them some slack. But the second the captain spoke, Jessie knew that day wouldn't be today.

“I checked in with your Research team while you two were out and about,” she said, motioning for them to take seats across from her desk. “Unless something has changed in the last ten minutes, I assume we're still treading water in the Chloe Baptiste case?”

“For the most part, yes,” Ryan conceded, keeping any annoyance he felt out of his voice for now. “We're still checking into the finances of Baptiste's husband, Laurent. They're complicated, but we haven't eliminated the possibility that he hired someone to take his wife out. Still, at this point, I'd call that a longshot.”

Jessie jumped in to put a more positive spin on the situation.

“We asked Jamil to play out that string, just in case,” she said. “But if he doesn't find a smoking gun in the next few hours, we'll have him switch over to Chloe's personal finances. She has a few accounts independent of his, but they're hard to access.”

“Why can't Ryerson do that?” Parker asked.

“In theory, she could,” Jessie agreed, “although Jamil usually handles the financial deep dives. That's one of his gifts. Besides, Beth is still tracking possible personal

connections with Chloe that might pop as being acrimonious. It's all moot for now anyway. We're waiting on a court order to access her accounts since not even Laurent can grant that to us."

Parker sighed as she leaned back in her chair. Jessie sensed what was coming and dreaded it.

"I know you don't want to hear this," the captain said, her own voice rough with exhaustion and frustration, "but the pressure from on high is building. Our old captain and current police chief is really feeling the heat from the media. It used to be his job to protect you from that scrutiny, and I guess that, at least in theory, that's my job now."

"Thanks, Captain," Ryan said even though he knew as well as Jessie that Parker wasn't done.

"But," Parker continued, undeterred, "I don't really see the point of that mindset. You're already well aware that this is a huge story locally, and maybe beyond. I'm not going to pretend that any of us are shielded from that knowledge. It's my belief that we're all better off when we steer into the skid rather than try to avoid it."

"So what's the skid?" Ryan asked, an undesirable edge in his voice.

"The skid is Chief Decker," she answered, unfazed by his tone. "I got my second call from him this morning just fifteen minutes ago. I had to tell him we didn't have anything new. He asked what you guys were pursuing. I said I'd check in with you and get back to him ASAP, as in, steer into the skid. He seems to think you're miracle workers. So tell me, do you see any miracles on the horizon?"

As she processed the question, Jessie felt her own frustration and fatigue getting the best of her. She could see that Ryan felt the same way. He looked like his next

remark might cross the line from edgy to insubordinate.

She wanted to stop him but simultaneously felt herself itching to react the same way. She knew HSS's mission was often to manage the highest profile cases involving the best known and wealthiest people in Los Angeles.

But in this moment, she couldn't overcome her anger that the richest, most famous denizens of this town got so much attention at the expense of the downtrodden, those without loved ones, or just everyday, middle-class folks. She'd signed on for this gig, but occasionally she hated it.

Maybe that was because she'd experienced this sort of thing personally. She thought back to her mother, Madeline Thurman, who was murdered by her father right in front of her when she was just six years old. The story had gotten some tabloid attention when it was revealed that Jessie was left alone with her mother's body, tied up in an isolated, snowy Ozark Mountains cabin for three days until hunters happened to find her.

But then interest waned, at least until it was revealed that Jessie's father, Xander Thurman, was the notorious serial killer known as the Ozarks Executioner. Even then, it was his name that lingered in the public consciousness. No one, save for Jessie, remembered Maddie Thurman.

She felt an angry response to the question about forthcoming miracles rising in her throat and feared she could no longer shut it down. She opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, the intercom buzzed.

"Captain," Officer George said, "I'm sorry to bother you but you have a call."

"I'm in a meeting, Shaniqua," Parker said, irritated.

“You’re going to want to take this,” George said ominously.

The captain picked up the phone immediately.

“This is Parker,” she said gruffly.

She listened silently for several seconds. Jessie watched as her expression quickly morphed from exasperated to horrified to resigned.

“I see,” she said. “We’re on it.”

She hung up and looked at them across the desk. Jessie knew what was coming before a word was spoken.

“There’s been another murder,” she said. “This time in Beverly Grove. They think it’s connected to Baptiste.”

“How can they be sure?” Ryan asked.

“The victim is a famous model named Isabella Moreno, but that’s not all,” Parker explained. “She was stabbed in a public elevator with a hunting knife—they think at least a dozen times.”

Jessie had started to stand up even before Parker finished the sentence. Ryan was getting up too.

“Text us the address,” he said.

Jessie didn’t know what Parker said in response. She had already rushed out of the office by then.

Jessie wasn't prepared for what she found.

She'd been to well over a hundred murder scenes in her short career, but few were this brutal. Perhaps she was lulled into a sense of complacency by the surroundings. The crime had taken place in a small shopping complex called Beverly Gardens in the chichi Beverly Grove neighborhood of L.A., adjacent to Beverly Hills. The sign next to the parking garage entrance listed the businesses on the premises, which included a high-end spa, a handcrafted furniture store, an artisanal cheese and wine shop, and a fashion boutique.

Once they parked and walked toward the elevator, the crime scene folks stepped aside so that Jessie and Ryan could take it in. What they saw was grotesque. Arterial blood spray extended a good ten feet outside of the elevator onto the parking lot's concrete surface.

Jessie put booties on over her shoes before entering, making sure not to look at the body until she'd had a chance to take in the rest of the elevator. The place looked like a nightmarish version of a Jackson Pollock painting, with red splatter everywhere. The only spots that weren't covered were the back wall behind the victim and a small section of the floor, where she suspected the attacker had been standing.

Taking deep breaths that filled her nose with an unpleasant rusty scent, Jessie finally looked at the victim. Beth had already given them a biographical rundown on the woman on their way over, along with pictures of the gorgeous young blonde. None of what they'd heard or seen compared with what Jessie saw before her.

Isabella Moreno was an extremely well-known model, equally famous for her runway

and fashion shoots as for her lingerie work, including several massively successful calendars. But the person slumped on her back in the corner of the elevator was unrecognizable. She'd been stabbed at least three times in the chest. Her neck had two major slices, one so deep that her head bobbed back, dangerously close to decapitation. Even worse than that, if possible, the attacker had gone at her face with the knife so many times that she barely looked human anymore .

Jessie closed her eyes, counted to five so as to not look spooked, and then stepped out of the elevator and walked several paces away. Ryan followed close behind.

"Are you okay?" he whispered, resting his hand on her shoulder.

"No, I'm not," she admitted. "I've seen some truly terrible things. You know that. But this is the worst in a long while. We're obviously dealing with a serial killer now, but whoever did this wasn't just thrill-seeking. There's a level of hate here that I thought I'd grown numb to. I guess I was wrong. This poor girl."

"We can have the M.E. and CSU send us their reports," Ryan said quietly. "There's no reason to go back in there."

"Okay," Jessie agreed without any argument. "You saw the section of floor that was unbloodied, right? We're assuming that's where the attacker stood, I gather?"

"That's a safe assumption," someone said from behind them.

They turned around to find a small man in his mid-thirties with a dark, tightly shorn hair and a fastidiously trimmed mustache. He saw that he'd startled them.

"Sorry to interject," he said. "I'm Bryan Kolek, deputy medical examiner. I know we've never worked together before, so I wanted to introduce myself."

“Good to meet you,” Ryan said, shaking his hand. “What can you tell us so far?”

“Nothing you probably didn’t already figure out for yourself,” he conceded. “The cause of death isn’t official yet, but I count at least fourteen separate stab wounds. And you won’t need me to do a full work-up to get the time of death.”

“Why is that?” Jessie asked, her voice shakier than she would have liked.

“I can take that one,” said a uniformed officer behind Kolek. When he stepped to the side, Jessie recognized him as Sergeant Robert Frank, whom they’d worked with before. The man was in his late forties. His belly was fighting his belt and what little hair he had left was more gray than brown. “Sorry to see you both again under these circumstances.”

"That's how it always seems to happen," Ryan noted. "What were you saying about the time of death?"

“Right,” Sergeant Frank said. “We’ve locked it down already. The building manager showed us the video from the elevator camera. The timestamp has the attack occurring at exactly 11:17 this morning.”

Jessie looked at her phone. It was 12:05 now. Isabella Moreno had been dead for less than an hour.

“We also did some preliminary interviews in the complex,” Frank continued. “We found out why Moreno was here. She was meeting with Monica Bertoni, who owns a clothing boutique on the second floor. Apparently, they were friends. Bertoni said that Moreno left at about 11:15.”

“Is she available to talk right now?” Jessie asked.

“Yes,” Sergeant Frank said. “We have an officer with her in the back of the ambulance out front in the main lot. She sent her employees home and closed up for the day, but we figured you’d want to speak with her.”

“Can you take us to her?” Ryan asked.

“Of course,” Frank said before adding unnecessarily, “let’s take the stairs.”

“Is she okay?” Jessie asked as they made their way up to the first floor.

“I think so,” Frank answered. “She was pretty shaken up and got quite distraught when I started asking questions, so the EMTs took her to the ambulance. They gave her some oxygen because she was hyperventilating. She was calmer when I left.”

They reached the top of the stairs and headed over to the back of the ambulance. Sergeant Frank knocked on the door and a young, muscular EMT with longish blond who looked more like a surfer than a medical professional opened it.

“Hey Jaz,” Sergeant Frank said, before looking over at the young woman, who was lying on the stretcher, “I have some investigators who’d like to talk to Ms. Bertoni.”

“Are you up for that?” Jaz asked the woman, as if he could stop them if he wanted.

She nodded and, with his help, slowly eased herself up to a seated position. Jessie studied the woman. Monica Bertoni had dark pixie-cut hair and sharp angular features. Her brown eyes were puffy from crying and her skin had a paleness that Jessie suspected wasn’t typical for her most of the time. She looked to be in her early thirties.

“Hi Monica,” she said, “is it okay if I call you Monica?”

The woman nodded weakly.

“Thanks,” Jessie said, climbing into the ambulance and kneeling by the stretcher.

“My name is Jessie, and this is Detective Hernandez.”

“I recognize you,” Monica said hoarsely. “That’s why I’m okay to talk. You’re Jessie Hunt, the one who caught all those killers.”

“With a lot of help,” Jessie said, moving quickly past her celebrity status, “and we want to do the same for Isabella—catch her killer. Can you tell us why she was here seeing you?”

“Yeah,” Monica said, “she was hoping to move beyond modeling by starting her own fashion line. She asked if she could practice pitch me on her presentation to the major designers that she was hoping to generate interest from.”

“How did it go?” Jessie asked, trying to ease the woman into the questioning.

“Pretty well,” Monica said, offering a wan smile at the memory. “She was nervous at first but got better. She left the clothes here, and we agreed that she’d run through the whole thing again on Thursday. We were going to tape that go-round to pick it apart. She really wanted it to be perfect. She thought that this could be her way to transition out of modeling altogether.”

“She didn’t like it?” Ryan asked.

“I think she’d outgrown it,” Monica said. “Izzie was really smart, got a BFA in Fashion Design from the Parsons School. But nobody took her seriously, partly because she’s super-hot, and also because of her father being so rich. I mean, she had so much money that she could have just hung out on her yacht and popped bon-bons all day, but she was really ambitious. She wanted to make her mark.”

That description of her wealth matched what Beth had told them on the drive over. Apparently her father was worth billions, and she had a couple of hundred million to her name as well. That would plant her squarely in the same ultra-high-net-worth community as Chloe Baptiste. Jessie couldn't help but wonder if there was a connection there that might be relevant. Then again, maybe it wasn't as complicated as that label. In basic terms, these were both super-rich, well-known women. That might be the link all by itself.

"Did she travel in those circles a lot?" she wondered, "you know, the crazy rich, yacht-loving, bon-bon eating crowd?"

Monica shrugged.

"Sure," she said, "some of the time. But not always. I may have my own boutique and fashion line, but I'm certainly not swimming in that pool, and we were pretty tight. Weirdly, I don't think she cared about money that much. I guess that can happen when you have so much of it. But she would cut people loose if they were too materialistic. I mean, that's what she did with Marcus."

"Who's Marcus?" Ryan asked.

"Marcus Blackwell," Monica said. "He's her ex."

Jessie recognized the name immediately. Marcus Blackwell was a self-made tech billionaire who had moved to L.A. from the Bay Area a couple of years ago. But he wasn't just known for owning the mega-company called BEING, whose holdings included multiple hugely popular websites and social media platforms. He was also notorious for his anger management issues, having assaulted a waiter after a few too many drinks at a restaurant and for ramming his Ferrari into the car of an actor who had once called him a scourge on society.

“So ending things was her decision?” Jessie asked.

“Yeah, she dumped him hard,” Monica recalled. “She told me that he looked stunned. No one had talked to him in that way in forever.”

“What exactly did she say?” Ryan asked, as if he was simply interested in the gossip and not fishing for a motive for murder.

“She told him that it wasn’t the fact that he was twice her age that put her off. It was that he judged people like property, assessing their value based on their looks or their income. She told him he was the most shallow man she’d ever met, and considering who she knew, that was saying a lot.”

“Wow,” Jessie said. “How did he take that?”

“Not well,” Monica told her. “Izzie said that he started throwing stuff. He smashed a glass window in his penthouse condo with some ancient sculpture from the Middle East or something. She said she high-tailed it out of there because she was so scared—oh my god, you don’t think this was him, do you?”

“We have to follow every lead,” Ryan said, before making sure to add, “but there’s a big difference between getting angry and throwing some stuff and committing murder. Best not to jump to conclusions.”

“Just for the record,” Jessie asked casually, “when did Isabella break up with him?”

“About a week ago, I think” she said. “It hasn’t hit the tabloids yet, but Izzie was worried that once it did, that would hurt her chances with these designers.”

"Thanks so much, Monica," Jessie said, squeezing the woman's hand. "You've been really helpful. Now, you should let Jaz take you to get checked out. I just have one

request.”

“Anything,” Monica said, her eyes welling up .

“Please don’t share what you’ve told us with anyone else until we give you the all clear. When it comes to investigations like this, the element of surprise can be very helpful. We don’t need any potential suspects getting a heads up that we’re coming.”

“I understand,” Monica said.

“Just as I’m sure Jaz does,” Ryan said, casting a wary eye at the EMT.

“My lips are sealed, man,” the guy said, brushing his long locks out of his eyes. “After hearing all this crap, I don’t want any part of that world.”

“Good man, Jaz,” Ryan said, patting him on the back before helping Jessie out of the ambulance.

Once the doors closed, he turned to Jessie.

“I assume we’re thinking the same thing,” he said.

“Yep, time to pay Marcus Blackwell a visit.”

“It’s not going to be easy to get in to see a guy like that right away,” Ryan warned.

“We’ll cross that bridge once we find him,” she replied. “Remember, whoever did this is probably taking a Silkwood shower right now to get all of Isabella Moreno’s blood off them. I don’t intend to give them any extra time. So let’s find this guy. And if he puts up a fuss when we do, there’ll be hell to pay.”

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Jessie learned quickly that Ryan was right.

While finding Marcus Blackwell wasn't a challenge, getting to him would be. Jamil had quickly determined that Blackwell was at his Century City office by checking street cameras nearby, one of which showed his red Ferrari pulling into the garage ten minutes earlier, at 12:41.

"Let's do the math," Ryan said as he sped to the location. "If he did commit this murder, he would have left the Beverly Gardens shopping complex parking garage right after the incident at 11:17. I doubt he drove his \$500,000 Ferrari SF90 Stradale to and from the scene. It's so recognizable that it would essentially be an admission of guilt. So let's say he drives another car to one of his...how many homes does he have in the city, Jamil?"

"According to his property records, three," answered the researcher, who was on speaker. "He's got a condo that takes up the top floor of a residential tower in West Hollywood."

"I assume that's where the sculpture-throwing excitement occurred," Jessie noted. "Sorry, go on, Jamil."

"He's also got a beach house in Malibu and a mansion in Beverly Hills," Jamil continued. "If he did this, I'd put my money on him going to that last one to change. It's only a five minute drive from the murder scene."

"And from there to his office in Century City?" Ryan asked.

“At this time of day, it looks like it’s about fifteen minutes,” Jamil answered.

“So,” Ryan calculated, “he leaves the parking garage and gets home by 11:25 at the latest. He arrives at work at 12:41 after a fifteen-minute drive. That means leaving the mansion around 12:26. So he had essentially a full hour to clean himself up and deal with the car. That’s feels like enough time to me.”

“Maybe,” Jessie said, less certain. “I could see him removing any evidence from his body in that time, but the car might be harder to clean. If we can find out what he was driving, maybe we can get a warrant to search it. ”

“Beth and I will work on that,” Jamil said.

“Great,” Ryan replied, “but before you do that, can you give us a rundown on Blackwell? I know of the guy, but I’ve never read his resume. And maybe you can give us the abridged version because we’re almost to his office.”

Jessie looked up to see the two giant, triangular towers that comprised the Century Plaza Towers. They would be at their base in less than a minute.

“Sure,” Beth volunteered. “Marcus Blackwell, fifty-three years old. Chairman, CEO, and founder of Blackwell Enterprises International Group, or BEING. Estimated net worth is \$144 billion.”

“Jeez,” Jessie couldn’t help but mutter under her breath.

“Everyone knows the guy as this self-made billionaire, which is kind of true,” Beth continued, “but his competitors might take issue with that.”

“Because he ripped them off?” Ryan recalled.

“That’s their claim,” Beth said. “He made his first billion off a social media site called People Pages, which was accused of simply copying Facebook. By the time that lawsuit went to court, he’d already created Peopster, which, despite its name, was a Twitter knock-off and not a porn site. The there was PeopTube—also not a porn site but one that operated suspiciously like YouTube.”

“Wow, it’s like he’s not even trying to hide it,” Jessie marveled.

“Right,” Beth said. “And those are just the biggies. He has almost a dozen other platforms, sites, and apps that mimic more well-known ones. He’s been able to fend off serious legal consequences for years through appeals and delays. Occasionally, he settles with the smaller companies but never with the big ones.”

“I can’t believe he hasn’t been nailed for any of this yet,” Ryan said as they reached the entrance to the parking garage.

“According to what I’ve read,” Beth said, “it’s been hard to hold him accountable partly because these sites are just slightly different enough from the originals to muddy the waters. Plus, many people, including some jury members, seem to find the way he flaunts these obvious knock-off sites to be charming. Some court watchers also think his celebrity status, or more accurately, his infamy, has helped him. The fights, the car crashes, dating famous women like Isabella Moreno, have made him seem like a lovable rogue to some people. ”

“Yeah, well, we’re about to find out how loveable he really is,” Ryan said. “We’re almost to the parking garage and will likely lose you down there, so we’ll end it here. Is the squad car almost here?”

“I just got an alert that your backup officers are waiting for you on the lobby level,” Jamil replied.

“Great,” Ryan said. “Let them know we’ll be joining them momentarily. And please text us if you learn anything pressing while we’re up there.”

“Will do,” Beth promised.

Ryan pulled into the garage, which immediately dropped precipitously downward. To Jessie, it felt like they were entering the belly of the beast.

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"I won't say it again," Ryan said firmly. "Unlock access to the top floor, or we will help you unlock it."

Jessie watched nervously to see how this would play out. They were standing at the bank of elevators on the lobby level of the north tower, where they'd been engaged in acrimonious negotiations with the tower's security for five minutes now.

When they'd first arrived, they were greeted by the security guard manning the reception desk, an amiable heavysset gentleman named Gary with a shock of curly red hair and freckles who struck Jessie as the incarnation of an adult, male Little Orphan Annie. He initially had no problem sending them up, along with the two uniformed LAPD officers that stood beside them.

It was only when Gary called up to inform the folks at BEING that they'd have law enforcement visitors that he got pushback. Jessie could hear a voice on the line insist that they not be allowed up. Clearly startled by the response, Gary called his supervisor for help. He got a lot more than he expected. Within sixty seconds, the supervisor and three other security guards arrived.

The supervisor, a middle-aged guy with thinning gray hair who didn't have a nametag like Gary's, informed them that this was private property and that they'd need a search warrant to access the premises.

"We're not trying to search the place," Ryan said slowly, trying to keep things civil. "We just need to interview someone in relation to an investigation we're conducting."

"Nonetheless," the security chief replied, "we've been instructed not to permit you

access to a private workplace.”

It went back and forth like that for a few minutes. Ryan made his case, and the security chief repeated the same objections. Finally, Ryan sighed heavily and turned to Jessie.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” he asked.

She was sure that he was.

“Exigent circumstances?” she guessed.

He nodded and turned back to the increasingly agitated security chief .

“What’s your name, sir?” Ryan asked.

“Clingan,” the man replied.

“Is that a first name or a last name?”

“Does it matter?” Clingan retorted.

“I guess not,” Ryan said, now seemingly more relaxed since he was free from the shackles of courtesy. He walked past the man in the direction of the elevators, calling back over his shoulder.

“Clingan, we have reason to believe that there is evidence of a serious crime in those BEING offices upstairs. We have concerns that any delay in accessing the offices might result in the destruction of said evidence. As such, these are exigent circumstances and we’re going to dispense with warrants and things like ‘permission.’ You can have Gary give us access or you can do it yourself, but one

way or another we're getting up there."

Clingan chased after him, along with Gary and his three other minions. The two uniformed LAPD officers looked over at Jessie nervously. She followed the other group and indicated that they should do the same.

"Just stay cool," she muttered to them, projecting a confidence she didn't entirely feel. "Let Detective Hernandez do his thing and follow his lead."

"I'm sorry, sir," Clingan said when he caught up to Ryan by the elevators, "but I simply cannot allow you access."

"Clingan," Ryan said, a broad smile on his face.

"Yes?" the man asked, his own face red with exertion from moving so quickly.

"I won't say it again," Ryan said firmly. "Unlock access to the top floor, or we will help you unlock it."

Clingan looked back at him uncertainly, then glanced over at the cops standing on either side of Jessie. Finally, his eyes fell helplessly on her. She decided to give him an assist.

"Mr. Clingan," she said, giving him the benefit of the doubt that it was his last name, "we don't need this to escalate. The next logical step, from our perspective, is arresting you and your team for impeding a priority investigation. Now, do you really think the legal staff up there at BEING is going to offer you their services when you all face those charges? Color me skeptical."

"Please, Ms. Hunt," he pleaded, indicating that even though she hadn't given her name, he knew exactly who she was, "you're putting me in an impossible position. "

“No we’re not, Mr. Clingan. They are,” she told him, pointing up. “This is a law enforcement action, and you are being instructed to impede it by them. Not only is that unfair to you, but it’s also pretty darn suspicious, don’t you think? Now, if you know who I am, you also know that I have some cachet in this town. And I assure you that if you get any blowback from your overlords upstairs for following the law, I will be front and center with the press to call them out. That’s a promise. Now, let’s end all this silliness and just enter the access code so we can do our job. What do you say?”

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The elevator doors opened onto a giant windowed concourse that offered a view of half the city of Los Angeles. Jessie stepped out and allowed herself a moment to appreciate it, pretending not to notice the two extremely large men in suits standing with their arms crossed, standing directly in front of her.

Ryan walked straight past them to the terrified-looking young woman at the massive reception desk, which appeared to be made entirely of carved marble. The giant suit guys both turned to watch but didn't speak or move.

"We're here to see Marcus Blackwell," he said politely, as if that wasn't already obvious to everyone.

"I'm afraid that Mr. Blackwell is unavailable right now," she replied through clenched teeth, her voice shaky. It was clear that she'd been instructed to answer that way.

"Brandy," Ryan said warmly, taking note of the nameplate on the desk, "I'm sorry this is happening to you today, but either you or someone of your choosing needs to take us back to see Mr. Blackwell now. We have to discuss a police matter with him, and it can't wait."

"Sir," said the larger, darker-haired of the two suited giants, "Mr. Blackwell is a very busy man. You can make an appointment and return later, or you can have a seat, and we'll try to fit you in if time permits. But at this time, he's unavailable."

Ryan didn't even look back at the guy as he replied, "We're going back now. We can search office to office for him if need be. Or we can avoid that fuss and be escorted

back.”

He took a step to the right of the desk, toward the glass doors behind it. The marginally smaller but still enormous, lighter-haired of the suited giants also moved one step in the same direction.

“You don’t want to do that,” Jessie said to him, her tone as friendly as Ryan’s had been. “You’re welcome to accompany us back, but any attempt to interfere with police business will require the nice officers here to—you know—arrest you. No one needs that hassle. ”

The man stopped in his tracks, uncertain how to proceed. Brandy the receptionist exhaled heavily and stood up. “I’ll take you back,” she said reluctantly.

Jessie was impressed that the seemingly least powerful person in the room was taking the initiative, despite how scared she must be.

“Thanks, Brandy,” she said.

They all followed the young woman through the glass doors and down the long, winding hallway. Jessie glanced back at the parade of people behind her, including Ryan, the two suited giants, the two LAPD officers, and Clingan and his three security guards.

Brandy eventually stopped in front of a humungous, rectangular office at the back corner of the floor. It was enclosed on all sides by frosted glass. She pressed a button by the door.

“Mr. Blackwell, there are some people from LAPD out here with me,” she said meekly. “They’d like to speak with you.”

They all waited silently for several seconds. Then, the glass changed from opaque to clear, revealing the interior. Staring back at them was Marcus Blackwell. His eyes were a piercing blue. He was dressed casually in black jeans, white Converse sneakers, and a tight-fitting turtleneck sweater that matched his eyes.

The man was shorter than he seemed in photos or on TV. Jessie guessed that he was about five-foot-seven. He appeared to be in great shape for his age—trim and muscular. She took particular note of his tightly cropped brown hair, which looked slightly damp.

Inside the office was a surprisingly small glass desk with a tablet and keyboard resting on it. Other than those two items, a remote control, and an old-timey 1930's era phone, it was spotless. Along the back wall, which was exposed brick on the bottom and expansive windows on top, was a weight set rack comprised of dumbbells and kettlebells. In the far corner were an elliptical machine, a rowing machine, and a treadmill. Blackwell pressed a button on the remote, and they heard a soft click. Brandy opened the door for them.

“Come on in,” Blackwell called out agreeably, as if he was welcoming old friends over.

Jessie and Ryan exchanged a mildly surprised look but said nothing as they entered, initially followed by the rest of the entourage.

“Actually,” Blackwell said, holding up a hand. “I know this office looks big but maybe we can keep it to essential personnel only. Mr. Clingan, you and your team can wait outside if that’s all right. And I’m happy to have my personal security officers wait out there as well if your officers would do the same.”

“I’m afraid the officers go where we go,” Ryan insisted.

“Understood,” Blackwell said, unfazed. “Then I guess I’ll keep my fellas in here too, just so I don’t feel too overwhelmed.”

Jessie almost chuckled. Marcus Blackwell was one of the least overwhelmed people she could remember encountering. He seemed completely at ease in what should have been an unsettling situation. In fact, he seemed to enjoy unsettling situations.

“Fine by me,” Ryan said with a shrug, giving the impression that this scenario was an everyday one for him too.

“So what can I do for you, Detective Hernandez?” Blackwell asked after the glass door clicked shut again and the windows re-frosted, notably naming Ryan even though he hadn’t identified himself yet. “You and Ms. Hunt are a long way from Homicide Special Section’s headquarters back at Central Station.”

“Did we catch you at a bad time?” Ryan asked, pointing at Blackwell’s hair. “It looks like you just got out of the shower.”

“Actually, it wasn’t too long ago,” Blackwell conceded. “I just worked out and felt icky, what with all the sweat. So what’s this all about? Don’t tell me the guy at the Aston Martin dealership really filed a complaint. I figured he was just blowing off steam when he threatened to do that. Maybe I got a little enthusiastic on the test drive, but I brought the car back in one piece.”

“This isn’t about that,” Ryan replied.

“Then I assume it’s about the crack I made to that one panelist at the Women in Tech conference yesterday, right?” he suggested. “Listen, I know that saying she probably did her best work on her knees was crass. It’s just that she was so confrontational and accusatory, especially after I showed up there as a favor to a friend. But to claim that she was going to pursue a charge of harassment over a bad joke? What is this, 1984

or something?”

“Guess again,” Ryan said.

“I’m at a loss then,” Blackwell said, throwing up his hands in amused exasperation. “That’s everything I’ve done in the last seventy-two hours where people threatened to get law enforcement involved.”

Jessie thought he was finally done and ready to hear what they had to say. But before either of them could speak, he pressed on. Only this time, his voice had more of an edge to it .

“I gather that if it required you to force yourselves into my private office, without advance notice, over the strenuous objections of the soon-to-be-dismissed Mr. Clingan out there, it must be important. I mean ‘exigent circumstances’ and ‘destruction of evidence?’ That sounds like serious stuff.”

“Were you listening in to our conversation in the downstairs lobby, Mr. Blackwell?” Ryan asked coyly.

“I like to know what’s going on,” he answered.

“I see,” Ryan replied. “Well, we had to get up here somehow, didn’t we?”

“So it was all B.S. then?” Blackwell demanded, his tone abruptly shifting from edgy to borderline hostile.

“You tell me,” Ryan shot back.

Jessie noticed both the two police officers and the suited giants shifting nervously, apparently concerned that things might escalate. She understood how they felt.

“I’m a busy man, Detective,” Blackwell retorted with a dismissive wave. “Can you get to your point?”

Jessie considered stepping in but held back. She knew what Ryan was doing, poking a man notorious for losing his temper. If he lost it now, maybe he’d inadvertently reveal something, or better yet, do something.

“Sure I can,” Ryan said. “How about this? We’ll ask you some direct questions. If we get direct answers, then this can all go quickly and we’ll be out of your wet hair.”

“I love it!” Blackwell shouted with fake enthusiasm. “Fire away!”

“You dated Isabella Moreno, correct?” Ryan asked without hesitation.

Blackwell’s deep blue eyes narrowed. When he answered it was with much more caution in his voice than before.

“For a while. Why?”

“She broke up with you, yes?” Ryan pressed, ignoring the man’s question.

“It was mutual,” Blackwell said carefully, trying to appear unflustered, but Jessie could feel the growing anger simmering just below the surface. She decided now was the time to join the conversation.

“Is that what the broken window in your condo was about?” she asked saccharinely, “a mutual breakup? ”

Blackwell fixed his gaze on her, and she could almost see his eyeballs vibrate with bitterness. He contorted his mouth into a smile before replying.

“What are you, cops or the National Enquirer ?” he asked with a forced chuckle.

“I’m a cop,” Ryan said matter-of-factly, glancing at his watch, “which is why I need to ask you where you were an hour and forty-five minutes ago.”

Blackwell was silent for a moment. Jessie noticed a drop of liquid near the man’s temple and wondered if it was sweat or water from the shower he claimed he needed after his workout.

“Why are you asking?” he demanded. “Did she accuse me of something?”

Blackwell was being so guarded that there was no way for Jessie to confidently determine if he was asking sincerely or if the question was intended to cover up what he might have done.

“I’ll ask the questions, Mr. Blackwell,” Ryan said sharply.

“I’m sick of this,” the man retorted, his voice rising, “you need to show me some respect in my own house!”

"This isn't a house, Mr. Blackwell," Jessie teased acidly. "It's an office tower."

“Listen,” he said resentfully, glaring at her as he took a step toward her, “I built this empire with my own hands, with my sweat, and I don’t appreciate how you’re belittling it.”

“Developing Peopster required sweat?” she replied dubiously. “Come on, we’re not exactly talking about a coal mine here.”

That seemed to push the man over the edge. He took another step toward Jessie, and before anyone could stop him, he reached out and grabbed her forearm—hard.

Everyone in the office froze.

The man's grip on Jessie only lasted a second.

In a flash, Ryan's hand was on Blackwell's forearm, ripping it off Jessie and pinning it behind his back. The man dropped to his knees in obvious pain. His giant protectors took simultaneous steps in that direction, but Jessie turned to face them and held up both palms.

"Bad idea, gentlemen," she said calmly but forcefully. "Mr. Blackwell is in a bit of a pickle here, but it doesn't have to be your pickle too."

The men stopped moving and, in fact, returned to their original positions. Just behind them, the two officers, one of whom had his hand on his gun holster, relaxed as well. Jessie turned to Blackwell, who was wincing.

"Here's the thing, Mr. Blackwell," she said with faux concern, "now you've gone and assaulted a law enforcement officer. That's not quite the same thing as beating up a waiter. The way I see it, you've got two choices here. Answer our questions honestly, and I'll consider letting this incident slide. Or get led out of your 'house' in handcuffs. Which do you prefer?"

She wasn't yet sure if she had any intention of letting things slide, whether or not he answered their questions. But letting him think he had a way out of this that didn't involve getting arrested served her purposes right now. Whether he was innocent or guilty, she expected he'd take it.

"What was the question again?" he asked through gritted teeth.

Jessie nodded to Ryan that he could release his grip on the guy. Her husband and partner did so grudgingly. She refreshed Blackwell's memory.

"Detective Hernandez asked where you were an hour and forty-five minutes ago, around 11:15. He'd like a straightforward answer."

Blackwell got to his feet slowly, then dusted off his still-immaculate jeans. When he felt that he'd re-established some measure of dignity, he answered.

"Like I told you, I was at my health club, Bodies @ Beverly. I had an 11:30 session with my trainer. I guess that technically I was on the way to the club at 11:15. We worked out until 12:15. I showered and drove over here, where I've been until you lovely people showed up."

Jessie looked over at Ryan and knew he was making some of the same calculations that she was. If Blackwell had killed Isabella, would he have had time to get from the shopping complex parking structure to his gym by 11:30? And if so, what did he do with the all-black outfit the killer wore—just toss it in a dumpster and have his workout clothes underneath? Could he have effectively cleaned up all the blood that would surely have landed on some parts of him?

And what about the car? Could he perhaps have driven from the murder scene to the gym in a less ostentatious vehicle and already had his Ferrari parked there, ready to drive to work after his training session? She pulled out her phone as Ryan continued to pepper Blackwell with questions.

"Who can verify that you were there?" he asked.

"Um, my trainer, Rico. Also, the girl at the desk making eyes at me when I showed up and left. And the valet."

“You dropped off your car and picked it up with the valet?” Ryan confirmed.

“How else would I do it?” Blackwell asked with a bit of attitude, seeming to sense that his interrogators were wavering.

“When?” Ryan pressed.

“I don’t remember, man,” Blackwell protested.

“When exactly?” Ryan repeated, “and don’t forget, we’ll be checking the gym’s security cameras.”

Blackwell threw up his hands in frustration. “Maybe 11:29? I know I hurried inside because I didn’t want to be late for the session, and I was cutting it close. Rico makes me do extra reps if I’m late.”

While he spoke Jessie punched in directions from the Beverly Gardens shopping complex to Bodies @ Beverly. The gym was another five minutes west of Blackwell’s mansion, making it ten total minutes from the Beverly Gardens. That meant that the guy would have had to drive from the crime scene to his mansion, strip off his blood-soaked clothes, change cars, and drive to the gym in time to make his workout session on time.

The murder occurred at 11:17. It took ten minutes to get to the gym, at 11:27. Could Blackwell have completed all those tasks- driving home, changing, and switching cars—in two to three minutes—in order to arrive at his stated time of 11:29? It seemed nearly impossible, especially without leaving some trace of blood that might be noticed .

“I’m going to need contact information for all of those people,” Ryan told Blackwell.

By his tone, Jessie sensed that he'd come to the same conclusion she had: if the security cameras at the health club and the interviews with the staff there confirmed his claims, Marcus Blackwell had a pretty solid alibi.

"Fine, I'll get their info," Blackwell said. "Now will you please tell why you're asking me for an alibi for where I was at 11:15? And what that has to do with Izzie?"

Ryan looked over at Jessie to see if she was okay with him revealing the truth. She nodded. At this point they needed to come clean. Their best way to prevent Blackwell from challenging their aggressive tactics later on was to make clear the enormity of what had led them here.

"That's when Isabella Moreno was murdered," Ryan said.

The expression of arrogant self-regard on Blackwell's face dropped away.

"What?" he asked. "How?"

Jessie wouldn't normally have revealed that detail, but she wanted to see his reaction.

"She was stabbed over a dozen times," she said evenly. "When it was over, her face was just a series of bloody holes. She was unrecognizable."

Blackwell stared at her with eyes that looked like they might pop out of his head. Then, without speaking, he leaned over and vomited, missing his trash can by a foot. They gave him a moment to collect himself before saying anything. As he wiped his mouth with his handkerchief, Ryan spoke softly.

"Give these officers the contact info for the Bodies @ Beverly staff," he said. "And prepare to provide us full access to the GPS location data on your cell phone and all your vehicles for the last two hours. Okay?"

Blackwell nodded silently as he stumbled over to the chair behind his desk. Jessie and Ryan started for the door when she suddenly remembered something else and turned around.

“One last thing,” she told him sternly. “If any of the building’s security staff is fired, from Clingan on down, I will hold a press conference making note of the violent episode the night of your breakup, when you destroyed your West Hollywood penthouse window. We can let the media draw their own conclusions about your character based on that incident. I’d imagine that by the time you get it cleared up, your reputation might finally take a real hit, something that will be harder to bounce back from than car crashes and fistfights. Do we understand each other, Mr. Blackwell?”

“We do,” he said hoarsely before clicking the remote to unlock the door to the office.

The satisfaction of that moment dissipated almost the second that Jessie passed through the door. Taking down an asshole like Blackwell didn’t resonate as deeply when it did nothing to solve their case.

Admittedly, there was still the outside chance that Blackwell had hired someone to take Isabella out so that he’d have an alibi at the time of her murder. But if so, why not make his alibi more ironclad? And would he have really had another woman slaughtered too just to throw them off the scent? Anything was possible, but it felt like a reach.

No, If Blackwell’s alibi held up, and she suspected that it would, that meant a serial killer as brutal as she’d ever encountered was still out there, waiting to cause more carnage.

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Janice Lemmon was still surprised that she was even here.

She thought it would be much more difficult to secure a conversation with Ash Pierce. If the LAPD didn't balk, surely the prisoner's lawyers would, either on their own or at her behest.

And yet here she was, standing at the nurses' station of the secure unit on Cedars-Sinai Medical Center's fifth floor, getting instructions on how to conduct herself in the patient's hospital room from the head of Pierce's security detail, Officer Brice Gaston, a guy in his early forties with a thick trunk, graying brown hair, and deep facial creases that suggested many years walking a beat.

"Don't approach her," Officer Gaston instructed. "There will be a chair on the wall across the room from Ash. You can sit there or stand in that general area, but no closer. Do not offer her anything to take or accept anything she offers. Do not agree to provide any service for her, not even a small favor. Got it?"

"Got it," Janice said. She wouldn't have done any of those things anyway but kept that to herself.

"And remember, consent was given for an interview, not an interrogation," Gaston said. "The terms of this meeting are clear. You are evaluating Ash, not trying to get a confession. And no recording is allowed. Are we clear?"

"We are," Janice said before asking a question of her own. "Officer Gaston, do you typically use first names to refer to prisoners that you're guarding, especially ones who are charged with multiple murders?"

Gaston looked slightly taken aback. "I see this woman every day. I'm just trying to be personable."

"Oh, I have no doubt about that," Janice said pleasantly. "I guess I'm just wondering if you and your team have perhaps become too close to the person you've been tasked with preventing from escaping or from doing harm to you or others. What do you think?"

Janice watched as Gaston glanced nervously at the other regular members of his guard team, a young male cop named Stoller, and a female officer named Michaelson. No matter how they replied, her query had already had the intended effect .

She wanted these officers to question whether they were too chummy with a murderer. That would serve two of her purposes. First they were more likely to keep a tight watch on Pierce, at least while Janice was here. And second, it would put them on their heels a little if she pushed Pierce harder than they might prefer.

"I don't think that's a concern, Ms. Lemmon," Gaston finally replied defensively. "We know how to do our jobs."

"Of course you," Janice replied warmly, as if she never had any doubt. "And not to be a pain, but it is Dr. Lemmon. I know there are so many of us around these parts, but a title is still a title, right, Officer?"

"My apologies, Doctor," Gaston said, now fully discombobulated, just as she liked. "Officer Michaelson will accompany you inside. If you have any questions, ask her. If she can't help, I will."

"Thanks so much," Janice said, adjusting her scarf around her neck to accommodate for the chilly hospital as she waited for Officer Michaelson to lead her in.

She made no mention of her credentials other than being a "doctor." They already knew that she was a psychiatrist. That was why she was here, after all. Gaston, at least, was probably also aware of her past work consulting for the LAPD and FBI in a profiling capacity. It would have been mentioned to him when explaining why she was qualified to talk to Pierce.

But she felt no need to refer to her other work. In fact, she wasn't permitted to. She'd signed documents many years ago that precluded her from ever discussing her employment at other, more clandestine organizations. But to her mind, it was that work that truly qualified her for this interview.

After all, before Ash Pierce became a hitwoman for hire, she had worked as an assassin for the CIA, and prior to that, did similar work for an elite military unit. Janice too had worked at the CIA, along with the NSA and DIA. But it was her time at the Central Intelligence Agency that was most relevant here.

Part of her work involved evaluating the truthfulness of terrorism suspects in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Some people preferred waterboarding or sleep deprivation. That wasn't Janice's area.

She simply sat in rooms with captured combatants and, through an interpreter, asked questions. She was trying to determine the value of the prisoner. Were they really involved in past attacks? Did they know about new, upcoming ones? How high up were they in the chain of command? Sometimes they answered. Sometimes they stayed silent. Either way, she learned something.

In the end, she questioned a total of 41 suspects over eighteen months and concluded that 21 of them had no involvement in terrorist activity. Of the remaining twenty men, 12 were deemed to be low level operators in isolated cells without knowledge of larger plans. Five were found to be mid-level members of terrorist organizations, and two were determined to be high-level leaders.

There was one man whose potential involvement Janice could not make a definitive determination about. He was eventually released many years later. Janice heard through the grapevine that he had an unfortunate encounter with a bullet to the head while wandering through an outdoor market in Kabul. Janice couldn't help but wonder if Ash Pierce might have been involved in that incident. It sounded right up her alley.

Janice finally left the agency when higher-ups insisted on putting more "aggressive" interrogators in the room with her and the suspects. She told her supervisors that she couldn't glean any accurate information from these men when under such duress, but she was overruled, so she left the agency and moved on to help capture domestic criminals for the FBI and eventually, the LAPD.

The skills she'd honed back in her Agency days had served her well over the years. She hoped that they hadn't atrophied too much, as she suspected she would need all of them for this conversation.

"Are you ready, Dr. Lemmon," asked Officer Michaelson, an open-faced young woman with a warm smile and sandy blonde hair, who looked like a mark waiting to be played.

"Yes, dear," Janice said. "Lead the way."

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As she followed Officer Michaelson into the room, Janice tried to keep her primary goal in mind. She was here to determine if Ash Pierce really had amnesia or if this was all an elaborate ruse.

She did her best to set aside the elephant that would be in the room with her and Pierce: Kat Gentry. She was well aware of just how desperate Kat was to know the truth. That was why Janice had ultimately agreed to do this interview at all.

But she also feared, despite Kat's protestations to the contrary, what might happen if she came to any conclusion other than that Pierce was playing everyone. Kat was in a delicate place right now, still deep in mourning over the murder of her fiancé. She seemed to have developed a fixation on Pierce as a way to take her mind off the pain she was feeling. That didn't mean that her suspicions weren't credible. But her passion didn't make those suspicions more credible. In fact, it threatened to blind her.

Janice couldn't let that happen, so as she passed the threshold into Pierce's hospital room, she allowed her concern for Kat to melt away like a lone ice cube on asphalt during a summer day. The room was nondescript, that is, apart from the bars on the window, which looked to be permanently locked.

She shuffled over to her chair, using her cane. The item was useful for two purposes. First, she legitimately needed it as she slowly recovered from a herniated disc that had incapacitated her for several weeks last year. But it was also an asset, which could be used to make her seem more frail and less of a threat to someone as wily and dangerous as Pierce. Lemmon wasn't above using anything that could offer her a tactical advantage.

Pierce was lying in her bed wearing a loose-fitting, floral hospital gown. She had short black hair, an arched nose, and pale skin. Despite the flowing gown, her diminutive frame was clearly evident. Janice guessed that Pierce was no taller than she was, and probably weighed as little. For a woman in her mid-thirties who had been through war zones, hand-to-hand combat, a stabbing to the neck, and a coma, she looked surprisingly fresh-faced. Her left wrist and right ankle were both attached to the hospital bed by handcuffs.

Pierce pushed a button on the bed, and it lifted her to a forty-five degree angle. To Janice, it almost felt like this was the woman's way of making an entrance. Once the bed was upright, she re-adjusted her head to face Janice and fixed her clear brown eyes on her. Even if she hadn't known about Pierce's history, that look alone would have told Janice that this woman was formidable.

"Dr. Lemmon, I presume?" she asked playfully in a voice still raspy from her neck injury, before adding, "sorry, I couldn't help myself."

"Good guess," Janice said as she maneuvered over to the chair Gaston had mentioned, making sure to keep her cane prominently displayed.

"Not really a guess," Pierce conceded. "I knew you were coming."

"And you didn't object," Janice noted as she slowly settled into the chair.

"What happened?" Pierce asked. "It looks like you could use more than a hard hospital chair."

"Thank you, but I'll muddle through," Janice replied, before deciding that there was no point in being secretive about her ailments. "As to what happened, what can I say? Old age has taken its toll, I guess. That, along with back issues, and a young man who recently tried to murder me in my own office at the behest of a serial killer."

“I feel like I should ask more about that, but I don’t want to invade your privacy,” Pierce said.

“A conversation for another time, perhaps,” Janice suggested before following up on her prior comment. “Let’s stick with you for now. Like I said, I really am surprised to be here. I assumed you would say no to meeting with me.”

“To be honest, my lawyers did at first,” she said. “They shared your qualifications and reputation and warned me that you were more cunning and perceptive than you might appear.”

“That’s very flattering for someone of my advanced years,” Janice replied.

“But then I reminded them that your powers of perception would only be a concern for me if I was being deceptive about my condition. You see,” she said in a loud whisper as she leaned forward slightly, “I’m not sure that they totally believe me.”

“Hard to imagine,” Janice said, her voice betraying no sarcasm .

“Right?” Pierce replied. “Anyway, I said that a chat with you might actually be beneficial to me, because based on that reputation of yours, a seal of approval from you would carry a lot of weight.”

“That’s taking a big risk,” Janice noted. “You’re here, without your attorneys present. What if I conclude that you’re not being straight with everyone?”

Pierce smiled wanly, as if mildly, exhaustedly amused that Janice would come to any other conclusion.

“First of all, I didn’t want a bunch of lawyers to sully our chat, what with their constant objections. I think that it would make it hard to really connect,” Pierce said.

“And as to the possibility of you not finding me credible, then I’m no worse off than I was before you came in. Everyone already assumes I’m lying. You agreeing with them would just reinforce their existing doubts.”

Janice smiled at that. “It seems that’s not entirely the case. Your guards here are apparently very deferential to you and I hear that prosecutors are concerned that your condition might play well with a jury. You seem to have made inroads.”

Pierce shook her head dismissively.

“While I wish that were the case, I wouldn’t put too much stock in that kind of talk,” she said. “Of course I’d like to think that the security team here has somehow sensed that I’m being genuine, but my guess is that they’ve just decided that being polite to me requires less effort than being constantly confrontational. And as to a jury, I think we both know that no matter how sympathetic I may come across, none of that will matter when my crimes are laid out before them.”

“Why not just plead guilty then?” Janice asked.

Pierce adjusted herself in the bed slightly, and Janice noticed a small grimace. She considered asking if the younger woman was all right but wanted an answer to her question.

“I’ll be honest,” Pierce said. “Whatever conclusion you draw about me, I don’t remember doing the things I’m accused of. And some part of me doesn’t feel like I should have to pay the price for something done by a person who is, to me, a stranger. I feel like, on the whole, I’m a good person. What I still remember about my life is the work I did in the military, taking out threats to our country. I’m not saying I deserve a free pass. Obviously, that’s not possible and not justifiable. There should be consequences. But for now, I feel like my only pathway to finding some fair outcome is to plead not guilty. Is that a reasonable position, in your opinion?”

“I suppose it depends on your perspective, Ash. May I call you Ash?”

“I’d prefer it,” Pierce said.

“Ash, giving you the benefit of the doubt for the moment that you really have lost all memory of your crimes, you still committed them. Should a killer who becomes a person of faith in prison avoid punishment for their crime, even if their conversion is sincere?”

Pierce sat quietly, appearing to honestly ponder the question. After a good ten seconds of silence, she responded.

“I don’t know that the analogy works perfectly,” she said. “In one instance, the perpetrator is aware of their crimes and is trying to become a better, more faithful person. In the other, the person who committed the crimes has no recollection of having committing them, so there is no visceral sense of guilt to work through, only the ‘official’ one that comes from seeing the evidence of what they’ve done.”

Janice was about to reply when Pierce continued.

“But I take your point,” she said. “A drunk driver who hits and kills someone isn’t absolved of what they’ve done just because they can’t remember having done it. Their victim is still dead, whether the drunk driver had some temporary blackout in the moment or just passed out at the wheel.”

Janice was impressed at the concession, which she hadn’t anticipated.

“Do you ever wonder if that’s what is happening to you?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“That all this might be just a temporary blackout, and that you’ll start to have flashes of recollection at some point?”

“The thought terrifies me,” Pierce said.

“Why?”

“Because if I start to remember what I did—these brutal acts that ‘I’ committed, then I worry I won’t have a leg to stand on anymore. What if the only thing that lets me sleep at night is the fact that I can’t remember these vile crimes, that I have no connection to the person responsible for them? But that’s not the worst part.”

“What is?” Janice asked, leaning in.

“It’s one thing to remember the crimes,” Pierce said. “It would be awful, but I suspect it would be like seeing a video of what I did instead of reading a transcript. But if I remember my crimes, does that mean I’ll also remember who I was when I did those things? I don’t think I want to meet that person, to look in the mirror and know that we’re one and the same.”

“But you are one in the same, Ash” Janice reminded her.

“Not to me,” she said softly.

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Janice Lemmon left the hospital room twenty minutes later.

As she did, Ash Pierce watched her go.

She hadn't wanted to mention it, but about halfway through their conversation Ash had developed a terrible headache. She didn't want to say anything for fear that it would look like she was being manipulative and attempting to shortcut the interview.

But now that it was over, the throbbing in her head was unbearable. She'd never experienced anything like this in any of her other interactions, whether with the detectives on the case, the prosecutors, her own lawyers, or the other psychiatrists who'd questioned her.

Not even when Hannah Dorsey came to speak with her did she have this reaction. Of course, at the time of that chat, she hadn't realized that Dorsey was the young woman who had stabbed her in the neck, which left her in a coma. She still wasn't sure why the girl had come. Dorsey could have rushed over to her bed and attacked her before the guards stopped her. But she only asked questions, albeit under false pretenses. Was she just here to see if her tormenter was telling the truth?

It was only later that Ash pieced together that Dorsey was also the girl she'd apparently hunted down and nearly killed in the boiler room of this very hospital, only to be stopped by the teenager and Katherine Gentry, a private detective that she was informed she had tortured within an inch of her life.

She knew all of these things were true, even if they didn't feel true to her. But somehow talking to Dr. Janice Lemmon had affected her in ways no other

conversation had. Maybe it was because Lemmon, unlike everyone else that Ash had dealt with, seemed to honestly be open to the idea that she had lost her memory. She neither accepted nor rejected the proposition. Maybe Ash just wasn't mentally prepared to deal with that kind of genuine curiosity.

"Can you please get the nurse, Leah?" she asked Officer Michaelson. "That thing with Dr. Lemmon really took it out of me. I've got a brutal headache, like migraine level. I need some serious meds."

Michaelson nodded and left the room. Once she was gone, Ash closed her eyes, hoping that might help ease her pain. But instead, bright images of light flashed in her head, like a strobe light she couldn't turn off. She thought she might throw up.

And then, amid all the flashing, a fractured, confused image appeared in her brain. It was of her standing triumphantly over a bruised and bloody woman tied to a chair in the middle of the desert. Then darkness briefly swallowed Ash, followed immediately by more lights. Then another image.

She was still in the desert, still with the woman she now knew had to be Katherine Gentry. But this time, in the static-y video in her skull, she caught a glimpse of herself in the side-view mirror of a nearby pickup truck. She saw the lips of the person she used to be form into a cruel smile. She didn't recognize it as her own, but she knew it was.

And then suddenly the pain in her head was too much and she retched, too weak and disoriented to prevent the mess from landing on her floral hospital gown.

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They didn't have to wait outside Parker's office this time. She called them right in.

Jessie didn't even bother to sit down. Standing beside her, Ryan had the rebellious posture of a high school kid who'd been called into the principal's office for an offense he didn't commit.

Jessie did her best not to follow suit. She tried to remember that Captain Parker was under just as much pressure as they were. But unlike them, she wasn't in a position to do anything about it. She just had to trust that they would get the job done. It must be incredibly frustrating. And yet.

The door had barely closed before she started ripping into them. "Just to be completely transparent, I got another call from Chief Decker not long ago, but that's not what has me hot right now."

Jessie and Ryan remained silent, waiting for the other shoe to drop. It didn't take long.

"What really has me up in arms was the call I got ten minutes ago from Captain Craig, who oversees the Media Relations division. According to him, you bullied your way into Marcus Blackwell's office and you, Detective Hernandez, proceeded to assault him."

"That's not accurate," Ryan said, speaking slowly in order to control his tone. "Frankly Captain, I'm surprised that you would even entertain the idea that it was."

"Accurate or not," Parker retorted, unfazed by his objection, "I'll tell you this: if you

thought social media was blowing up over this case before, take a guess what it'll be like now that all of Blackwell's various sites and platforms come for you and this department."

"I'm not sure that will happen, Captain," Jessie said, trying to lower the temperature. "We've uncovered information about Mr. Blackwell that, if it became public could make him look very bad. He knows that."

Well, according to Craig, Blackwell's on the verge of blasting out the tale of the indignities he suffered," Parker told her." And on top of that, he's apparently also considering suing the department. "

Ryan exhaled loudly, seemingly trying to push the frustration out of his body before it got the better of him.

"Does it matter at all that we had good cause to be there?" he challenged. "That we thought he might be destroying evidence of his involvement in a murder? Or that he assaulted Jessie?"

"Sure it matters," Parker acknowledged. "And your actions would all be fine if he was our guy. Is he our guy, Detective Hernandez?"

It was clear that she already knew the answer. If he was, then Blackwell wouldn't have been in a position to call Captain Craig in Media Relations. He would be in a cell.

"It doesn't look like it," Ryan said, obligated to explain where things stood even if it was self-evident. "His alibi seems almost certain to hold up. And so far, Jamil and Beth can't find any evidence that he contracted someone for the killing."

"So that's not great," Parker replied acidly.

“That’s not the point,” Ryan insisted. “He was a good suspect in the moment. Everything we had at the time pointed to him. As I said, there were exigent circumstances. We legitimately thought that evidence—including potentially blood on his body—had been or was about to be destroyed. And did I mention that he assaulted Jessie?”

“Yes, twice now,” Parker shot back. “And my understanding is that his assault amounted to him grabbing Ms. Hunt’s arm. You make it sound like he punched her in the face. It has me wondering if this has gotten a little too personal for you, Detective.”

Jessie had had just about enough of this and decided now was the time to make that clear.

“What would you have us do, Captain Parker?” she asked, “Just give the guy a pass because he’s a billionaire with an online megaphone? Is that how we’re conducting investigations now?”

Parker shook her head vigorously.

“I expect the top investigators in a unit specifically created to deal with these kinds of people to be more diplomatic—,” she explained, but Jessie wasn’t having any of it.

“That’s not our job,” she interrupted forcefully. “HSS wasn’t established to massage the delicate sensibilities of the rich and famous. It was formed to catch the killers of victims who were high-profile. We are here for the dead, like Chloe Baptiste and Isabella Moreno, not the possible perpetrators still rolling in bathtubs of cash.”

“Ms. Hunt, You don’t seem to understand—,” Parker objected .

“No, you don’t seem to understand, Captain,” Jessie challenged. “You used to run the

Vice unit. Were you there to protect the johns? Of course not. And we're not here to coddle some billionaire, no matter who he complains to. We go where the evidence leads us. And in this situation, it led us to him. He may have ultimately alibied out, but we don't have the benefit of hindsight. I can't speak for Detective Hernandez, but I apologize for nothing."

She stopped talking. Though she didn't look at Ryan, she could almost feel him grinning next to her. There was a long silence before Parker finally replied.

"Are you done?" she asked.

"Actually, no," Jessie said. "I've got one more thing to say. A suspect grabbed me forcefully. That is assault. If he'd have done it to you, you'd have kicked him in the teeth. Detective Hernandez was pretty restrained, considering the circumstances and the fact that we're married. Blackwell's lucky he doesn't have a broken arm."

Ryan stayed silent. Parker shook her head. Jessie couldn't tell if she was angry or chastened.

"Maybe putting you on this case was a mistake," the captain said quietly. "I'm thinking you both may just be too close to it. It almost seems like you've got a vendetta."

"I know that I do," Jessie countered. "I have a vendetta against serial killers."

Parker was about to reply when Officer George buzzed in.

"Sorry to interrupt, Captain," she said, "but I've got the medical examiner on the line. He says it's urgent and he can't reach Hernandez or Hunt."

Jessie pulled her phone out of her pocket and saw that she'd missed a text and a call

from Kolek. Apparently, she'd been too focused on the argument to notice.

“Put him through,” Parker said, and then addressed Kolek, “you’re on speaker. Hernandez and Hunt are here too.”

“Excellent,” the man said, sounding excited. “I wanted to let you know that our preliminary exam of Isabella Moreno revealed something interesting. We found a strand of hair on her body that wasn’t hers. We put it through the system and came up with a name.”

“Who?” Parker asked.

“Julian Crest,” Kolek said. “He was charged with statutory rape six years ago. Apparently, the case fell apart when the girl wouldn’t testify, but his DNA is still in the system. ”

“I know that name,” Jessie said. “Isn’t he that fitness guru who’s hugely popular online?”

“I don’t know,” Kolek admitted.

“That’s all right,” Ryan said. “We’ll have Jamil and Beth give us a rundown, including his location, so we can get to him ASAP.”

“That is, assuming we’re still on the case,” Jessie prompted. “Are we, Captain?”

Parker scowled at her and for the briefest of seconds, Jessie thought the woman might actually dump them. Then she gave them both a curt wave.

“Get moving,” she growled.

Hannah felt helpless.

It wasn't a sensation she was accustomed to, and it had put her in a bad mood. Apparently, she wasn't doing a great job of hiding it.

"Are you okay?" Finn Anderton asked with a frown as they sat at the Java City Kiosk, having a mid-afternoon snack of scones and iced tea.

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't realize how unpleasant I was being."

"Tell me what's going on," Finn said. "Maybe getting it off your chest will help."

She fought off a smile. Finn looked like an enthusiastic puppy, with his wide gray eyes, casually windswept dirty blond hair, and crooked grin, highlighted his pronounced dimples. He was so eager to help and despite her best efforts, she found herself warming to his bro-tastic frat boy energy.

"I didn't want to bore you with my stuff on what was supposed to be a relaxing, between-class study break."

"I thought you didn't have a class for the last little while," he replied.

"True," she said. "I've been spending the last few hours focused on something else."

"Spill," he said. "You know you want to."

So she did, filling him in on Clayton Callum's request to deal with Dana Douglas, the

girl he thought was stalking him. She detailed the possible food poisoning incident of Bridget Lerner, the classmate working on Clayton's project, and the photo with the word "hot" on it slid under his door.

"Do you know either of them?" she asked Finn when she was done.

"I don't think so," he said. "Do you have pictures?"

"Who do you think you're dealing with?" she scoffed. "Of course I do."

She showed him photos of both students, but he shook his head when he saw them .

"I don't know either of them," he said. "I think I might have seen him around campus. I don't recognize her at all. Then again, that's not such a shock. There are over 28,000 students at this school."

"Well, I'm having trouble finding anything concrete," she said. "I did a shallow dive into Dana's background and—" she started.

"A shallow dive?" Finn asked, puzzled.

"Yeah, you know," she said, amused by his confusion, "instead of a deep dive. I don't have time for that right now."

"Oh, I get it," he said, "so what did you find out?"

"Okay," Hannah launched in, happy to review what she learned for her own benefit, as well as his, "Dana Marie Douglas, twenty-year-old sophomore. Business Administration major, just like Clayton. From up north in Bakersfield. Graduated 14th in her senior class. No criminal complaints as an adult. I searched to see if there were any sealed juvenile records that might suggest something untoward when she

was younger, but nothing popped.”

“I forgot that you know how to sneak around legal corners to find what you’re looking for,” Finn marveled. “How do I know you didn’t do that with me?”

“First of all, I’ll take that as a compliment,” Hannah retorted, aware he didn’t mean it as an attack but a little defensive nonetheless. “Kat Gentry taught me well when I was an intern at her detective agency. And second, you can rest assured that I absolutely did a deep dive on you. I thought you might be sending my roommate threatening messages, remember? I know all about you, Finn Anderton.”

His already ruddy cheeks turned scarlet. “So you were saying something about Dana?” he deflected.

“Right,” she continued, not pressing any further. “No legal issues to speak of for Dana. No disciplinary problems here at Irvine. Good grades as a freshman and so far this year.”

“So do you think this Clayton guy is blowing things out of proportion?”

“Not necessarily,” Hannah answered. “A spotless record in the past doesn’t say much about what’s in her head now. She could have stalked people all that time but just never been found out. Something might have happened recently in her personal life that made her snap and start behaving this way. Her past history, or lack of one, is relevant but it’s not exculpatory.”

“But so far, you haven’t found anything?” Finn pressed .

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Hannah said. “The girl who was originally in Clayton’s project group, Bridget, did get food poisoning according to resources I won’t share with you because I don’t want you to judge my legal sneakiness again. And I did find

footage from Clayton's apartment building showing her leaving around the time he said he saw her. But there are only exterior cameras at the complex, not on the individual floors, so that's not definitive. There's nothing I could confidently claim proves or disproves his concerns."

"So what now?"

Hannah sighed.

"I'm thinking of taking Clayton up on his offer."

"What offer?" Finn asked.

"He's supposed to have a meeting with Dana and the other member of their group, Van Moseby, tonight at Langson Library," she explained. "But Van is out of town and won't be back until late tonight. Dana supposedly still wants to get together. Clayton thought it might be a chance to catch her in the act somehow, maybe extract a confession and record it."

"So he wants you to be there, like nearby as witness, to catch her saying something incriminating?"

"Pretty much."

Finn smiled broadly.

"Maybe I can help," he suggested.

"How?" she asked, skeptical but curious.

"I could go too," he said. "You're not as famous as your sister, but you have been in

the news a few times in the last few years because of...the stuff that happened to you. What if she recognizes you and gets suspicious? What if she knows about how you've been helping out fellow students and wonders why you're there? If you think that you're made, you can leave but I'll still be around, hanging somewhere inconspicuous, to be an extra set of ears."

Hannah held up her hand. "I'm sorry, but did you just say, 'if I think that I'm made?' What is this, a Philip Marlowe movie or something?"

"I don't know who that is," Finn said without shame.

She shook her head.

"That's a very sweet offer but not necessary."

"Really," he insisted, "I don't mind at all."

"How about I agree to keep you in mind if I need your help?" she suggested .

"Keep me in mind?" he repeated with a scoff, "as opposed to considering all your other candidates?"

"You don't know," she told him, trying to keep a straight face. "Maybe I have an intern of my own."

"You do," he told her, "me!

Hannah quickly took bite of her scone so as to not let him see the giggle she couldn't hold back. It was nice to have a moment of goofiness. She decided to lean into it. She could relax this afternoon.

But tonight, she had work to do.

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As they pulled up to Julian Crest's private West Hollywood gym, Jessie scanned their surroundings.

They were on a bustling stretch of Sunset Boulevard just east of San Vicente Boulevard that was populated by chic cafes, upscale boutiques, and all kinds of specialty services. This wasn't cheap real estate and the gym's location suggested that Crest was doing well.

They already knew that he was here. Beth had learned that he did an online workout on Tuesdays that ran from 1:30-2:30. It was 2:28 now so they should be able to talk as soon as he finished. Ryan parked in a loading zone across the street from the gym, Crest Fitness, and called Jamil.

"We're here," he said over speaker. "We need whatever you have on this guy before we go in to see him."

"Right," Jamil said, sounding a little harried. "I'm still hunting up some background info, so I'm going to hand you off to Beth. She's got a mini bio on him that might help."

"Okay," Beth said, picking up where her supervisor left off, "Julian is 37 years old. He's been a certified trainer since he was 25. Looks like he did the standard thing, working out of a chain gym until about seven years ago. That's when he transitioned into doing a lot of YouTube workouts. They took off, maybe because he's talented, but possibly also because he's good looking and does these workouts shirtless. After two years of that, he had enough subscribers that he opened his own place, Crest Fitness. It has the studio he uses for his videos. He also does private training sessions

there as well.”

“So he’s doing okay for himself,” Ryan note.

“He’s nowhere near that ultra-high-net-worth crowd,” Beth answered, “but yeah, he’s doing just fine. From what we’ve found, he made about \$4 million last year.”

“Okay,” Jessie said, “so he’s UNHW-adjacent. I wonder if that created some envy.”

“Ooh,” Beth said with more excitement than Jessie expected, “I just found something else.”

“What?” Ryan asked .

“We just got access to a partial client list,” she replied. “Both Chloe Baptiste and Isabella Moreno are on it. It’s not clear if they’re still active clients or from a while back, but Julian Crest trained both of them at some point.”

“That’s extremely promising,” Ryan said. “I think we’ve got something to work with there.”

He started to open his door, but Jessie wasn’t done.

“What about the statutory rape charge?” she asked. “How did that all shake out?”

“I can answer that one,” Jamil said. “I’ve been poring over his record. Six years ago, when he was doing these videos but before he opened the gym, he got involved with the daughter of a client he did in-home training with. She was seventeen at the time. He was thirty-one. Apparently, the father found some photos she'd sent to Crest and went to his house with a baseball bat. He got in a couple of good blows before the cops arrived and broke it up. Both men were charged. But just before trial, the girl

refused to testify—recanted actually—said nothing had happened between them."

"What happened to cause the change of heart?" Jessie asked.

"I'm not sure there ever was one," Jamil said. "In her initial statement, the girl said that the two of them were in love. Reading between the lines, I think her father demanded that she testify against her wishes. But when she turned 18, she changed her tune. There was nothing the prosecutors could do. In fact, they were getting set to pursue the assault case against the father when Crest said he'd refuse to testify in that one if the family dropped the civil suit they had against him. So they did, and everybody walked away."

"So just to be clear," Ryan said. "The father dropped a lawsuit against the guy who slept with his underage daughter in order to get clear of an assault charge."

"That's right, Jamil said. "No one in this story covered themselves in glory."

"Any other legal issues?" Jessie asked, too disgusted to continue down that road.

"Some minor scrapes," Jamil said. "Crest was charged with refusal to disperse when police shut down a club that got busted for exceeding the fire marshal's maximum occupancy limit. He wouldn't leave the VIP room and talked back to officers. It's not a surprise. He's pretty full of himself. "

"How do you know that?" Jessie asked. Beth sounded pretty definitive.

"Um, I didn't want to mention it," the researcher said, seemingly almost blushing over the phone, "but I used to watch some of his videos."

"Come on, Beth," Jamil baited playfully. "Tell the whole truth."

"Okay, fine. I subscribed to his channel for a while," she said quickly, "but I stopped after a few months. He has this arrogant, self-congratulatory vibe that's really off-putting."

"Well," Ryan said, "this is all very useful information. We're going to go talk to him now. And Beth, if we don't arrest him for murder, we'll tell him you said 'hi.'"

That comment was greeted with a dial tone.

"I don't think she appreciated that," Jessie said.

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Jessie wasn't sure if this was a gym or a dance club.

When they walked into the small lobby of Crest Fitness, 1990s-era techno music was blasting over the speakers. They passed four stunning, impossibly fit young women. They were each of different ethnicities and wore different colored tights and sports bras, but they shared one thing in common: they were sweating profusely.

Jessie and Ryan did their best to maneuver through the obstacle course comprised of bombshells to get to the receptionist, who greeted them with a thin, unconvincing smile. Behind her in the glassed-in workout studio, Jessie saw Crest toweling off his shirtless torso.

The man was unquestionably a looker. Tall, with light brown hair and brown eyes, his skin was bronzed, and he had what looked like eight-pack abs. Jessie could see why he was popular, even without any special talent as a trainer.

"May I help you," the receptionist yelled over the music.

"Yes," Ryan said, holding up his badge, "we need to talk to Mr. Crest."

"What?" she shouted.

"Could you turn the music down a little?" Ryan asked, leaning in.

She nodded and lowered volume enough so that Jessie could at least hear her own thoughts.

“We need to talk to Mr. Crest,” Ryan repeated.

“Oh,” she said hesitantly, “he doesn’t usually do meet and greets right after a session. He needs time to recuperate.”

“I have no doubt,” Ryan said, staying impressively unfazed by the lack of cooperation, “but this isn’t a meet and greet. We’re the police and we need to speak with him now. So we’re just going to head back.”

“Um,” the receptionist said, starting to stand up before changing her mind, “okay, I guess.”

They got to the locked door, and the young woman buzzed them in. Ryan entered first and Jessie followed behind, keeping a low profile to better note how Crest would react to this invasion of his private space. At first, he seemed oblivious to them, flexing his forearm lovingly as he blew some of his hair out of his face .

“Julian Crest,” Ryan said, “I’m Dete—.”

“You can set up an appointment with Carla,” Crest interrupted, without even looking up. “I don’t do walk-in evals and I definitely don’t do them after a video session. But thanks for your interest.”

“I’m afraid that’s not going to work for us,” Ryan told him firmly. “We’re with LAPD.”

The trainer finished toweling off his damp hair, then squinted first at Ryan, then at Jessie.

“I’m cool giving a discount for law enforcement,” he said “But like I told you, Carla handles all the appointments. Besides you look like you’re doing fine, buddy. And

your partner there doesn't look like she needs a trainer, although I'm happy to give her an initial private session for free. She's bangin'."

"As flattering as that is to hear," Jessie replied drily, jumping in before Ryan could, "we're not here to schedule training sessions. We have a few questions for you related to some work we're doing. Do you know Chloe Baptiste?"

Of course, she already knew the answer, but seeing how he chose to provide it could prove instructive. Crest moved over to the nearby bench and grabbed his shirt. He turned away as he put it on, so Jessie couldn't see his face.

"I wouldn't usually talk about current or former clients, because of trainer-patient privilege, but you obviously know that I know her, or you wouldn't be here," he said. "Terrible what happened to her. I saw it on the news."

Jessie was still processing the use of the term "trainer-patient privilege," which most definitely wasn't a thing, but Ryan managed to move past it to ask his first question.

"How well did you know her?" he pressed.

Crest turned around.

"I don't like the tone of that question," he said belligerently.

"Mr. Crest," Ryan replied. "I'm not really interested in what you do or don't like. We're investigating a murder. So how about you be straight with us?"

Crest looked like he wanted to snap back but managed to restrain himself when he answered.

"If you're asking if I was sleeping with Chloe, the answer is no," he said. "There

might have been some sparks, but she was married to this super-rich guy and there was no way she was going to risk messing things up with that golden goose. ”

“But you did get involved with some other clients, right?” Jessie asked.

“Why do you assume that?” he asked defensively.

“Come on, Julian, a good-looking guy like you,” she said, “lots of up close and personal sweating. I’m sure there were tons of ‘sparks.’”

The guy flashed a cocky smile.

“Maybe on occasion,” he conceded.

“I heard you had a thing with that super-model, Isabella Moreno,” she said. “Is that true?”

“A gentleman never kisses and tells,” he replied.

“That sounds like a yes to me,” Jessie said.

“I didn’t say that,” Crest retorted, suddenly combative, “don’t try to get me in a jam. Besides, my personal affairs are none of your business, lady, no matter how long your legs are.”

Jessie felt Ryan tense up next to her, though he said nothing. He clearly understood that she was getting somewhere and didn’t want to upend that.

“I appreciate the gentlemanly assessment,” she said, “but I can’t help but notice that you’re really defensive when it comes to Isabella. Why is that? Were things not consensual?”

“Hey,” he protested, “what the hell? You can’t come in here making accusations like that.”

“Where were you today between 11 a.m. and noon, Julian?” she asked, undaunted.

“Probably nailing some chick who’s hotter than you,” he spat, “now I’ve had enough of this. You can go.”

Ryan decided to make a contribution to the conversation. “This is serious business, Mr. Crest, and my partner asked you a serious question. We need a serious answer.”

Crest looked at him, then over at Jessie, before returning his attention to the detective.

“Here’s your serious answer,” he finally said. “Screw you!”

Ryan sighed.

“That’s not a serious answer either, Mr. Crest,” he said with disappointment in his voice. “I’m afraid you’re not giving us much choice but to take you in and get our answers back at the station. None of us want that, so I’m going to give you one last opportunity to be forthcoming—. ”

“You don’t want to mess with me,” Crest said, assuming a fighting position with his fists up, “I know my rights. You come at me in here without a warrant and I’ll bust you up and be justified in doing it.”

“None of that is true, Mr. Crest,” Ryan told him calmly.

“Of course you’d say that,” the trainer retorted, unconvinced.

Ryan looked over at Jessie. She could see that he was half-annoyed that it had come

to this, but also party enthused at the opportunity to take this jerk down.

“You got my back?” he asked.

“Always,” she told him.

"Julian Crest," Ryan said, taking a step forward, "I'm taking you into custody on suspicion of murder. Please don't resist arrest, or I'll have to add that to the charge sheet."

“Come at me, bro,” Crest barked, weaving back and forth. Then, choosing not to actually wait for the detective to come at him, he lunged wildly at Ryan, slamming into his chest and propelling him against the back wall of the studio. Even though it was padded, the collision was violent.

Jessie was just starting to move in their direction when Ryan, still pinned against the wall, extended his arms outward and then forcefully brought them together, boxing both of Crest's ears. The trainer released his grip and stumbled backward, stunned.

Ryan looked over at Jessie and shook his head to indicate that she shouldn't intervene. Then he took a step forward so that he was within striking distance of the other man. Crest, having mostly regrouped, lashed out, swinging hard with his right fist. Ryan, no longer taking anything for granted, blocked it easily with his left forearm, then gave the trainer a swift punch to his formidable solar plexus.

Crest gasped and doubled over, grabbing at his stomach as Ryan darted behind him and kicked him in the back of his left leg. The man dropped to his knees. Almost too quickly for Jessie to process, Ryan had removed his handcuffs, yanked Crest's left arm behind his back, and snapped a cuff on his wrist. The trainer started to struggle, but before he knew it, his right wrist was cuffed to the left one. Ryan grabbed the man's shoulders and tugged him upright.

“You weren’t much help,” he told Jessie.

“You didn’t seem to need any,” she replied.

“I know my rights,” Crest managed to huff now that he’d gotten some of his breath back. “This is entrapment. ”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Jessie told him. “I would have thought that your experience with the legal system during that whole statutory rape thing would have been a decent primer on how things work but apparently not.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” he demanded, before he seemed to grasp what Ryan had told him earlier. “Wait, did you say suspicion of murder before?”

“Yeah,” Ryan told him as he guided him through the glass doors of the studio into the lobby, “you didn’t seem all that surprised in the moment.”

“I wasn’t really listening, man,” he objected. “You can’t be serious.”

“You’re cuffed, Mr. Crest, so I’m pretty serious.”

“That’s some crap,” the man objected before turning his attention to the baffled receptionist. “Carla, call my lawyer.”

“I don’t know who your lawyer is,” she said.

“Then call my mother,” he told her. “She’ll get ahold of him. Where are you taking me?”

“Central Station,” Ryan said.

“Where’s that?” he demanded, “like Central West Hollywood?”

“No, Julian,” Jessie said as she held open the gym’s front door so Ryan could guide him through. “West Hollywood is like Kansas compared to where you’re going. And we’re not in Kansas anymore. We’re going downtown.”

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An hour later, Jessie stared at Julian Crest across the interrogation table at Central Station, trying to hide her frustration.

Despite his demand that Carla the receptionist call his lawyer or his mother, the man hadn't invoked his right to remain silent after he had his rights read to him. In fact, he'd been as combative as ever once they started questioning him. And yet, Jessie didn't feel any closer to solving this case than before.

She understood now why Beth had stopped subscribing to the guy's YouTube channel. Despite his good looks and his intermittent ability to charm, Julian Crest was an egotistical blowhard who couldn't be counted on to speak coherently for any extended period of time. He was a himbo with anger management issues who had been coasting on his dazzling face and body for years.

In fact, midway through their interrogation, they'd received a text from Jamil which showed that Crest's business had been set up by his mother, a CPA who was apparently very involved in his life. That made sense to Jessie, as she couldn't imagine Crest running a lemonade stand, much less a multi-million-dollar business.

Of course, that gave her pause on another front. If this guy was as thick-headed as he seemed to be, could he really have murdered two women without leaving any trace? That's what she intended to get at now.

"Julian," she said. "We've been going around in circles here. You keep saying you're an innocent man being railroaded, but you're not offering us anything to support what you say."

“Because this a corrupt investigation,” he bellowed before pointing at Ryan, who was standing against the far wall of the room with an incredulous look on his face. “You and your beefcake buddy there are like, the enemy of the peop—.”

“Julian,” Jessie interrupted, holding up her hand, “I want you to focus on the question that I’m asking you, not the one you want to answer. If you’re innocent, then you shouldn’t have a problem with that.”

“Unless you’re trying to entrap me! ”

"Even if I was," she told him, "that won't work if the evidence doesn't support it. Now, after we found Isabella Moreno's body—."

“I still think that photo of her you showed me could have been a deep fake,” he protested.

Crest was referring to when they initially confronted him with Moreno’s murder and how he had refused to accept it. At the time, Jessie couldn’t tell if that was an act to throw off suspicion or a legitimate refusal to accept the truth. Her additional questions had her leaning toward the latter.

“Julian, the police don’t create deep fake photos of dead bodies to trick suspects,” she said. “Please stay focused.”

“That’s exactly what you would say if you were trying to entrap me,” he said as if he’d made some unassailably logical argument.

Jessie chose to ignore the comment, sensing it would just send them back down the rabbit hole. “A strand of your hair was found on Isabella’s body. Can you explain that?”

Crest looked at her with a mix of apprehension and pride.

“How do I know I can trust you with my answer?”

“I’m not even sure what that means, Julian,” she said. “All I can tell you is that if you have an explanation for your hair being on her body that doesn’t involve you killing her, it would be smart to share that now. Otherwise, we have to assume the worst.”

Crest dramatically ran his hand through the hair at issue, as if that might help him make his decision.

“Okay, listen,” he whispered, apparently thinking that the microphones in the interrogation room wouldn’t pick up his words, “sometimes Izzie and I would bang. You know, not a relationship or anything, just two people having a good time every now and then.”

“Okay,” Jessie said, happy to be making any forward progress, “did you and Izzie ‘bang’ this morning?”

“No,” he said, “but we did last night. I stopped by her place for a little while. She was nervous about some presentation she had today and said she needed a stress reliever.”

“Where in her home did you help relieve her stress?” Jessie pressed.

“That time it was in the bed, although we would knock boots all over—in her car, once even on the kitchen counter,” he said, smiling at the memory, before another thought popped into his head. “Hey, maybe my hair got on her because it was still in her bed or her car or something. That can happen, right? ”

“Sometimes,” Jessie conceded, deflated. “So you were with Izzie last night. Do you remember what time?”

“Yeah, she asked me to come over early because she wanted to get a good night’s sleep, so I showed up at her place in Santa Monica at 8:30.”

“Do you remember when you left?” Jessie asked.

“Not exactly,” he said, “but I wasn’t there that long, maybe twenty minutes. I remember she made me a sandwich for the road.”

Jessie glanced over at Ryan and could read his mind from his expression. He was doing the same math that she was. If Crest was being honest, there was no way he could have made it from Santa Monica around 8:50 to the Hancock Park art gallery where Chloe Baptiste was killed by 9 p.m.

“What about today at around 11:15?” she asked. “Where were you then?”

“Can I check my phone?” he asked.

She nodded and slid it over to him.

“Oh yeah,” he said after clicking to his calendar. “I was at a meeting. My mom set up this photo calendar shoot and we were going over what I would wear for each month. It lasted from eleven to just before noon.”

“Where was the meeting?” Jessie asked, doing her best not to reveal how, with each word he said, she saw the case against him slipping away.

“Over the hill, in Burbank,” he answered before asking a question of his own. “Is that when she was killed, at 11:15, because there was no way I could be there at that time.”

“Good to know,” Jessie said, standing up. “Julian, I’m going to leave you with

Detective Hernandez here. He's going to ask you to provide some names, numbers, and cell phone data. If it backs up what you've told me, then we may be able to let you go."

"For real?" he asked, a delighted smile on his face.

"For real," she told him before leaning over and murmuring in Ryan's ear. "I'm sorry but I can't take another minute of this. While we've been wasting time with this numbskull, there's someone out there slaughtering women. I need a few moments."

She didn't even wait for his response. As he took over her seat and asked Julian for the names of the people in the photo calendar meeting, she stepped out of the interrogation room. Once she was in the hallway, she headed straight for the courtyard square in the center of the station. It was often her respite from the horrors of these cases, a place where she could take a mental break.

In this instance, she wondered if it could do more. But it probably wasn't realistic to ask a plot of green space in the middle of a concrete, downtown fortress to help her shake off the feeling of approaching doom that was enveloping her like a heavy cloak. No amount of pretty trees could do that. Only catching this bastard would.

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Fiona Greene was sick of the incompetence.

She thundered out of the house, slamming the side door behind her before the staff could hear her expletives.

No matter how many times she'd told them, they just couldn't seem to get it through their thick heads. The furniture in the mansion had to be lint-rolled for fur every day. She loved both her chow chows—Diamond and Pearl—but they shed up a storm. And unless upkeep was done regularly, as in twice a day, things got messy.

Fiona had far too many events at the house, from fundraisers to dinner parties to the occasional speech from a mover and shaker, for her guests to end up with dog hair on their clothes.

Then there was the matter of proper food storage. Far too often of late, Griselda, her head maid, had allowed leftover food items to be placed in traditional Ziploc bags rather than vacuum-sealing them in the special ones that had been purchased for just that purpose. It was infuriating.

Fiona stopped for a moment to gather herself, running her hand through her long, bright red hair. She'd been planning to go to the backyard pool house for a calming mid-afternoon cocktail. That's where she'd told Griselda she would be, before adding that she was not to be disturbed under any circumstances.

But now she had another idea, a better one. She would go shopping. She glanced at her Cartier watch, the one Branford got her for her last birthday. It was 3:42 right now. That meant that if she moved quickly, she would have time to visit some of her

favorite spots before they closed up for the day.

That was what she needed to feel better, some good, old-fashioned retail therapy. She changed directions on the cobblestoned path, no longer headed to the pool house but to the garage.

Fiona found that it was increasingly difficult to find happiness these days. Yes, her life was amazing since marrying Branford. Who wouldn't appreciate the lavish lifestyle afforded by being the wife of a global investment bank CEO ?

There were the impromptu weekend jaunts to Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat on the private jet. There was the annual pilgrimage to the retreat on Lake Como. There was the stay at the Scottish castle last month with the celebrity couple that was so reclusive that she hesitated to even think their names, much less say them.

But as delightful as all of it was, there were times when she pined for her previous life as the owner of a simple Beverly Hills boutique that specialized in purses. Admittedly, most of those purses cost well over \$20,000 and she was pulling in a tidy six to seven million a year from the place.

Still, she had to work hard to make it what it was: managing a staff, coddling wealthy customers, and convincing designers to place their wares with her. It was a hustle, one that she only realized in retrospect that she loved.

Now there was no hustle. As she stepped into the six-car garage, deciding which vehicle she wanted to take to Rodeo Drive, she acknowledged that leading such an opulent lifestyle in recent years had made her soft, and a little petty.

In fact, she found her resentment rising up once more as she realized that someone had left one of the garage doors open, something the staff had been warned to never do. She was about to yell to Griselda, but then told herself to let that one go.

As she took a long, deep, soothing breath and then slowly exhaled, she acknowledged that maybe part of her brittleness was because she harbored a bit of guilt about how she'd come into all this wealth in the first place. After all, she'd only met Branford because he came into the boutique looking for a purse for his then-wife. While Fiona showed him around, they'd hit it off, to put it mildly.

Two months later, he'd left his spouse of twenty-four years. Six months after that, Fiona became his third wife. That was four years ago now, but it seemed like the distant past.

How has she transformed from the go-getter who could sell anyone on that 'perfect' bag, to a woman who screamed at the assistant maid because she didn't put the carrot medley in the proper container? Or who was getting riled up right now because of the bits of dirt and grass on what should be the immaculate garage floor? Where had that come from anyway?

Choking back her exasperation, she chose the Bentley. It felt the most appropriate for the venue. Plus, it would be easier to drive than the stick-shift Jaguar and less challenging to park than the Rivian .

With that decision made, and as she headed over to the car key cabinet, Fiona decided it was time to turn over a new leaf. No more berating the staff for minor missteps. No more firing people for giving her side eye, at least not without giving at least one warning. No more making folks work on their birthdays unless it was absolutely necessary. She knew there was some real animosity when she didn't hear out her people's objections on that one.

Maybe she'd even buy staffers something while she was out today, perhaps a bauble for everyone, something that showed how much she appreciated them. And to be extra generous, she'd include gift receipts so that if the item wasn't to their taste, they could return it for cash. After all, not everyone was liquid these days, something

she'd do well to keep in mind.

Fiona found the Bentley key, snagged it, and turned around. She was startled to find herself face-to-face with someone dressed entirely in black, including a ski mask covering their head. She yelped in surprise and stumbled backward into the key cabinet.

Before she could scream for help, she saw something in the person's raised right hand. To her horror, she realized it was a large knife. She started to lift her hands to protect herself as the knife came at her.

But she was too slow. The blade plunged into the right side of her chest. She'd never felt such unimaginable pain. As blood spurted everywhere, she heard a gasp of agony and understood it had come from her. Before she knew what was happening, the knife had been removed and was coming at her again. She flung her hands out in front of it, but the weapon pierced her palm before slamming back into her body.

She tried to call for help, but all that came out was a dull groan. She felt her body slipping to the ground due to weakness and the slippery red liquid beneath her shoes. Even as that happened, she saw the knife coming down again, hard and fast. She wanted to do something—anything—to avoid it. But her body wasn't responding to her commands.

And then, all at once, the pain was gone. Everything was gone.

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Jessie knew she couldn't stay here for long.

The station's courtyard was just too damn cold. This was where she came when she wanted to clear her head and get a new perspective. But it was hard to think outside the box when her fingers were getting numb. Still, she tried to think about other ways to approach the case. A life might depend on it.

It occurred to her that after her frustrating experiences with Marcus Blackwell, and then with Julian Crest, she'd lost a little perspective. She was more focused on catching this person than understanding them. And it was the latter, more often than not, that led her down the right investigative path. She had to think like the killer she was hunting.

And then it came to her: a way to get a fresh take on things that would also meet another obligation that she'd been putting off. Less than a five-minute drive from here was someone who understood deeply how a serial killer thought because he was one.

Mark Haddonfield, the college student who had first tried to win her favor, and then went on a rampage of murder when he couldn't, was currently sitting in a cell at the Twin Towers Correctional Facility, where he was awaiting trial for his crimes.

He was also awaiting a visit from Jessie. She had agreed that she would come to see him periodically, even have him consult on cases, in exchange for retracting the manifesto he'd written calling for the death of all her loved ones.

He'd lived up to his end of the bargain, posting a recantation video that was compelling, and to date, effective. Prior to the release of his video, one of his acolytes

had murdered Kat's fiancé, Mitch, while trying to get to her. Another had attacked Dr. Lemmon in her office. If not for her stun gun, the psychiatrist might not be here today. Since the video was posted online three and a half weeks ago, nothing had happened.

But Jessie hadn't yet lived up to her end of the deal. She owed him a visit, partly because she'd promised, but mostly because she feared what he might do if he got antsy and decided to have his minions go after those close to her again .

Plus, this was an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. She was skeptical that Haddonfield would have anything meaningful to offer about this case. But maybe just talking to a man who got a thrill from ending the lives of innocents would give her new avenues of investigation. It was worth a try.

They met in the same conference room where they made the recantation deal just two days before Christmas.

Normally, prisoner visits occurred, as one would expect, in the visiting room, but this was a special situation. Jessie sat on one side of the table. Standing at the doors of the room were two prison guards. Notably, neither of them was the guard who had helped tip off corrupt former cop Hank Costabile to her presence the last time she was here, which nearly led to her death.

That guard was busted, just like Walt Crowley, the desk sergeant at Central Station who had secretly helped organize support for Costabile, when his phone number was found in Costabile's cell phone.

Across the table from Jessie was Haddonfield. Jessie studied the young man who had at first tried to ruin her life and then end it. Mark Haddonfield still looked much like

the college student who had once approached her on the quad at UCLA, asking for an autograph. He was the same tall, skinny, now-twenty-one-year-old with pale skin, curly blond hair and glasses. Yes, he looked harder and more guarded than the college boy, but that was to be expected considering his new home. She noted that his gray eyes still had the same manic energy that she'd first noticed over a year ago.

There were some differences. 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.

When he walked in earlier, she noticed that the limp in his left leg, a gift from Hannah when he tried to attack her months ago and she dove into his knee, was almost gone after successful surgery.

But he still had splints on the broken middle finger on his left hand and the broken ring finger on his right, which she suspected came from getting on the bad side of the wrong prisoner. In addition to those old wounds, his right cheekbone was badly bruised, and his left eye was black .

"I was starting to worry that you'd forgotten about me, Ms. Hunt," he said with a wry smile.

"No," she replied. "I've just been very busy. What happened to your face?"

He rolled his eyes slightly at the question, as if to say that they both knew that the consequences for ratting on the person responsible could be severe.

"I accidentally walked into a bathroom door," he said drily. "The vagaries of public living, I suppose."

“And did your fingers walk into that same door?” she wondered.

He stared at her for a few seconds with an expression that suggested he still couldn’t believe she was here.

“For a while there, I was worried you hadn’t visited because they’d gotten to you,” he said, ignoring her question.

“They?”

“Whoever that guard was calling right after the last time we chatted,” he said. “I overheard him and tried to let someone know that you were in danger, but obviously, my resources are limited. I was so happy to see that you had survived.”

“Thanks,” she said. “I’m surprised you had time to think about me, what with your busy schedule.”

He looked perplexed for a second before grinning.

"Oh, you mean my trial," he said. "Don't worry, just because it got delayed a month doesn't mean I won't be facing lady justice."

“Well, I guess it’s my luck that you aren’t sitting before a jury of your peers just yet because I could use your help,” she said, pulling a manila folder out of her bag and resting it on the table.

Haddonfield beamed at the sight of it.

“Is this what I think it is?” he asked excitedly, “our first official case together?”

“I suppose it is.”

“May I?” he asked, pointing at the folder.

“Please,” she said.

He put his hand on top of the folder and started to slide it toward him. He was on the verge of picking it up when he suddenly stopped, looking hesitant for some reason. She was about to ask what the problem was when he glanced to his left and began murmuring unintelligibly.

She’d seen this before. In their last encounter in this very room, as well as in the hospital room where he attacked her while she was awaiting brain surgery, he’d done the same thing. It was almost as if he was talking to some imaginary, invisible friend.

She watched silently as he paused, as if listening to someone. Whatever he heard made him increasingly agitated, to the point that he slammed his fist down on the table. The two guards both made moves to approach him, but she held up her hand for them to stop. He was still mumbling and she could have sworn she heard him mutter “this is my choice. Stop being so jealous!” Then he closed his eyes and exhaled slowly.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

His eyes popped open.

“Yes, of course,” he said enthusiastically. “Just assuaging a few doubts. What have we got here?”

“I’m dealing with a potential serial killer, Mark,” she said, using his first name, well aware that the familiarity would melt whatever walls he’d built up in the last few moments. His giddy smile proved her right.

She proceeded to fill him in on what she knew so far, leaving out the victims' names, which were redacted in the file, but explaining their backgrounds, including their shared, nearly unimaginable wealth. As she detailed their biographies, followed by the method of their death, Haddonfield listened intently, his eyes scanning the crime scene photos with an uncomfortable ravenousness.

When she was done talking, he continued to flip through the pages quietly, clearly deep in thought. She was starting to wonder if he was just stalling when he finally looked back up at her.

"Thank you for sharing this with me," he said, almost sweetly.

"It was part of our deal," she replied noncommittally.

"I have some thoughts," he said.

"I'm all ears."

"I don't pretend to have your experience or talent, Ms. Hunt," he said. "But I am a serial killer, as we can both agree."

After Jessie nodded that they could, he continued.

"I don't think that this person is a traditional serial killer."

"What makes you say that?" she asked, sincerely intrigued.

"Well, when I was planning my kills, I spent weeks, sometimes months on them," he said, his eyes getting slightly hazy at the memory. "It was part of the thrill for me: the organization, the build-up. At first, I didn't really enjoy the murders themselves. They were the obligatory endpoint of the mission, although I will concede that I eventually

warmed up to them. If you'll recall, I had to make my first victim someone truly objectionable, before working up to people who were, I will acknowledge, less deserving."

"And you think this is different, how?" she asked, keeping the focus on the current case and not Haddonfield's exploits.

"Well, as I learned from reading transcripts of some of your seminars and speeches, sometimes the distinction between serial and spree killers gets blurred. But to me, this person feels more spree than serial."

"Why do you say that?" Jessie asked.

"You said the first murder was last night, around 9 p.m., and the second one was earlier today at 11:15 a.m. That doesn't cleanly follow the pattern of a traditional spree killer, going directly from one place to another to wreak carnage. But it feels more rushed than I would be comfortable with."

"Okay," Jessie said, willing to entertain the idea. "Anything else?"

"Yes, the method of murder, while the same with both victims—what with the knife and all—isn't methodical. It's frenzied. It doesn't feel like your killer planned this out in painstaking detail. Instead it feels like they had a general plan, but in the moment, lost control and just stabbed until they couldn't stab anymore. I know this is an odd thing to say, but these murders just feel so...angry."

Jessie sat quietly, turning over his words in her head.

"I'm sorry," he continued, "but I just don't buy that these killings are exclusively about the victims being—what did you call them earlier?"

“Ultra-high-net-worth individuals.”

“Right,” he said. “I’m sure that’s somehow a factor, but these women have both been super rich for a while now. Why suddenly slaughter them in the last twenty-four hours? What was the catalyst that set off our friend, Stabby Stabberson? I don’t accept that this is some ‘eat the rich’ scenario. This feels personal more than political.”

Jessie let that last comment wash over her and, to her amazement, she had to admit that Haddonfield was right. Whatever economic motive there might be to these acts, there was an up-close intimacy to their rage that suggested something more. This was, for reasons she couldn’t yet identify, personal.

“Thank you, Mark,” she said. “This could prove very helpful.”

She was as surprised to say it as he seemed to be to hear it. She had assumed that this would be a perfunctory meeting that might help her reconfigure how she looked at things. But it had turned out to be much more. She didn’t just have a fresh perspective now, she had renewed hope that she could solve this thing. Who would have thought that hope would come from a guy who tried to kill her?

“You’re welcome, Jessie,” he said.

A shiver ran up her spine as she realized this was the first time he’d ever called her by her first name. She stood up and grabbed the file.

"Please don't take offense," she said, "but I've really got to go. This case is obviously a high priority."

“I totally understand,” he said, more relaxed than she’d ever seen him. “And you should go. Based on what I saw in those photos, whoever did this is going to kill

again, if they haven't already."

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Jessie's head was swimming as she jogged out of Twin Towers to the street where Ryan was waiting for her. As she reached the sidewalk, she realized that this was nearly the exact spot where Hank Costabile had tried to kill her just over three weeks ago. She was trying to wrap her head around that when a horn honked, making her jump slightly.

She looked in the direction of the sound and saw Ryan waiting in the car across the street. He was waving at her frantically. She hurried across the street, dodging cars that honked at her angrily. When she arrived, he looked beyond agitated.

"What?" she asked apprehensively.

"You forgot to turn your phone back on when you got out of there," he said. "I've been texting and calling for the last five minutes. I was about to come up there."

"Why?" she asked.

"I just got a call from Parker. There's been another murder."

Jessie couldn't believe the chaos.

When they arrived at Fiona Greene's Beverly Hills mansion, there were so many police vehicles that they had to dart and weave just to get to the main gate.

They had already gotten the basic background on the situation from Jamil and Beth

on the way over. Apparently, Greene, 35, was married to the CEO of a huge global investment bank. Prior to that, she ran a successful Rodeo Drive purse boutique. All they knew about her death so far was that she'd been killed in her garage, stabbed multiple times with a hunting knife.

As they stopped at the gate, Ryan flashed his badge to the officer standing in the middle of the driveway. He stepped to the side and waved them through. As Ryan drove slowly up the long, winding private road leading to the house, Jessie had a thought.

"Whoever did this likely had inside knowledge about the house," she suggested .

"Why do you say that?" Ryan asked as he rounded a grove of trees. The mansion, a plantation-style monstrosity, loomed in the distance.

"The front gate and outer walls of the property are easily a dozen feet high with electrified netting and metal spikes at the top," she said. "It would be pretty hard to scale. To get in, they'd likely need the code to the gate entry keypad."

"You don't think they could have just snuck in when someone entered or left through the gate?"

"I suppose it's possible," Jessie conceded, "but there's no place to hide anywhere near the entrance. It's exposed for fifty feet in either direction. I would think that someone dressed in all black with a ski mask on would be noticed."

"Maybe they dressed normally and changed once they got on the property," he countered.

"Unlikely," Jessie said. "There were multiple security cameras on those walls. They wouldn't have wanted to be identified."

“They could have worn a disguise,” he offered.

"Maybe," Jessie conceded as they pulled up into the circular drive in front of the main doors.

A uniformed officer immediately approached them. From his graying hair, weary face, and confident manner, she suspected he was in charge.

“Hi,” he said as they got out of the car. “I recognized you both as you were arriving. I’m Sergeant Jack Cole, Beverly Hills Police Department. I’ve been maintaining the scene until you could get here.”

“Good to meet you, Sergeant,” Ryan said. “So I gather that there are no jurisdictional issues?”

“No,” Cole answered. “When BHPD learned that this incident fit the profile of the other murders that HSS has been investigating, the higher-ups decided to hand it off. We don’t need a turf war with a serial killer on the loose.”

“We appreciate that,” Jessie said. “Are you able to take us to the crime scene?”

“Absolutely, follow me,” Cole said, motioning for them to join him. “I’m sorry but we don’t have lot for you to work with yet. We’re still gathering information.”

“What can you tell us?” Ryan asked.

“Okay, so it’s 4:47 right now,” Cole said, looking at his watch. “The body was discovered just after 4 p.m. by the senior housemaid. We had people on the scene within five minutes and I got here soon after, at about 4:15. We pegged it as possibly connected to your case almost immediately and reached out.”

“That’s quick work,” Ryan noted as they approached the massive garage. Jessie silently noted that it looked like it could hold up to six vehicles. Right now, there were five parked inside.

“Thanks,” Cole said. “Since our arrival, we were able to get a preliminary time of death. Staff members said that Mrs. Greene left the kitchen around 3:40, saying that she was headed to the back pool house for a cocktail. Apparently, she was upset over some housekeeping faux pas and needed to decompress. The senior maid, Griselda Quintana, decided to check on her to make sure she didn’t need anything, even though Greene had said she didn’t want to be disturbed. Ms. Quintana claims that was rarely actually the case and that Greene would get upset if she wasn’t attended to back there, no matter what she’d said earlier.”

“When did she go to check on her?” Jessie asked.

“Around 3:55,” Cole said. “She said that fifteen minutes was about all the decompression time that Mrs. Greene could handle solo before needing something.”

“And that’s when she noticed something was off?” Jessie asked, not commenting on how challenging a personality Fiona Greene already sounded like.

“That’s right,” Cole explained. “She went to the pool house, but it was empty. She was returning to the main house when she saw that the side door to the unattached garage was open. She went to check on that. That’s when she found Greene in the condition you’ll see her in now.”

They had stopped just outside the open, retractable garage doors.

“Where’s her husband right now?” Ryan asked.

“He drove up to Santa Barbara last night for a shareholders luncheon,” Cole said.

“Our chief of police called to inform him of the situation about twenty minutes ago. He was already on his way back and should be here in the next hour or so, depending on traffic.”

“Did your chief get a sense of his reaction to the news?” Ryan asked.

“He said the guy sounded devastated and had to pull over because he was so upset.”

“Sounds like he has a credible alibi,” Ryan noted, “assuming this wasn’t a murder for hire.”

Jessie hadn’t yet had a chance to share what Haddonfield had told her back at Twin Towers. But based on their conversation about the up- close-and-personal feel of these killings, she was disinclined to think this was the work of a hired gun.

“Before we go into the garage,” she said, “I noticed security cameras out by the main gate. Has anyone looked at them yet?”

“We have someone going through them now,” Cole replied. “I hope to have something for you very soon. Unfortunately there are no cameras near the garage, as you can see.”

“Thanks,” Ryan said. “Mind if we check out the scene now?”

“I’ll stay out of your way,” Cole said. “The body is off to the left, at the base of the car keys cabinet.”

They nodded and headed in the direction he’d pointed them toward. Jessie immediately noticed what looked like faded, bloody footprints on the cement of the driveway. As they got closer to the garage entrance, the footsteps became more red and pronounced. All they had to do to find Fiona Greene was follow them. The

members of the crime scene unit had already stepped off to the side to make room for them.

Greene was slumped down, her back against the side wall of the garage, a giant pool of blood surrounding her. Her blue eyes were glassy. Her fiery red hair was matted with her own blood. Jessie counted at least seven separate knife wounds to her neck and chest and one puncture of her left palm, which looked like a defensive wound.

However challenging Fiona Greene was, she didn't deserve this. No one did. Jessie noted that clutched tight in her right hand was a car key.

"It looks like it's to the Bentley three spots over," Ryan said reading her thoughts. "I guess she changed her mind about the pool house and decided to go for a drive."

"So," Jessie said, taking a few steps back and looking away from the body, "sometime between approximately 3:40 and four, she came to the garage, where she was killed."

"It looks like it was closer to 3:40," Cole announced from the main garage entrance.

"How do you know that?" Ryan asked.

"We just got access to the security footage from the front gate," he explained. "I'll have it sent to you, but it shows someone dressed all in black and wearing a ski mask approach the gate at 3:20. They used the access code to enter the property. They're seen leaving again at 3:47. So based on what Ms. Quintana told us, I'm guessing Fiona Greene died sometime between 3:40 and 3:45."

"No one checking the cameras at the time noticed someone dressed like that sneaking onto the property?" Ryan asked in disbelief.

“Apparently the security team is comprised of two people who walk the property regularly, inside and out,” Cole told him, “but there’s no control room where someone is constantly watching security footage. The cameras seem to have been intended more as a deterrent.”

“They didn’t do a very good job,” Ryan muttered.

“The killer knew the code,” Jessie noted, moving on to the fact that intrigued her more than the cameras, “that means they likely had regular access to the house and that it was someone Greene trusted.”

“Were you able to track where they came from before arriving at the gate or after they left?” Ryan asked.

"Unfortunately, no," Cole said. "We could only tell that they came and left from the direction of the parkette, which is across the street and just down the block. But there are no cameras set up there, and there are no homes close enough to provide alternate views."

“It’s almost like the killer knew exactly how to evade detection,” Jessie grumbled sarcastically.

“And I’m afraid there’s more bad news,” Cole added reluctantly. “I know that parkette well. The back side of it leads to a series of dirt trails, some of which end on adjoining streets. So the killer could have parked just about anywhere on one of the surrounding blocks, changed out of the black get-up and into normal clothes, exited the trail, and driven away without being noticed.”

“Are we sure they drove anywhere?” Ryan wondered. “Let’s not dismiss the employees. It sounds like Fiona Greene wasn’t the greatest boss of all time. Is it possible that someone exited the property from some other spot, changed into the

black outfit, and then came around front to make it look like it was an outsider.”

“There is a back entrance for the staff, just off the rear alley that runs behind all the houses on this street,” Cole noted. “I suppose that with enough planning ahead of time, someone on staff could have found a way to make that work.”

“Then we need to interview everyone on the staff,” Ryan said. “Are your people able to help out with that?”

“We’re at your disposal, Detective,” Cole said.

“How many people work here?” Jessie asked.

"Today, there are fifteen staff people on the property," Cole said.

Jessie’s heart sank. That was a lot of interviews, especially when they couldn’t be sure the killer was one of them.

“We better get started,” she said.

Jessie couldn't believe her luck.

It was at 5:15, barely a half hour into their interviews, when a passing comment from the gardener caught her attention. She was with the sun-weathered man, named Miguel Carlos, in the library, while Ryan and various other officers were speaking to other staffers. A burly, armed, uniformed officer stood off to the side, just in case Carlos was their killer and decided to do something rash.

"Mrs. Greene was very hard in her judgments," he said, when asked how he felt towards the woman, "so I stayed away from her as much as could. She was a little better today."

"Better compared to when?" Jessie asked, her interest piqued.

"She was in a bad mood all day yesterday from the morning on," he said, "ever since the meeting with the man."

"Which man?" Jessie pressed, leaning in.

"I don't know his name," Carlos admitted. "Just that he was in a suit. He comes by every few months to talk to the Greenes. It is something to do with business."

"Tell me about the meeting," Jessie said. "Why did it put her in a bad mood?"

"I don't know what they said," Carlos told her. "They were in the driveway near the front door, and I was by the rose bushes, which isn't close enough to hear. But I saw the man and the Greenes at the door talking. They shook hands. Then he went to his

car, and they returned to the house. But a few seconds later, Mrs. Greene came back out alone and called to the man. They were standing by his car. She was waving her hands and talking loud and angry. He wasn't as loud, but also sounded mad. After a minute, he got in his car and left, driving very fast. She went back to the house and slammed the front door. The rest of the day, she yelled, even more than usual."

"What time was this, Mr. Carlos?" Jessie asked.

"Maybe around ten?" he guessed.

"Who would know his name?"

"The house manager, Missy," he said. "She handles everything—all workers and all appointments. "

Jessie turned to the burly officer standing nearby.

"Can you please get on the radio and ask Detective Hernandez and Missy, the house manager, to come to the library right away?"

Jessie had the call on speaker as they tore down the street.

Before quickly leaving the Greene mansion, they had asked Sergeant Cole to continue the questioning of the other staffers, as they had another suspect to pursue.

"Tell us more," Jessie asked of Jamil, who was feeding them information as fast as he and Beth could gather it.

"So as we already established, the man that Fiona Greene met with yesterday was

their tax attorney, Douglas Kingman,” he said, “and as we discovered pretty easily, he also represented both the Baptistes and Isabella Moreno. Now we’re trying to determine if he had any conflicts with those clients.”

“Keep us apprised of anything you find,” Ryan said as they arrived in front of the Beverly Hills building on North Robertson where Kingman’s office was. “Did any of these clients part ways with him recently? Were there any complaints filed against him by other UHNW clients? Speaking of that, do we know how much the Greenes are worth?”

“I can take that one,” Beth volunteered. “in the last year before their marriage, Fiona Greene made about \$6.7 million. This last year, their net worth is estimated at about \$1.1 billion.”

“Okay, listen,” Ryan said, “we’re heading up there now. Text us what you find.”

The building was only three stories tall, but they had to get through security in the lobby and on the third floor, before they finally got access to Kingman’s office. The security guard accompanied them and, over the intercom outside the front door, instructed the receptionist to buzz them in. She did but shook her head as they approached her.

"I'm sorry, folks," said the forty-something woman with gray hair and glasses sitting behind the desk. "We're closed for the evening."

“But your website says your office hours are until 5:30 and it’s only 5:28,” Jessie noted, hoping that by implying that they wanted to make an appointment, they could access Kingman without having to pull out identification right away .

“I’m happy to discuss a potential appointment for you if you call tomorrow,” she said with a kind smile.

Next to her, Ryan shifted impatiently. She could sense that he wasn't willing to play this game much longer.

"But we're already here," Jessie pleaded. "Please don't make it a wasted trip."

"I'm so sorry," the woman said, "but frankly, Mr. Kingman deals in tax guidance for an extremely exclusive clientele, and he simply doesn't take walk-in appointments. There's an extensive pre-meeting review that is required. Now I'm sure that Lloyd will be happy to escort you back downstairs."

The security guard, who was apparently named Lloyd, looked over at Ryan uncomfortably, uncertain how to proceed. He knew that they were law enforcement, but they hadn't said that to the receptionist yet, which put him in an awkward position. At that point, Ryan decided to end the discomfort.

"Ma'am," he said, holding out his badge and ID, "I'm afraid we're going to have to insist on speaking with Mr. Kingman right now."

The woman leaned across her desk, squinting behind her glasses. After a moment, she settled back in her chair.

"In that case," she replied, as if this was the most normal thing in the world, "let me buzz him."

"Thank you," Ryan said, putting his ID back in his pocket.

The receptionist picked up the phone and pushed a button, "Mr. Kingman, there are people here from the Los Angeles Police Department. They'd like to speak with you."

After a moment of listening to what he said, she replied, "they weren't specific about

the nature of their enquiry.”

After another moment, she hung up and smiled at them.

“He’s waiting for you,” she said, “last door on the right.”

She buzzed them in, and they walked past four other offices, all of which were empty, before reaching the last one. The door was open, and they stepped inside.

Kingman was already standing behind his desk, awaiting their arrival. He was a tall, lean man in his early forties, with thinning blond hair that he made no attempt conceal. He was dressed impeccably, even at this late hour, in a navy Brioni suit, complete with vest.

He had narrow, brown eyes and a scowl that looked like it might be permanently affixed to his face. When he spoke, his voice was gravelly and clipped .

“So what’s this all about?” he demanded.

Jessie glanced over at Ryan to see if he was as taken aback as she was. Apparently, they were skipping the pleasantries. Ryan looked like he was fine with that.

“Do you represent Chloe Baptiste, Isabella Moreno, and Fiona Greene,” he asked flatly.

“In tax-related matters, yes I do,” Kingman replied directly, without any attempt to be evasive.

“When was the last time you saw any of them?”

Kingman sat back down at his desk and punched the keyboard in front of his desktop.

“I met with the Greenes just yesterday morning,” he said. “For the other two, I’ll need to look it up.”

As he typed, he gave no indication that he found their presence or questions even vaguely troubling. He scribbled a few things on a notepad, then looked up.

“I last met with the Baptistes two months ago, just before Thanksgiving. For Ms. Moreno, it was longer. We met last April, just before she submitted her taxes. But I do have records of short phone conversations with her in the months since. The last call was in October.”

“Are you at all curious about why we’re here, Mr. Kingman?” Jessie asked, hoping to shake him out of his officious, robotic persona.

“In light of the news about both Chloe and Isabella’s murders,” he said evenly, “I can only assume that Fiona has been killed too, and that, as the tax attorney for all three, you felt an obligation to talk with me to see if I have any information that might be of value.”

“I have to say that you seem surprisingly unperturbed by the brutal murders of multiple clients,” she noted.

“Would you like me to be disingenuous?” he asked. “I was their lawyer, not their bestie.”

“In that case, do you?” she pressed.

“Do I what?”

“You said we were likely here to see if you have any information of value,” she reminded him. “Do you?”

He shrugged noncommittally. “I’m not at liberty to discuss anything related to their tax situations.”

“What about their personal situations?” Ryan wondered.

“I didn’t know them personally. ”

“Apparently you knew Fiona Greene well enough to get into a heated argument with her yesterday morning,” Jessie said. “What was that about?”

Kingman paused briefly. For the first time since their arrival, he seemed slightly thrown.

“All I can tell you is that it was in regard to a professional matter,” he finally said. “Beyond that, I can’t disclose the particulars.”

Jessie sensed agitation rising in her chest and didn’t feel like making much of an effort to control it.

“You understand that we’re investigating three murders,” she said sharply, “and you have a connection to each victim. Maybe you should be a little more forthcoming.”

“And yet,” he replied slowly. “I choose not to be.”

“That strikes me as very suspicious, Mr. Kingman,” Ryan pointed out.

“You’re free to draw your own conclusions.”

“In light of your lack of cooperation,” Ryan said, “we may need to ask you to come back to the station for a chat.”

Kingman sighed and leaned back in his chair. “In that case, you should know that I won’t go with you voluntarily. But if you feel that you need to arrest me, that is at your discretion, of course. I would just ask to call my attorney first.”

“You have a criminal attorney?” Jessie asked.

“Doesn’t everyone?”

Jessie glanced at Ryan, who looked ready to pull out the cuffs.

“Give us a moment,” she said to Kingman before motioning for Ryan to join her just outside the office. Once there, she spoke in a whisper.

“We can’t afford to waste time going through all the back and forth with criminal lawyers, especially considering how obstinate he is,” she said. “If he’s like this now, it’s only going to get worse once his attorney arrives. Meanwhile, if he’s not our guy, the real killer could be out there doing damage while we’re stuck in an interrogation room.”

“What are you suggesting we do?” Ryan asked irritably. “Give the guy a free pass because he’s difficult to deal with?”

“Of course not,” she replied, fighting off her own irritation. “But maybe we try a different tack. If he didn’t do this, he won’t want to be arrested. No matter how things ultimately play out, it’s a bad look for him with current and potential future clients. So let’s find a way to get what we need without offending his delicate sensibilities.”

“I’m open to anything that gets us answers,” he told her. “Go for it.”

They returned to the office, where Kingman didn’t look like he’d moved a muscle in their absence.

"Mr. Kingman, as I said, we're trying to solve three murders," she told him, keeping her tone as conversational as possible under the circumstances. "If you weren't involved, we'd like to make that determination as quickly as possible so that we can move on to other suspects. I assume that if you're innocent, you'd also prefer that this not become an ugly, protracted process."

"That would be my preference, yes," he said, softening ever so slightly, "as long as I'm not asked to violate any professional standards."

"Okay," she replied, feeling like they might finally be getting somewhere. "Would it violate your professional standards to share your whereabouts at the times of the three murders, and provide relevant phone and vehicle GPS data for those periods, as well as contact information for people you interacted with?"

Kingman thought about it for a moment. "Assuming that none of those requests conflict with attorney-client privilege, I don't think that would be a problem."

"All right then," she said. "Detective Hernandez is going to give you the windows of death for all three victims, and you can check your records for where you were, sound good?"

Kingman nodded, and Ryan stepped forward. As the men began bouncing times back and forth, Jessie stopped listening. However the particulars worked out, she already suspected that she knew the ultimate outcome of this interview.

Something about Douglas Kingman's cool confidence and his quiet stoicism in the face of the allegations he was facing told her all she needed to know. Either this man, in the middle of his busy workday, had twice stripped out of his fancy suit and into all-black clothing to murder two women just today, or he wasn't their killer. The latter seemed infinitely more likely.

That meant that someone else had slaughtered three women in less than a day. And she had a bad feeling that they weren't done yet.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:38 pm

Kat was surprisingly nervous.

As she sat on the couch in her downtown apartment, Dr. Janice Lemmon puttered about in the kitchen, making tea for them both. The psychiatrist had called earlier and asked if she could stop by for an informal house call.

Kat said yes, even though her Spidey sense immediately began to tingle. Lemmon had never offered to come by before, even though her office, also downtown, was less than a ten-minute drive from here. And a visit at 6:15 at night seemed unusual. The doctor had claimed that she just wanted to check in on her, but Kat felt certain that there was more to it than that.

“Did I freak you out so badly at our session this morning that you felt like you had to make a ‘proof of life’ visit?” she called out to Lemmon from the living room.

“I think you’re actually doing pretty well, all things considered,” Lemmon said as she carefully shuffled over with a tray that had a teapot, mugs, cream, sugar, and spoons. Without her cane for support, she had to take it extra slow. “Haven’t you ever had a mental health professional stop by just to say ‘hi’?”

“Sure,” Kat said, “After I got blown up by that IED and everyone else in my Humvee died, I had shrinks stopping by my hospital bed every day for weeks. But none of them made me tea.”

“I guess you’re leveling up,” Lemmon said warmly, placing the tray on the coffee table. “Do you feel as troubled these days as you did after your fellow Army Rangers died?”

Kat shrugged. “It’s different. I didn’t just get blown up that day in Afghanistan. My whole world did. But at least I knew it wasn’t my fault. This time around, there’s no way to avoid the fact that Mitch would be alive and well if he’d never met me.”

“He was a law enforcement officer, Kat,” Lemmon reminded her. “something could have happened to him in the line of duty every time he left the house.”

Kat had multiple comebacks for that but sensed that the doctor was stalling .

“Why are you really here, Dr. Lemmon?” she asked. “Is it to tell me you’ve decided not to go see Ash Pierce? Or that they wouldn’t let you? Just give it to me straight.”

Lemmon poured tea into both mugs, picked up one of them and took a sip. Kat grabbed hers too and was about to pour some cream into it when Lemmon spoke.

“Actually, I spoke to her earlier today,” she said. “That’s the ‘real’ reason I’m here. I wanted to tell you how it went.”

Kat’s hand suddenly started shaking and she quickly put her mug back down on the tray. She forced herself to take two deep breaths, then looked up at Lemmon.

“I’m all ears,” she said.

“We didn’t talk for that long, less than a half hour,” Lemmon said, “so I don’t feel comfortable offering a full-fledged professional assessment. It wasn’t a formal session or interview.”

“She wouldn’t allow that?” Kat assumed.

“Actually, she was receptive to my visit,” Lemmon told her. “She overruled her attorneys’ objections to letting me in.”

“Then why didn’t you stay long enough to make a formal assessment?” Kat wanted to know.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” Lemmon said. “Because it wasn’t an official visit, I can assert, if asked, that I can’t fully evaluate whether Pierce’s claim of amnesia is credible.”

Kat felt a lump develop in her gut. She didn’t like where this was going.

“Why did you feel like you needed that ‘out?’” she asked.

“Because, Kat,” Lemmon answered, looking her directly in the eyes, “I think there’s a substantial likelihood that she’s telling the truth.”

Kat slumped back on the couch, dumbfounded.

“Really?” she asked quietly.

“Yes,” Lemmon said, “and if I had stayed the length of a full session, I worried that her lawyers might be able to get a court to compel me to provide my analysis. I don’t want to do that because I worry that, despite the horrific crimes that Pierce has committed, my professional opinion might provide some sway that could be counterproductive to her conviction. But by cutting the interview short, I can legitimately assert that I didn’t have the time to do a full and proper evaluation.”

Kat shook her head ferociously .

“Listen,” she said, “when I first met Ash Pierce last summer, she was posing as an abused wife trying to escape from her husband. She was totally convincing. Neither Hannah nor I doubted her for a second, she was so good. I don’t want to insult you, but is it possible that she snowed you?”

“Look, I’ll never say never,” Lemmon said. “it’s happened to me before. But not in a long time, and certainly not when I was on guard like this. I know about her deception with you and Hannah. I had access to all her files, even ones that the average doctor doesn’t get to see because they require a security clearance. I was alert to all her tricks. And I still came away convinced that she, more likely than not, has real memory loss about her time as a hitwoman. I wish that wasn’t my conclusion, but it is.”

Kat sat with that for a moment, allowing the reality of it to filter through her brain. She trusted Dr. Janice Lemmon implicitly. The woman was a legend in the psychiatric community, and a person who had her best interests at heart. She wouldn’t admit this unless she really believed it to be true. And she wasn’t alone.

Hannah, too, after her visit with Pierce two weeks ago, had left uncertain that the woman was lying. And this was a person who had also been tricked by Pierce and later, nearly killed by her on multiple occasions. The fact that even she had doubts was telling.

“Do you mind if I run to the bathroom for a sec?” she asked Lemmon.

“It’s your apartment,” Lemmon reminded her with a smile.

She got up and went to the one just off the bedroom. After turning on the water at the sink, she threw some on her face and stared at herself in the mirror.

She reminded herself that this wasn’t as bad as it might seem. Ash Pierce was still scheduled to go on trial for her many crimes, including multiple murders. Memory loss or not, there was ample evidence to convict her. Maybe she could somehow weasel her way into a lesser sentence because of her “condition,” but she’d still be spending decades behind bars. That should be enough.

And yet it wasn't. As Kat towed her face off, she felt a rising resentment grow inside her. If not for her own actions—stemming the blood flowing from Pierce's knife wound to the neck in the hospital boiler room and giving her CPR—the woman would be dead now and Kat wouldn't be torturing herself like this .

Instead the cold-blooded assassin was not just alive, but being catered to in a hospital bed, and very possibly going to live for many years to come. Yes, she'd be in prison, but Ash Pierce was the kind of woman who could mold a place like that to her will. She'd find a way to make it hers.

That was something Kat simply couldn't abide. She didn't know exactly what she intended to do about it. But she couldn't just let it happen. She couldn't just do nothing.

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Hannah did her best to act casual.

It was a challenge, considering that she was essentially surveilling another student.

She wasn't psyched about how this was all playing out. Despite some additional research, she still hadn't found anything definitive that proved that Dana Douglas was stalking Clayton. As a result, she didn't feel she had enough to legally justify recording their study group conversation.

So now she was in the uncomfortable position of trying to get physically close enough to the study room where Clayton was currently waiting for Dana, while seeming to be there to do her own work.

It was a bit of a stretch. The soundproofed study room was on the fourth floor of Langson Library, at the very back of the building, behind endless rows of stacks. Unless one was making use of the study rooms, it was an odd place to go just to work on a paper or prep for a test.

Other than in the study rooms, there were no desks or couches back here, just a few hard-backed chairs interspersed occasionally along walls. She definitely looked suspicious sitting in one just yards from the only occupied study room on the floor. And that was reinforced by the fact that right now, there was no one else up here at all besides her and Clayton.

When Dana arrived, she was sure to wonder what some random chick was doing in this off-the-beaten-path corner of the library, so close to where she and Clayton were. In fact, Hannah worried that her very presence might prevent Dana from doing or

saying anything incriminating.

That was why she was glad that she'd agreed to let Finn come. At least with him here, too, their hovering wouldn't seem so obvious.

She glanced at her phone. It was 6:57. Clayton and Dana's project meeting was supposed to begin at seven. But even though Clayton was already fully set up in the study room, Dana hadn't arrived yet.

Hannah hoped that Finn would get here before her. She'd asked him to come at 6:45 but he was running late because of a fraternity committee meeting. She also worried that he'd get lost finding his way to this out-of-the-way spot. Just then, Clayton poked his head out of the study room.

"You all ready?" he asked.

"Don't talk to me, Clayton," she hissed. "What if Dana shows up and sees us? This will all be for nothing."

"Oh, sorry," he said. "I should have told you. I got a text from her a few minutes ago saying she was running late. She'll probably be another ten minutes or so."

As annoyed as she was by Clayton's lack of real-time communication, the delay allowed her to ask him a question she'd mean to follow up on but hadn't yet.

"Hey, what happened with the guy you said knew someone who left school because Dana was too fixated on him?" she asked. "You were going to get more specifics on that."

"Oh, right," Clayton said. "The guy who told me that is out of town, and I don't have his number. But I'll check in with him as soon as he gets back."

Hannah was about to directly address her frustration with Clayton's lack of urgency when her phone buzzed. She glanced down and saw that it was a message from Finn, saying that he had stopped to grab something to eat and would be about fifteen minutes late. She got a sinking feeling. If he wasn't here, she'd stick out like a sore thumb. But it wasn't his fault. She blamed herself. Her 'intern' was new to all this and didn't get that, when it came to surveillance, punctuality was a priority.

"What's up?" Clayton asked, nodding at the phone.

"Oh, nothing important," she said.

She hadn't mentioned that Finn was coming. Clayton was already so amped up by her being here, she worried that telling him he'd have another observer close by would make him act even more unnaturally around Dana. At that moment, she suddenly came to a conclusion that Kat had once taught her: if a stakeout didn't feel right, bail on it. It wasn't worth blowing your cover long-term to force something short-term. She got up and walked into the study room to break the news.

"Listen, Clayton," she said, "I think we're going to have to pull the plug on this."

"What do you mean?" he asked confused.

"This setup is just too awkward," she told him. "Like I told you earlier, I don't think we can justify recording her, based on the scant evidence of stalking we have so far. And if she closes the study room door, I won't be able to hear a thing. It is soundproof, after all. Plus, she's going to see me out here, with not another soul in sight, and be too guarded. She's not going to say anything to implicate herself unless she thinks you two are alone. Let's bail on this one. Set up your next meeting somewhere more public so I won't stick out so much if I'm nearby."

"But what if she does something sketchy tonight?"

“If you’re really that concerned, I think you should go to the authorities,” she told him. “Stalking is a serious thing, and you shouldn’t mess around using an amateur student detective if you’re that in fear for your safety.”

“But Hannah, the whole point is that I didn’t want to go to them because it would be so embarrassing,” he pleaded, “besides, you’re supposed to be the best. Are you just going to cut and run when things get tough?”

She didn’t appreciate the accusation but tried to keep cool. The guy was feeling unsettled, and he was acting out a little. She decided to let it slide.

“It’s not cutting and running, Clayton,” she told him. “It’s just being smart. This is a bad setup. We’ll figure out a better one. But for now, I should go. I know you said she was running late, but if she shows up and sees me here, the whole thing is ruined.”

Clayton walked over to the door of the study room and looked out, as if he had x-ray vision and could somehow see through the rows of stacks to locate Dana as she approached. Then, to Hannah’s surprise, he closed the door. When he locked it, surprise turned to dismay.

“Why did you lock the door, Clayton?” she asked, a buzz of adrenaline shooting through her system.

He turned around to face her. “I just want to see what all the fuss is about,” he said. “I kept hearing that you’re this big-deal sleuth, you know?”

“What does that have to do with locking the door?” she asked cautiously.

He scratched his head nervously. “It’s just that when I looked you up to see who this girl was who solved crimes, I was really blown away when I saw how hot you were.”

The last comment set off alarm bells in Hannah's brain. Though she managed not to show it, her head started to spin. Multiple questions popped into it at once. Was any of what he'd told her real? Had she underestimated what this guy was capable of?

"Dana's not on her way here right now, is she Clayton?" she said. "And she's not stalking you."

He shrugged.

"She could be," he said with an unpleasant smile. "How would I know?"

In a flash, it all started to make sense to her.

"But the photo under the door," she said, "you took that yourself, didn't you? And Bridget's food poisoning had nothing to do with Dana, right? It was just a convenient way to make her seem menacing? Did you poison Bridget yourself?"

"I would never do something like that," he said unconvincingly as he took a step toward her. "That's very hurtful."

Hannah looked Clayton up and down. He wasn't a big guy, smaller than her in fact. But she knew better than to make assumptions about people's capabilities based on their size. Ash Pierce was tiny. The serial killer she'd shot dead, who was known as the Night Hunter, was an elderly man. She took a step back.

"You're making a mistake here," she said forcefully, standing as tall as she could. "Unlock the door, open it, and step aside. I might be willing to let this go if you stop now."

His smile twisted into an ugly grimace.

“What if I don’t want to let this go?”

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Hannah sensed that this situation was in danger, spiraling out of control. She decided to make one last attempt to rein it in before resorting to more desperate measures.

“Clayton,” she said, hoping she sounded calm and confident, “if you think that stalking someone has legal consequences, think about what you’re doing. Physically threatening someone, which you are on the verge of, has life-altering consequences. You’d be destroying your future. Take a moment to reconsider your choices here.”

He took another step toward her, seemingly undeterred.

“I used to worry about that,” he acknowledged. “But the truth is that none of the other girls talked after the fact. They must have known that saying something would be worse for them than just letting it go. So I figure you’ll keep your mouth shut too.”

Hannah’s heart was beating near out of her chest now, but she reminded herself that she’d been in situations more dire than this and come through them. That thought cleared her head. When she spoke, there was no hesitation in her voice.

“You’re forgetting something, Clayton,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“I’m not like other girls.”

Clayton, seemingly turned on by her words, licked his lips. Then he leapt at her.

He was quicker than she had anticipated, slamming into her and sending her colliding

with the back wall of the study room. With one forearm pressed against her chest, he grabbed at the button of her jeans, trying to pop it open.

She reminded herself not to panic and waited until he got frustrated and looked down to see what he was doing. That's when she pulled her right arm back, then fired it up and forward, smashing the bridge of his nose with the meaty part of her open palm.

Clayton released his arm from her chest as he reached for his face, allowing her to scurry away. But before she could dash to the door, he stepped into her path.

"You're going to regret that," he growled .

Behind him, on the other side of the glass, she suddenly saw movement. It took her a second to process that it was Finn, walking over with a confused look on his face. Because the room was soundproofed, he clearly didn't understand what was happening. But she couldn't worry about that. Clayton had recovered enough to smile again, oblivious to the blood dripping down from his nose into his mouth. He took a giant step toward her.

This time she maneuvered behind the chair that Clayton had been sitting in earlier, and gripped the back of it, as if it was some kind of shield. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that her action had given Finn an idea. He picked up the chair just outside the room that she'd been sitting in and held it up high over his head as if he was going to smash the glass with it.

Clayton got her attention again when unexpectedly, he dove at her. She let go of the chair and kicked it at him, aware that it wasn't going to stop his forward progress. But it did make him stumble slightly as he neared her. That was enough.

As he got to her, she launched her knee upward, making contact with his groin. Just as she connected, she heard glass smashing. She ignored it. Clayton had doubled over

in pain but was still standing. Again, she opened her right hand and locked her wrist. This time she came at him with an uppercut, slamming her palm into the underside of his chin. She heard his jaw snap shut as he toppled backward onto the carpeted floor.

Without hesitation, she grabbed the chair she'd kicked at him, flipped it around so that she was holding it by the legs, and thrust it downward, pinning the top of it to Clayton's neck, jamming it up against his Adam's apple. He appeared too stunned to struggle. Then she looked over at Finn, who was standing in a sea of broken glass, staring at her, dumbfounded.

"There are zip ties in the small back pocket of my backpack over there," she said evenly, nodding to the right. "Get them please."

Finn nodded without speaking. As he dashed over to her backpack, Hannah tossed the chair away and dropped down heavily, slamming her knee into Clayton's gut. He groaned. She lifted her leg up just enough to flip him onto his stomach. Then she pressed her knees into his lower back and pinned his right arm behind it.

"Ow!" he squealed .

Finn appeared at the now non-existent door, with a shocked expression on his face and the zip ties in his clenched fist. She extended her hand, and he tossed them to her.

"Can you please call campus police while I deal with him?"

Again, Finn nodded silently as he pulled out his phone. While he called, she proceeded to tie Clayton's wrists together behind his back. Then she had an idea. She took another tie, and attached it to Clayton's ankle before connecting it to a leg of the desk he'd been sitting at only minutes earlier. Satisfied that it was secure, she stood up. Finn was just finishing the call.

“Yes, at the very back of the fourth floor, at the study rooms behind the stacks. We’ll be waiting.”

He hung up and looked at her, still stunned.

“They said to hang tight,” he told her, sounding like he was in shock. “They’ll be here within two minutes.”

“Great,” she said. “I think we’ll get by until then. Are you okay?”

“I will be,” he answered. “Are you?”

“Mostly,” she said. “Don’t forget, I’ve been through stuff like this before.”

“Oh yeah,” he said, still sounding uncertain. “I haven’t.”

“You did good,” she told him, trying to shake him out of his disorientation.

“Thanks?” he said hesitantly, managing an embarrassed smile. “I feel like it’s an understatement to say this, but so did you.”

“Thanks,” she said with a laugh, stepping over and giving him a kiss on the cheek.

“What was that for?”

“Showing up,” she said. “I thought you were going to be late because you needed food.”

“I decided food could wait,” he told her. “I realized this was more important.”

“My hero,” she said, batting her eyes playfully.

“Are you kidding?” he exclaimed, seeming to be returning to his old self a bit. “You’re my hero. You’re such a badass. How did you stay so calm and collected through all that?”

She sighed.

“Unfortunately, I’ve had a lot of practice,” she told him. “I’m just keeping it together until the cops get here. Then the shaking will kick in. ”

Finn nodded sympathetically. On the floor behind them, Clayton groaned again. Finn looked in his direction.

“What the hell happened?” he asked.

“I’ll get into it later,” she said, feeling suddenly exhausted. “Let’s just say that Clayton wasn’t exactly what he seemed to be.”

"Well, apparently neither are you," Finn said, then grinned mischievously. "Would you like a return kiss in acknowledgement of your accomplishment?"

“We can see about that later,” she told him. “Right now, let’s just get this guy to the cops.”

“Understood,” Finn said. “Sorry to be so glib.”

“That’s okay,” she told him, “but I wouldn’t mind a hug right now.”

“Sure,” he said, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her in tight.

It was then, when she finally felt safe, that the shaking began.

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Lila Warwick checked the mirror one more time.

Satisfied that her dark hair perfectly framed her face and that her hazel eyes popped nicely, she looked at the time. It was 7:08.

She reminded herself that she was a smart, sophisticated, sexy bitch as she turned on the ring light, adjusted the angle of her phone camera, and prepared to start the livestream. They always began at 7:09 p.m., to match her birthday, July 9th.

It was a little cheesy, but she didn't care. And it had taken off with her followers. Most nights, she had a couple of hundred thousand viewers, and for big ones like tonight, that number could climb to half a million.

Lila was proud of what she'd accomplished in such a short time. She could have rested on her laurels and lived off the money that came from being an heir to the Bubblicity Sodas fortune. That's what both her older brother and sister had done. Neither of them had jobs, at least not real ones.

But Lila was different. She'd only been doing this for two years now and she'd already been listed at #26 on the most recent ranking of social media influencers. This year, she was aiming for the top ten.

But that could only happen if she brought it consistently. That's what her fans expected. And that's what she would give them tonight. In fact, she'd be coming in hot in four, three, two...

"What is up my darlings!" she squealed delightedly into the camera. "So good to see

you all again, especially on what we all know is a big night here at Lila's Lounge. As I promised last night, there is a big announcement coming that I think you're all going to be as excited about as I am. Should I share it right now or wait?"

She looked at the stream of comments pouring in on the monitor to her right and smiled.

"Peanutbaby231 says I should spill right now," she announced. "But NeverEverBunnyBoy is begging me to hold off because his boyfriend won't be home from work for another twenty minutes. I'm sorry, Bunny. I don't think I can keep people waiting that long, but maybe we'll compromise and hold off just a couple of minutes for the late-comers to join."

She stopped for a second to take a sip of water. As she did, she felt an odd shiver go up her spine. She had no idea where it came from, but she couldn't let her fans notice that anything was off, so she dived right back into it.

"In the meantime, while we wait for stragglers—and shame on you! —I have to tell you that I just tried these amazing new plantain chips," she said holding up a bag in one hand and a chip in the other, "I mean, what the heck is a plantain even? Like a mutant banana or something? Whatever they are, these things are awesome. They're like, sweet, but not too sweet, with like, a little kick of savory, you know? When they were pitched to me, I almost said no, because as you all know—calories count! But then I found out—."

There was a clicking sound off to the left behind her that threw Lila off slightly, almost making her look over in that direction. She recognized it as the studio booth door unlocking, which was weird because she had the key, and she was the only one here. Instead of getting another shiver, she noticed the hairs on her arms were standing up. Luckily, she was a professional and only stopped talking for the tiniest of seconds.

“Sorry, guys, but my mouth started watering at the thought of a bite of one of these and I had to swallow,” she said, covering nicely. “So I was saying, we hate the empty calories right, which is why—.”

Suddenly there was movement off to the side of the booth. Lila couldn't help but look over. What she saw made her scream. There was someone inside the booth. They were dressed all in black and had some kind of hood over their face. Then she saw the knife and screamed again.

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“Are you sure you’re okay? Because I can drive down there right now.”

Jessie waited anxiously for the answer, hoping that she could read her sister’s tone well enough over speakerphone to determine if she was being honest or just acting tough.

“No, Jessie, it’s okay, I swear,” Hannah told her. “I was kind of freaked out there for a while, I’ll admit. But the guy is in custody now, and I’ve got a friend here with me. Besides, the police say they want to go over my statement again. I just thought you should know what was going on.”

“I can’t tell if you’re just trying to make me feel better or if you’re really all right,” Jessie admitted.

“Listen, if you want to come visit once your case is resolved, I’m happy to have you,” Hannah said. “But I’ll be fine for now. I certainly don’t want you to short-circuit a serial killer investigation just to hold my hand. Maybe bring me some ice cream when your case is over.”

“Okay,” Jessie said, still not entirely convinced that her sister was doing as well as she insisted, but not sensing a full-blown crisis, “but I’m going to be down there as soon as this is done.”

“We both will,” Ryan added.

“Thanks guys,” Hannah replied, “now enough talking to me. Go catch this killer.”

She hung up, leaving them to focus on the task at hand.

“You know,” Jessie said to Ryan as they left the privacy of the small conference room that they’d been in and returned to the Research department, “I meant to mention this earlier and what Hannah said reminded me.”

“What?” he asked.

"She called this a serial killer investigation but when I talked with Haddonfield earlier, he noted something that I'd been thinking about too. This case feels much more like a combination between a serial killer and a spree killer. Yes, we've had multiple victims over more than just one calendar day. But they've all been in the last twenty-four hours, and the frequency of the attacks seems to be escalating. And maybe more crucially, he pointed out that they lack the cold, methodical nature of a lot of serial killers. They're more intimate than that. They feel personal."

“Okay, so where does that leave us?” Ryan asked as they walked into Research, where both Jamil and Beth looked up from their keyboards.

"I think we should focus less on the UHNW element here and more on what set our killer off in the first place," she said, addressing all of them. "Haddonfield was right when he said these people have been rich for a while. That didn't change recently, but something about our killer's connection to them did. Something made them snap. I think we should go back to the first murder again. I have to believe that something about Chloe Baptiste's death is the key here. What if she wronged someone in an irreparable way?"

“We can look again,” Beth said, “but we already eliminated all of the gallery owners and artists that she alienated. They each either had alibis or nowhere near enough motive.”

“Right,” Jamil added. “And our analysis of the security footage in the gallery parking lot didn’t reveal anything more about the size, age, or gender of the killer than Sergeant Delco’s people originally provided to us.”

“Let’s try it from a different angle,” Jessie suggested, “for our purposes, maybe treat Baptiste like a suspect more than a victim. Jamil, didn’t you say you were going to look into her finances independent of her husband’s?”

“Yes,” he said, “but that kind of fell by the wayside once we got more victims and suspects. I can go back to it now.”

“Please do,” she said.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Beth said anxiously, “but there’s something here you guys need to see.”

“What is it?” Ryan asked as they approached her screen and looked over her shoulder.

“I monitor all kinds of internet traffic, and this just had a massive spike,” Beth said. “Let me play it back.”

She pulled up what looked like a clip from a livestream for something called Lila’s Lounge. Onscreen, an attractive raven-haired woman that Jessie assumed was Lila, likely in her mid-twenties, was holding court about some big announcement she had to make before diverting into a commercial for some kind of snack.

“I don’t get it,” Ryan said. “Why is this such a big deal? ”

“Hold on,” Beth said. “It’s coming.”

“So I was saying,” Lila blathered on, “we hate the empty calories right, which is why—.”

Suddenly, Lila looked offscreen and began screaming in terror. A moment later, a gloved hand grabbed at her top. Lila tried to pull away, but a voice hissed, "move and I'll gut you."

Lila stopped moving. The person wearing the glove appeared in the frame, pulling the young woman to her feet. They were wearing all black, including a ski mask. In their right hand was a long hunting knife.

“Let’s go,” they growled. A moment later both of them were gone, leaving the livestream running but no one onscreen. Then it cut abruptly to black.

“How long ago is this from?” Jessie demanded before noticing the timestamp in the top right corner of the screen. It read: 7:10 p.m. Jessie looked at her phone. It was 7:16 right now.

“Do we know who this Lila is and where she was recording from?” Ryan asked.

“I know who she is,” Beth said as Jamil’s fingers began flying across his keyboard. “She’s an influencer named Lila Warwick. She’s gotten hugely popular in the last year, although she was already well-known before that.”

“Why?” Jessie asked, though she had a sneaking suspicion.

"Her family owns Bubblicious Soda," Beth said. "They're massively rich. Plus, her siblings are always on the gossip sites because of their antics."

“I can tell you where she recorded from,” Jamil said, jumping in. “Lila does most of her livestreams from her home studio at her house in Silver Lake.”

“I’ll get units there now,” Ryan said. “Jamil, see about getting an emergency order to access Lila’s phone GPS in case the killer took it too.”

“While they’re doing that,” Jessie said, “Beth, can you freeze on the clearest image of the killer from the livestream?”

Beth did as she was asked, but the results were disappointing.

“There’s no way to identify them based on this, or even get an accurate height or weight,” Jessie said.

“I can try to isolate the voice,” Beth suggested. “It might not help much because they weren’t speaking normally, but it’s worth a shot.”

Ryan’s phone rang but he was still talking on Jamil’s landline to Northeast station—which was responsible for the Silver Lake area—giving dispatch Lila Warwick’s address, so he handed it over to Jessie. The caller ID showed that the call was from Captain Parker.

“Hey Captain,” she said. “Ryan’s on another call. This is Jessie.”

“Hunt,” Parker said urgently. “There’s been another attack, only this time it’s an abduction.”

“We know, Captain,” she said. “We’re all over it already. I’ve got to go.”

She hung up, feeling a small twinge of satisfaction, and returned her attention to the people in the room with her.

“We have to find this girl,” she said, knowing it wasn’t necessary. “No more victims today.”

She could only hope it wasn't too late.

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When they left Lila Warwick's house a half hour later, they were empty-handed.

Jessie had feared as much. If the killer was going to stab Lila right there in the house, what better way to do it than on a livestream? The fact that they'd let her live, rather than killing her right then and there, suggested that they had other, bigger plans.

As they stood on the porch, Ryan called Jamil and Beth.

"There was nothing there," he told them. "I guess the good news is that we don't have a dead body. The bad news is that we have no idea where they went."

"Maybe not yet," Jessie said, "but we could soon. Remember, Lila's phone was gone when we went into the recording booth. That suggests someone took it with them."

"Any luck on that court order giving us access to its geolocation, Jamil?" Ryan asked as they walked back to the car.

"Yes, Detective," Jamil said. "We were able to get an emergency order quickly. Unfortunately, it's not pinging, which suggests that it's turned off. I wouldn't be surprised if the killer put it in a Faraday bag or something to ensure that we couldn't find it."

"Dammit!" Ryan said. "We're right back at square one."

"Maybe not," Jamil said. "While we were waiting for the court order to come in, I was able to do a little more digging into Chloe Baptiste's finances and I found something really interesting."

“Don’t keep us in suspense,” Jessie said, hoping they might have finally caught a break.

“Okay,” he said. “She had multiple bank accounts before she married Laurent, both personal and business, along with several brokerage accounts and the standard retirement stuff. Most of them were folded into joint accounts after they got married.”

“Doesn’t that put her at financial risk if they get divorced?” Beth wondered.

“Truthfully, she would make so much in any divorce settlement that what she had before would seem like peanuts,” Jamil explained, “which is why I found what accounts she chose to keep odd. ”

“Like what?” Jessie asked as she got in the passenger seat of Ryan’s car.

“One isn’t that big a deal,” Jamil said. “It’s an IRA with about \$2.2 million in it. I could see her holding on to it. There’s no real disadvantage. She also maintained a standard checking account. It’s the same one she’s had since she was twenty-two and has \$6,343 in it. It’s possible that she’s just keeping it out of nostalgia or simply forgot she still has it. But there’s another that’s more interesting.”

“Why?” Ryan asked as he got in the car too.

“Because it’s not a personal account held in her name,” Jamil said. “It’s a business account called Creative Holdings and seems at first to be related to sales and purchases of works of art.”

“And that’s odd because...?” Jessie said, waiting for the hammer to drop.

“Because it doesn’t make sense. She already has another business account—a much larger one, that she seems to do all of her art buying and selling through. Invariably,

those deals involve hundreds of thousands of dollars at a time, if not millions. Compared to that, this account is small potatoes.”

“Like how small?” Jessie asked.

“Typically, the items go for between three and ten thousand dollars. Occasionally, they hit upwards of fifteen thousand. But it doesn't look like they're original pieces. It's a lot of prints of known works. And whether she's buying or selling—the latter of which is far more common—the prices are horribly inflated. In one instance, she paid \$5000 for a print that would normally sell for about \$800. I see another instance where she sold a piece for \$7000 that was worth a grand at most.”

“Maybe the frames are gold-plated?” Beth half-joked.

“I was always told that the value of a piece of art is what someone is willing to pay for it,” Ryan noted.

“Yeah, but who's she even competing against?” Jessie wondered before addressing Jamil. “Has the IRS ever looked into this?”

“Not as far as I can find,” Jamil said, “but that doesn't shock me. Considering the sums involved in her primary art deals, they wouldn't have much reason to take notice of transactions this small.”

“But,” Jessie said, “you said she sold far more than she bought, right Jamil?”

“Yes,” he confirmed, “at a rate of about four to one.”

“So,” Jessie mused, speaking aloud what she suspected the researcher was hinting at, “are you thinking that the art works might be a front for some other kind of business?”

“The thought had occurred to me,” he admitted. “I just can’t imagine this woman wasting her time on the sale and purchase of bland reprints when she deals in other, original works valued in the millions. It just doesn’t make any sense.”

“So maybe these transactions are covers for the sale of something else,” Jessie said, “something illicit.”

“Drugs perhaps,” Ryan volunteered. “It wouldn’t be the first time that an art dealer subsidized their lifestyle that way.”

“But why take that kind of risk when she didn’t need any help paying for stuff anymore?” Beth asked.

“And just for the record,” Jamil added, “the preliminary toxicology screen from her autopsy came back a few hours ago. It showed traces of alcohol but no drugs, so it doesn’t seem that if drugs were her thing, they were for her personal use.”

Jessie thought back to what she knew about Chloe Baptiste—how she was willing to push the boundaries of propriety when it came to pressuring artists and gallery owners. Even when it clearly wasn’t necessary, considering that she could outbid almost anyone, she seemed to like the thrill of bending people to her will. Chloe Baptiste liked to play with fire.

“What if it’s not drugs?” she pondered aloud. “What if it’s sex?”

“You think she was an escort?” Ryan asked in disbelief.

“No, that doesn’t seem like her style,” Jessie said, “but trafficking in the sale of sex through other people does seem like the kind of thing that might give her a buzz.”

“That would also be incredibly risky for someone in her position,” Ryan countered.

“Actually,” Jamil piped in, “now that I look at it more closely, Chloe seems to have always sold the same prints. When she bought pieces, they varied. But almost all of her sales are prints of the same eight to ten works.”

“That could make sense,” Jessie agreed. “If each work was a code name for an escort, it would make it easy for her to talk to potential clients about who they wanted, by naming pieces instead of people.”

“It would also make it easier to do the books,” Jamil added, “and to see which escort was ‘selling’ the most. ”

“This is a great theory,” Ryan said, “but do we have any actual hard evidence to confirm that Baptiste is running an escort ring?”

“I don’t know about hard evidence,” Beth volunteered, “but when you guys started discussing the possibility, I pulled up security footage from the office warehouse that Baptiste operated from. I’ve only gone back a few weeks so far, but there is what I’d call a disproportionate number of super-attractive women who entered and left the facility in that time, and they come and go on a pretty regular basis. It could be completely innocent, but it fits with your hypothesis.”

“Okay,” Jessie summed up, “so if we play this theory out, now we have another motive for killing Chloe Baptiste. Maybe she pulled those hardball tactics she’s known for on the wrong client, threatened to reveal that he was paying for sex unless he gave her more money? Or maybe some other person in the same business decided to take out the competition.”

“But how does that explain the other murders?” Beth asked.

“Well, both Isabella Moreno and Lila Warwick are young, attractive women,” Ryan pointed out. “Maybe they were employed by Chloe, and maybe the same client who

didn't want her revealing his secrets decided to take them out too."

It was a compelling theory, but it didn't sit quite right with Jessie. These killings felt like they were motivated more by anger than desperation. Plus, both Isabella and Lila were public figures whose livelihoods could be ruined if they were to work as call girls and it came to light. Beyond that, the theory didn't explain the death of Fiona Greene. She seemed like the kind of person who detested getting her hands dirty. It was hard to imagine her embracing the inherently grimy world of sex work, no matter how "high class."

"Maybe," she said, "but I'm not sure all those puzzle pieces fit together."

"Still," Ryan pressed, "we should look into who bought those prints. That could be a whole other group of potential suspects."

"I just found something else," Beth told them. "Should I set it aside to work on this list of johns with Jamil?"

"What did you find?" Jessie asked.

"I was running Lila Warwick through the system to see if there were any connections among her and the other victims. I found one, but it doesn't look like it fits with this lead."

"Tell us anyway," Jessie told her .

"Well, it looks like two of them—Chloe Baptiste and Lila Warwick—shared the same financial advisor, a woman named Adrienne Shaw," she said. "The firm that Shaw works for, Wealth Consultants West, or WCW, specializes in helping ultra-high-net-worth individuals and for both of them, she was the primary advisor. The firm also advises the Moreno family, although Shaw isn't listed as their advisor. And

unfortunately, there's no indication that Shaw ever worked with Fiona Greene. In fact Greene's financial advisors are with a different firm altogether."

Jessie had gotten her hopes up briefly, only to have them dashed by the last revelation. But then another thought occurred to her.

"What about before she joined WCW?" she asked. "Did Shaw ever work at Greene's firm?"

"Checking," Beth said, pausing briefly before going on. "Hold on, this is kind of weird."

"What?" Ryan asked.

"Jamil, can you backstop me here?" Beth asked. "Make sure I'm not missing something?"

He stopped his work on potential escort clients, rolled his chair next to hers, and looked over her shoulder at her monitor. Jessie could tell from his expression that he was as amazed as Beth.

"What is it?" she asked.

"According to multiple federal and state databases," Jamil said, shaking his head, "prior to four years ago, Adrienne Shaw, didn't exist."

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“You need to shut up.”

Paulina Fitzgerald—better known to the world as Adrienne Shaw—was fed up with this little brat’s muffled sobs. Part of her regretted abducting the pain in the ass. In retrospect, maybe she should have just gutted the girl on the spot like all the others.

But she had bigger plans for Lila Warwick. The woman was her opportunity to finally lay bare the disgusting excesses of these skanks. When the world understood the obscene amounts of money these women burned on a daily basis, all when there were countless sick, starving people everywhere, maybe something could finally be done about it.

The thought made her smile slightly to herself as she looked out on the Los Angeles skyline from the roof of her apartment building, where she was keeping Lila until the moment was just right. She brushed her long, dark hair out of her brown eyes and wrapped the blanket tighter around her curvy frame to protect against the cutting nighttime wind.

Of course, if she was honest with herself, Paulina had to admit that her recent actions weren’t exclusively altruistic. After all, at one point she been one of these uber-rich bitches too.

That felt like ages ago. Sometimes it seemed like a dream, or more accurately, a nightmare. She still remembered how her stepfather first snuck into her bed when she was twelve, and how he’d continued to do it for fifteen more years.

It was still hard to fight off the guilt that came from having let it go on so long. All

through college at Loyola Marymount University and while she got her master's in Finance from USC, she lived at home, in the massive compound in Bel-Air that was paid for by her stepfather's unimaginable wealth, all due to shady oil deals, many of them with men who had been labeled war criminals by various international bodies.

And all that time he would visit her, sometimes after her mother, Carmel, was passed out drunk. Other times, he didn't even bother with that formality. It was only when she was 27 and had been working as a junior financial advisor for a full two years at a Beverly Hills firm, that she finally screwed up the courage to tell her mother what had been happening right under her nose.

She knew the horrible truth the second the words came out her mouth and she saw Carmel's face. The woman had known all along. Maybe that was what drove her to drink. Worse, she didn't seem to care. Paulina threatened to go to the authorities.

Her mother said that she didn't believe her, almost certainly because to say anything else would have put her extravagant lifestyle at risk. Until she married Donald Fitzgerald when Paulina was five, the two of them led a tough life, surviving on public assistance while Carmel worked as a cocktail waitress. That's how she met Donald. Paulina knew that after years of easy living, her mother would never risk going back to that old life.

Paulina realized just how desperate to hold onto her current life her mother was almost immediately. Carmel told her daughter that if she went to the police, she would tell them that Paulina was lying, that she had emotional issues which had never been properly addressed. She even went to Paulina's stepfather and told him about the allegations.

Soon after that, both her parents came to talk to her in the cavernous breakfast room where she was sipping her coffee one morning before heading off to work. She still remembered that it was a lovely fall day, just a week before Thanksgiving. They sat

down opposite her, stern expressions on their faces.

They told her that they were cutting her off financially, and in fact disowning her as their daughter. They reiterated that no one would believe her allegations and that if she insisted on going to the authorities, they would bury her in lawyers, filing defamation lawsuits against her and trying to get her committed to an institution.

Stunned but deep down, not really that surprised, she agreed to move out and not pursue any legal action. With the tiny nest egg that she'd scraped together since she started working, she decamped to a weekly motel in Mar Vista that let her pay in cash and didn't ask for any ID to verify the fake name she used when she checked in.

But somehow, her stepfather found her anyway. He had people for that. And apparently, he'd paid off the night desk manager at the motel to give him a key to her room. When he opened the door, she woke up and found him undressing. She said that if he didn't leave, she'd go to the cops.

“Who will ever believe you over me?” he asked dismissively .

Then he got under the covers with her and climbed on top of her. Fighting him for the first time in her life, she managed to shove him to the side and scramble away to the bathroom. She tried to lock the door, but he slammed it open. She was knocked backward, and his momentum sent him forward too fast. His leg hit the edge of the bathtub shower.

He careened in and slammed his head against the tile before slumping down in a heap, semi-conscious and groaning. PaulaPaula rushed out of the bathroom and started for the front door, wearing nothing but a t-shirt and panties. But then she stopped.

She looked over at the tiny kitchenette in the corner of the room and remembered the

steak knife that she'd used earlier in the evening to cut her microwaved chicken nuggets into extra-small pieces to make them last longer.

Without stopping to think, she hurried over, grabbed the knife from the drain tray, and headed back to the bathroom. Her stepfather, the wealthy, illustrious Donald Fitzgerald, was lying naked in the bathtub, struggling to pull himself upright. His eyes were glassy, and he blinked repeatedly.

Paulina took two steps toward him, pulled the plastic shower curtain across the tub, then grabbed a washcloth and shoved it in his mouth. His eyes popped wide as she leaned down and plunged the steak knife into the side of his neck.

He flailed wildly. Blood spurted everywhere. He tried to scream, but the washcloth muffled it. Then she stabbed him again on the other side of the neck. More flailing. But she stayed focused, keeping her hand pressed against the washcloth while jamming the knife into any soft spot she could find, of which there were many.

It took thrusting the knife into her stepfather a good fifteen times before he finally stopped fighting. She pulled back and watched his last, fitful, wheezy breaths. Then he stopped moving entirely.

The rest of the night was exhausting, but everything she did seemed to make sense. That included throwing on jeans and a hoodie and going to the nearby big box hardware store, which was open all night. She bought a hacksaw, rubber gloves, a drop cloth, several small towels, bleach, and a box of heavy-duty trash bags. It was self-checkout, so no one batted an eye.

She spent hours cutting Donald Fitzgerald into manageable pieces and stuffing him into trash bags. She did the same with the shower curtain, which was beyond salvaging, and the drop cloth. After that, she wiped down the tub with the bleach until it was immaculate and tossed the towels into a bag with most of Donald's arms.

Then, while it was still dark out, she hauled it all out to the trunk of the crappy old beater she'd bought earlier in the week after her parents had her Porsche repossessed. She left without checking out of the motel.

She drove around in the wee hours until she found an empty lot that had a rusted oil drum. She folded down the backseat, shoved it in and drove out to Pyramid Lake, in the Angeles National Forest, up near Castaic, a good fifty-five miles north of the city. She remembered visiting the lake when she was a kid and learning to jet ski there. She also remembered that the lake's beach was rocky in places and that there was a fishing pier that extended unusually far out into the water.

When she arrived, it was just as it had been in her memory. She didn't waste time on nostalgia. Instead, she loaded up the oil drum with big rocks, along with trash bags full of Donald's body parts. Then she put the top back on the drum and smashed it down with a rock so that it was snug.

After that, she rolled it down the pier and into the water. The sun was just starting to rise over a mountain to the east as the oil drum plopped into the lake. In the dim light, she watched it bob on top of the water. For an endless moment, she feared it would stay that way.

But then water slowly started to seep in through the myriad rusted holes in the drum. After what felt like an eternity but was probably less than two minutes, the drum began to sink. Soon it was completely below the surface, and then, too deep to see at all.

Over the next few weeks, Paulina had much work to do, but that didn't stop her from keeping half an eye on the news, which detailed the missing father and daughter, Donald and Paulina Fitzgerald. There were lots of theories but not much evidence.

And with Paulina now in Mexico, using a false name, the trail ran dry. She saw fewer

and fewer stories over the next few months, which she spent laying low as she used what remained of her nominal funds to get plastic surgery and pay for forged documents that gave her a new identity, education, and work history.

Unfortunately, there were cost overruns that her nest egg couldn't cover. In order to pay for everything, she had to do some escort work at a few high-end hotels in Mazatlán. Nothing she experienced there was worse than what her stepfather had done to her. Eventually, after nearly a year, she had replenished her nest egg enough to feel comfortable returning to L.A.

With her new face, her blonde hair now dyed black, brown contact lenses to hide her naturally blue eyes, and a breast reduction, she was virtually unrecognizable as the same person. In fact, she wasn't. Now her identity was Adrienne Shaw, an in-demand financial advisor to multiple ultra-high-net-worth individuals. Conveniently, she couldn't name any of them to potential new employers during job interviews because of nondisclosure agreements.

She got an internship at Wealth Consultants West and quickly moved up the career ladder, in large part because of her past experience in the field, which far exceeded the other interns. It didn't hurt that at 28 (though her faked birth certificate said she was 25), she was older and more erudite than her peers.

Within a year, she had her own accounts, Within three more she was juggling several of the most prominent clients in the firm's portfolio, among them the Baptistes and the Warwick family, along with their daughter, Lila. At one point she had also worked with the Moreno family, including their daughter Isabella, before eventually handing off that account to a colleague.

Adrienne was raking it in. Admittedly not anywhere close to her clients or her stepfather, but still pulling in a solid seven figures. Considering that less than five years prior, she was selling her body in Mexican hotels, she'd come a long way. No

one questioned her identity or her bona fides. Everything was going wonderfully, until she made one mistake.

In a meeting with Chloe Baptiste last week, she had unthinkingly mentioned that the art dealer had overpaid for a piece she bought. Adrienne knew that because her stepfather had bought it eleven years ago for \$6.9 million. In an unfortunate coincidence, Chloe ended up buying it from Paulina's mother, who apparently wasn't as liquid as she liked, for \$11.1 million.

Chloe became immediately suspicious of her young financial advisor's unexpected knowledge of the high-end art world and had some research done by an off-the-books investigator. Pretty quickly, he unraveled some of her background, including her surgeries and her time working the Mazatlán hotel scene.

Chloe asked for an unscheduled lunch meeting in a café yesterday, where she revealed to Adrienne what she knew, including sharing some grainy photos of her getting extra handsy with potential clients in hotel bars before heading back to their rooms.

She didn't seem to have made the connection between Adrienne and her past life as Paulina Fitzgerald, but that loomed as a possibility, maybe even a certainty, if she kept digging. Luckily that wasn't her focus. Instead Chloe revealed that in addition to being an art dealer, she ran a top flight escort agency on the side, and she thought that Adrienne could fill a gap in her services.

She said that she had several pretty young things in her stable. But she didn't have a girl who met the needs of men looking for a little more maturity. They wanted adult women who gave off an air of elegant professionalism rather than mere nubile enthusiasm. Adrienne could meet that need.

"I promise that it will be our little secret," Chloe said over a Cobb salad. "Your

employers need never know. It's time to get back into the business."

"I'm happy with the work I'm doing now," Adrienne had told her.

"Maybe re-think that," Chloe warned. "This could be a boon for you, or it could destroy you."

"What about you?" Adrienne had challenged. "A mega-art dealer married to a big-time film executive. Your reputation is at risk here too."

"Oh, you're so sweet, trying to threaten me," Chloe said, after sipping a glass of Chablis. "That kind of allegation wouldn't affect me. I'm richer than God. Besides, I would just deny everything. Those accounts are well-hidden. And let's be frank, at the end of the day, who would believe you over me?"

Those were almost exactly the same words that Adrienne's stepfather had said to her as he climbed into bed with her in that ratty motel room all those years ago. And when she heard them again, something in her snapped. But outwardly, she just smiled.

"Can I have a little time to think about it?" she asked.

"Of course," Chloe had said. "Not that there's much to think about. It's 1 p.m. now. I'll give you twenty-four hours, until exactly this time tomorrow. If I don't hear from you by then, I'll assume we have a deal. If you do call, then we may have a problem."

After lunch, Adrienne changed into sweat pants and a hoodie, then went to a local army supply store where she bought an all-black outfit and a ski mask. After that, she went home and collected the hunting knife that she'd kept under her pillow at night ever since her stepfather snuck into that motel room .

That night she drove to the art gallery where, at lunch, Chloe had mentioned that she'd be tonight for an auction. She parked a block away and walked to the alley behind the gallery, hiding in the bushes until she saw the woman emerge. The rest was shockingly easy. And liberating.

It was as if each plunge of the knife into Chloe's body broke a shackle that had been binding Adrienne, until by the final blow, she was free. After the deed was done and she rushed back to her car, she luxuriated in the rage. She'd never felt so powerful. It was as if she was finally, after two decades of subjugation, in control of her own destiny.

She had to recreate this high again. And then, on the drive home, it hit her. What better way to regain the glorious fury she'd just experienced than by unleashing her wrath on others who deserved it?

Her firm had multiple other clients who were just as self-satisfied with their grotesque wealth as Chloe. For example, there was the model, Isabella Moreno, who thought that her success was a result of her own talent rather than daddy's bankroll.

But she knew that if she butchered only her own current or former clients, she'd be easy to find. So she decided to mix it up. Back in her Paulina Fitzgerald days, when she was a financial advisor at her first firm in Beverly Hills, one of her clients had been a real nightmare named Fiona Cantwell, who owned a successful purse boutique.

In the years since, Fiona had married extremely well, taken her husband's name, and no longer needed to work. But according to everything Adrienne had heard, the woman was even more awful than when she'd known her. So, she added her to the mix.

Getting into the Greene mansion wasn't hard. She simply waited outside the back

gate until an employee left for lunch, and then followed him to the local Jack in the Box and offered him a \$1000 for the gate entry code. The guy gave it up without any fuss, likely assuming she just wanted to rob the place. He even offered to tell her where the security cameras on the property were for another grand, which she happily handed over. Adrienne knew that he'd never reveal what he'd done after Fiona was dead. He'd be considered an accessory to the crime.

Once Fiona was no more, Adrienne wracked her brain for the next best candidate. It didn't take long. Lila Warwick, who would be just another wannabe influencer without her father's ill-gotten gain, had mentioned to her recently that she would be announcing the release of her very first fragrance on her livestream tonight. That outlet would provide the perfect chance to let the world see, in real time, just how craven these women were. But unlike the other kills, this time she wouldn't do it right away. She would take her time.

That's why she had to rush Lila out of her Silver Lake house quickly before the police arrived. It was also why she brought a roll of aluminum foil along with her. After securing Lila in her trunk, she removed the SIM card from the girl's phone, turned it off, and wrapped it in the foil as an extra precaution so that it couldn't be traced.

All of that had led to this moment on the roof of her building. With the door to the roof barred and Lila gagged and duct-taped to a chaise lounge chair, Adrienne finally had a moment to relax before the big finish.

She leaned against a wall and basked the rainbow-hued glow of the sign shining across the street from the Paradiso Hotel. Somehow the psychedelic wash of colors that periodically splashed across her building's roof, and the empty pool, seemed appropriate for the magnificent madness of this moment.

She took a deep breath and turned her attention back to Lila. The respite was over. It was time to get down to business. Soon the whole world would watch Adrienne

complete her mission. Everyone would know the truth about these people. It would be laid bare in blood.

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Jessie didn't understand what they'd done wrong.

As they walked out of Adrienne Shaw's apartment building onto the downtown street, she tried to think back on what error they might have made. Concentrating was made more challenging by the garish hotel sign overhead that drenched the entire street in a kaleidoscopic rainbow that made her head hurt.

They had divided up their search after Jamil gave them Shaw's office and home addresses. Ryan had sent detectives Susannah Valentine and Sam Goodwin to her office after Jessie insisted on searching her apartment. She felt sure that the woman would feel more comfortable returning to her home base to finish what she'd started with Lila.

But after a thorough search of the place, with the help of four uniformed officers, they came up empty. Susannah had informed them that they too, didn't find any trace of Shaw or Warwick at the Wealth Consultants West offices.

So where would she have gone? As the officers who'd helped them pulled away in their squad cars, Jessie thought back on what Jamil and Beth had told them about Shaw in their conference call on the drive here from the Silver Lake house. Foremost in her head was the shocker that Jamil had shared just as they'd pulled up at the building. Adrienne Shaw's real name was Paulina Fitzgerald.

It had taken the computer a while reach that conclusion because of the extensive plastic surgery the woman had, along with changes in the color of her eyes and hair and the style of the latter. But eventually, the facial recognition program worked through the changes to shoot out the name of a woman who'd been missing and

presumed dead for five years. Most people thought that she and her stepfather, who had also disappeared around the same time, had been abducted and murdered. But she at least she was still alive.

Jessie wondered what could have caused the young woman to make such a dramatic decision—to throw away her life of unending wealth and start fresh with a new face and name. In her experience, when someone made such a drastic choice, it suggested that there was something deeply wrong with the life they were abandoning. More often than not, it had to do with some kind of abuse that they were trying to escape.

If Jessie was were to hazard a guess, it would be that this had something to do with the woman's missing stepfather. His disappearance didn't feel coincidental. But that was just supposition for now. And unless it helped her find Adrienne and Lila, it wasn't of much use at the moment.

What might be more relevant was why Paulina had targeted her original victim, Chloe Baptiste, in the first place. It wasn't crazy to suspect that perhaps Chloe had somehow uncovered her financial advisor's fake identity and decided to use it against her. She had certainly proven that she was willing to manipulate people and that she was willing to cross legal lines with impunity. Was it possible that she might use Paulina's secret as a way to recruit her into the escort business? It didn't feel like that much of a stretch. Either way, that seemed like a pretty strong motive to shut her up.

"Let's go back to the station and regroup," Ryan suggested, opening the driver's door and getting in.

Jessie opened her door as well but instead of hopping in the passenger seat, she remained sanding, staring up at Adrienne's—or Paulina's—gleamingly expensive apartment complex.

"What is it?" Ryan asked, poking his head up again.

“I’m not sure,” she told him. “I know we didn’t find anything up there, but I can’t shake the feeling that this is the right place. Paulina doesn’t know that we know about her. She still thinks her identity is secure. She’d want to go somewhere that she could have privacy, where no one would stumble across what she was doing. The office is too public, and she doesn’t own any other property. This is it.”

“Maybe we should have more officers from West L.A. Division join the search at the Fitzgerald compound in Bel-Air,” he suggested. “I know they didn’t find anything there yet but it’s a big place and that was her home for a long time.”

“That would have made sense,” Jessie agreed, “but it just doesn’t fit. Remember, Jamil got authorization to check all the Bel-Air compound’s surveillance footage and didn’t see anything suspicious. Besides, Paulina’s car was found parked on the street halfway between her office and this place. It has to be one of the two. And while I can’t prove it, I just know it’s here. ”

“Okay then, Ryan said, “then let’s figure this thing out. We don’t have to go anywhere. We’ll just sit in the car until we crack it.”

Jessie nodded and joined him inside the vehicle. Truthfully, it was nice to have a little break from the lashing winter wind. She took several deep breaths, trying to clear her head. But before she’d even exhaled once, Ryan’s phone rang. It was Beth. He put her on speaker.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“The livestream started up again,” she said. “I’m sending you both the link now.”

A moment later it arrived and Jessie clicked on it. Her screen filled with the image of Lila Warwick, who was gagged and duct-taped to a chaise lounge chair. Her hair whipped violently across her face. It was hard to be sure, but it didn’t look like she

was bleeding or had any obvious injuries. There was still time to save her.

“Jamil, where is this?” Ryan demanded.

“Working on it,” the researcher said.

Jessie heard someone off-camera off-camera talking, making no attempt to hide her voice. That was a concern. If Paulina was no longer trying to disguise her identity, it might mean she didn't care anymore whether she was caught. That made her not just dangerous, but unpredictable.

“You all came for an announcement,” she said, the camera shaking slightly in her hand. “Well, I’ve got one for you, and it’s a hell of a lot better than the release of some dumb perfume. What I’m here to tell is that after I list the crimes of Lila Warwick, I will pass judgment on her. And you, the viewing public, will get to bear witness to her live execution. Exciting stuff, huh!”

Jamil!” Ryan barked.

“I know, Detective,” Jamil said quickly. “There’s a little lag time in how long it takes for the GPS data to process. It’s definitely downtown. I should have an exact block for you in the next thirty seconds.”

That might be too late,” Ryan growled in frustration.

As Jessie listened and stared at the screen, she tried to glean any clues about their whereabouts from Lila’s surroundings. With the way her hair was flying everywhere, and with her constant shivering, it was clear that they were somewhere outside. The chaise lounge suggested they might be poolside. And then, a gaudy phantasmagoria of moving colors crossed over the girl’s face .

Jessie looked out the car window up at the sign for the Paradiso Hotel. It had the same unsightly, shifting visual palette. The two women were nearby, within range of the sign. And then it hit her.

“Beth,” she said quickly, ignoring Paulina’s monologue as she detailed a litany of Lila’s crimes, which mostly involved being too rich, “does Paulina’s apartment complex have a rooftop pool?”

“Hold on,” she said, “checking.”

She didn’t wait for her to answer, getting out of the car and jogging back to the building’s lobby, with Ryan right behind her. They were just entering when the researcher replied.

“Yes, it does.”

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The door to the rooftop was barred shut. Jessie wanted to scream in frustration but worried that Paulina would hear her.

“I don’t want to try to smash it open or shoot it,” Ryan said to both Jessie and the building manager as they stood just inside. “That will warn her that we’re here. Is there another way to access the roof?”

“Yes,” said the manager, a smallish man in his fifties who looked like he was struggling valiantly not to become overwhelmed by the situation. “There’s a service entrance down the corridor. It opens up onto the other side of the roof.”

“Take us there,” Ryan instructed.

Forty-five seconds later, they were through the quickly unlocked door and on the roof. From this angle, neither Paulina nor Lila was visible. Jessie and Ryan put in their earbuds and listened to Beth, who was giving them a play-by-play of the livestream.

"You guys need to hurry," she told them urgently. "Paulina has listed off Lila's supposed crimes. Now she's put the phone somewhere nearby, and we can see her onscreen. She's right up next to Lila, holding the knife to her throat and saying that she's been found guilty. I think she's almost done talking."

They darted around a series of large mushroom-shaped turbine vents until they finally caught sight of the two women. Despite the situation, Paulina Fitzgerald—now Adrienne Shaw—had a statuesque bearing that made it easy to understand why people would trust her with their money. Even with a hunting knife to someone's

throat, she had a self-possessed, unflappable bearing about her. Her own dark hair was tied back in a bun, and her angular, surgically altered features were unperturbed by the enormity of what was going on.

After processing all that, Jessie came to another grimmer determination. From the direction that she and Ryan were approaching, Paulina would see them easily. There was no way to sneak around the back of her.

“We’re not going to be able to surprise her,” Ryan whispered, “and she’s too close to Lila. The risk of hitting the victim is too great to try shooting her. ”

“Then there’s only one option left,” Jessie replied.

“What?”

“We have to try to talk her down,” she said.

“In her state, there’s no way we’re going to be able to—.”

But before he'd finished the sentence, Jessie had stepped out into full view.

“Adrienne,” she called out from across the roof, “can I have a word with you?”

The woman looked up, startled to see Jessie there, along with Ryan, who had drawn his gun the second his wife made her presence known.

“Don’t take another step!” Paulina shouted.

“I just want to talk,” Jessie said evenly. “You’re still in control here. I’m just trying to understand what you’re after.”

Paulina shook her head forcefully.

“Didn’t you hear the charges I laid out?” she demanded. “Didn’t you hear me render a verdict?”

“I did,” Jessie said, slowly moving forward, “but we both know that’s not what this is really about.”

“You don’t know anything about me!”

“I know more than you think, Paulina,” Jessie said, using her real name for the first time.

The woman briefly froze before regrouping.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” she spat. “So, you know who I am. That’s just a cheap parlor trick.”

“But that’s not all I know,” Jessie told her, inching closer. They had been fifty feet away. Now they were thirty. “I think I understand what really has you so upset, and it’s not just the fact that these women you killed didn’t appreciate the money they have.”

“I’m not upset,” Paulina said. “I’m full of righteous outrage for everyone who suffers at their hands.”

“You weren’t upset at Chloe Baptiste’s effort to blackmail you?” she asked, knowing that she was taking a risk by making that assumption. “You didn’t resent the way she tried to use your past against you? Isn’t that what really set you off, Paulina, and with good reason?”

As she spoke, she continued to take small steps toward the two women, until, when she finished speaking, she was only fifteen feet away.

“Stop moving,” Paulina said, pressing the blade of the knife right up against Lila’s throat. “You are killing her. ”

Jessie stopped and held up her hands with her palms facing Paulina in a sign of submission.

“I’m stopping,” she assured her, glancing over her shoulder and seeing that Ryan had stopped too, a good ten feet behind her. Even though she had stopped moving, she kept talking.

“I get it,” she said quietly, now that they were close enough to each other that she could be heard without yelling, “I really do.”

“You don’t get anything,” Paulina snarled. “You have no idea what I’ve been through.”

“It’s true—there’s no way that I can comprehend the depth of your pain,” Jessie conceded, before deciding to take a leap that was based more on feeling than fact, “And I don’t know what Chloe was holding over you that made you so angry, so desperate. But I do know what it’s like to have a father whose intentions can’t be trusted.”

Paulina stood up slightly. She seemed legitimately surprised by that one, as if this was the first time that someone else had ever suggested that such a highly regarded man might not be exactly what he seemed.

“He was my step father,” she said with unvarnished derision.

"Okay," Jessie said, "but all the same, he raised you, right? He was supposed to take care of you. But I'm guessing he failed in some unfathomable ways. Am I right, Paulina?"

The woman's eyes went wide, but she said nothing. Jessie continued.

"My father murdered my mother right in front of me when I was six years old," she said softly. "He used a knife a lot like that one. And then he left me, tied to a chair, in an isolated, snow-covered cabin. That was my childhood, Paulina. I'm guessing that your pain was different, but that it lasted a lot longer than mine. Because, while my mother died and all I have left of her is memories, yours was there the whole time, letting it happen, wasn't she? Is that what you see when you use that knife on these women?"

"How could you possibly know any of this?" Paulina whispered, loosening the grip the knife slightly.

"Why would you leave a life that seemed so perfect?" Jessie asked. "Why change your identity and start over unless the perfect facade hid a nightmare? There are only a few reasons someone would do something as desperate as that. That's how I know, Paulina. And also—because I can see it in your eyes. I can see years of pain."

Paulina just stared her, unblinking, as if stunned by the first person to ever understand her. Jessie kept going .

"But I can tell you that the pain doesn't have to last forever," she said, "not if you're willing to face it head-on head-on. There are people who can help. I can help. But to get that help, and to get real freedom from the trauma of your past, you have to stop this. You have to let Lila go. If you do that, we can start down the path to healing. All you have to do is hand over the knife. Will you do that, Paulina?"

For an endless, wordless eternity, Paulina just stood there, knife in her hand, tears welling up in her eyes. Then, finally, she nodded.

“Okay, I’m going to step toward you then,” Jessie said carefully. “Just hold out the knife by the blade and I’ll take it.”

She took a small step forward. Paulina looked down at the knife, almost like she’d forgotten that it was in her hand. She was just starting to adjust it so that she would be holding the blade when she passed it to Jessie. And then, whether out of anger or terror, Lila grunted.

Paulina looked over at her and in that moment, something changed. Jessie saw it immediately. The vulnerable young woman trying to make a break with her tattered past was gone. The vengeful butcher of three people was back.

As Paulina regripped the knife, Jessie launched herself forward, making up the distance between them in the time it took Paulina to raise her arm over her head. The woman seemed to sense that she wasn’t going to be able to stab Lila before Jessie got to her, so instead, she turned to face her pursuer directly, swinging the knife downward.

Jessie got to her first. She grabbed Paulina’s right forearm as it drove toward her, stopping her momentum. For several seconds they grappled, like a deadly game of arm wrestling, as the blade rested only inches from Jessie’s face.

“I can’t get a clear shot!” Ryan shouted from behind her. “Move!”

Without really thinking about it, Jessie stopped pushing up on Paulina’s arm and yanked it down and to the side, making both of their bodies twist so that she was no longer blocking her husband’s aim.

He fired a second later. For a moment, nothing changed between the women. Then Jessie saw a patch of blood start to spread at Paulina's right shoulder. A second after that, Jessie felt the other woman's grip loosen. Then Paulina dropped to the ground, leaving the knife in Jessie's hand.

She clutched the thing like a precious jewel, staring down at its long, sharp, serrated blade. In a flash, she pictured Paulina's three victims, all slaughtered mercilessly with this weapon. Then she looked over at Paulina, lying on her back, clutching at her right shoulder with her left hand, wincing in pain.

Jessie suspected that the woman in front of her had suffered unimaginable agony in her lifetime, but she'd unleashed just as much on the world. Seeing her lying there, undone by the pain of her wound, when she's inflicted so much of it on others, sparked a rageful fire in Jessie's chest. She gripped the knife handle tight.

As she pictured the bloodied, destroyed bodies of Chloe Baptiste, Isabella Moreno, and Fiona Greene, she felt an intense desire to give Paulina some of her own medicine, to see how she would enjoy having her insides ruptured by the very blade that she'd used on others. It was the same thirst for vengeance that had almost consumed her when she watched Ryan punch corrupt cop Hank Costabile into submission just weeks ago.

"Jessie, step aside so I can cuff her," Ryan said from behind her.

She heard his words but didn't move. She was more focused on where she would strike the first blow with the knife. Would it be to Paulina's neck so that the woman could see her own blood spray everywhere? Or would she go for the face, like Paulina had done to Isabella?

"Jessie," Ryan whispered with quiet concern, now right beside her. "We're on a livestream being watched around the world. Put the knife down."

Those words forced her brain back into the reality of the moment. Whatever she had fantasized about doing, it couldn't happen. She stepped to the side so that Ryan could get to Paulina. As he passed by her, she placed the knife on a nearby end table.

She watched her husband carefully roll Paulina onto her stomach and put handcuffs on her wrists. Beyond them, Lila grunted again. Jessie shook herself into alertness and hurried over to the young woman.

She took the gag out of her mouth and, as the girl quietly whimpered, she began to tug at the duct tape binding her to the chaise lounge, but it was too tight. She got up and retrieved the knife, making sure not to look at Paulina as Ryan read her her rights. She returned to Lila, who flinched at the sight of the knife but held still as Jessie cut her loose.

"Thank you," the girl said hoarsely.

"We'll get you some water," Jessie promised.

"You saved my life," Lila said softly .

"It's part of the job," Jessie told her.

But what wasn't part of the job was almost acting on the bloodthirsty desire to stab a captured killer. Jessie tried not to think about it, to focus exclusively on freeing Lila. But deep down she knew the truth.

If Ryan hadn't mentioned that livestream to her, they might not be calling for an ambulance for Paulina Fitzgerald. They'd be calling for a body bag.

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No matter how long Jessie washed her face, she didn't feel clean.

She looked up from the sink in the Central Station women's restroom to study herself in the mirror. She looked worn down, which wasn't a surprise. But to her relief, there was no obvious sign of the murderous murderous intent she'd been consumed by only an hour earlier.

In the time since then, both Paulina and Lila had been taken to the hospital. The former was currently in surgery for her shoulder, after which she would be booked. Hopefully sometime after that, Jessie would get to talk to her and find out how right she was in her suspicions about both the woman's motives and her background.

Meanwhile, Lila was being treated for dehydration, but otherwise hadn't suffered any major injuries. She was scheduled to be released in the morning.

Ryan was finishing up the preliminary paperwork on the case right now. Jessie knew there were more bureaucratic hoops to jump through, but right now she wanted to get to Irvine to check on Hannah. It was currently 9:18 p.m., and she hoped that if she and Ryan left soon, they could get to her dorm room by ten.

She dried off her face with some paper towels and was just leaving the restroom when she got a call from Kat. As exhausted as she was, she knew she had to pick up.

"Hey," she said, trying to sound chipper, "how's it going?"

"How's it going with you ?" Kat wanted to know.

“From your tone of voice, I’m assuming you heard what happened?”

“Heard?” Kat said. “I watched it live on my phone. If you thought you were well-known before, get ready for a whole new level. You saved a potential stabbing victim live on the internet.”

“Is that what jumped out at you?” Jessie couldn’t stop herself from asking.

“Well, there was the part where you almost got stabbed yourself, but I didn’t want to focus on that. ”

Kat hadn’t seemed to pick up on the moment when Jessie had come within a whisper of doing some stabbing of her own. That was heartening. If her best friend hadn’t noticed, maybe no one else would. Other than Ryan, that is.

“Yeah,” she said, “I’d just as soon put the whole thing out of my head for right now. So seriously, how are you?”

“I don’t want to bother you with my issues after what you just went through,” Kat said hesitantly.

“Really, I don’t mind. Anything to take my mind off this case for a while would be a blessing.”

“Okay then, since you asked,” Kat said, “I got some unexpectedly disturbing news today.”

“What?” Jessie asked as she walked down the hallway to find Ryan.

“Dr. Lemmon, at my request, went to see Ash Pierce.”

“I’m guessing it didn’t go as you hoped,” Jessie said.

“That’s an understatement,” Kat answered. “Her assessment is that Pierce likely does have memory loss about her time as a hitwoman. In fact, she cut their conversation short so that she couldn’t be pressed to give a formal evaluation at Pierce’s trial.”

Jessie sighed. She understood how frustrated her friend must be, though she didn’t have any obvious suggestions to help.

“What do you make of that?” she asked cautiously.

“I mean, who am I to question Janice Lemmon’s analysis?” Kat said, the irritation evident in her voice. “She’s about as solid an expert as you’ll find. In fact, everyone who’s met with Pierce, including your sister, came away believing she could be legit.”

“But…” Jessie said expectantly.

“But I just can’t get there, Jessie,” she said. “I know I should just let it go and allow the wheels of justice to do their thing. But my fixation with this is consuming me. I’m so focused on it that I can’t even mourn Mitch properly.”

“Listen,” Jessie said as she walked into the station’s bullpen to find Ryan heading her way, “you don’t have to believe her. Just press pause on this for a little while. Give your brain a break. After all, it’s not like she’s going anywhere.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Kat replied unconvincingly. “Anyway, I’ll work it out. I’ve taken up too much of your time already. You should be giving your brain a break too.”

“I’m about to,” Jessie assured her. “Talk soon?”

“You bet,” Kat said .

Jessie hung up and extended her arms for a hug from her husband. He happily obliged.

“All done?” she asked.

“For now,” he said.

“Good, because I want to go see my sister. Let’s get out of here.”

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:38 pm

It was getting late, but Ash couldn't get to sleep.

She was watching a crappy movie on one of the few stations that the hospital got. When it finally ended, she grabbed the remote to turn the TV off. But before she could, the 10 p.m. local news came on.

To her surprise, there was a story about Jessie Hunt. She watched as a reporter standing on the street in front of a large apartment complex explained how Hunt and her detective husband, Ryan Hernandez, had captured a serial killer live on the internet just before she tried to murder her latest victim.

Ash was already very familiar with Jessie Hunt. When she first woke up from her coma and was told about all the crimes she'd been charged with, she noted that a great many of them had to do with Jessie Hunt. It was Hunt's sister and her best friend that she'd supposedly tried to kill in the desert as part of some elaborate hit job that she'd been assigned.

It seemed that everything that led to her lying here, cuffed to a hospital bed with three armed police officers guarding her 24/7, was in some way connected to Jessie Hunt.

She thought about that, and about her visit with Dr. Lemmon earlier today, which had so unsettled her. Maybe it was the combination of the doctor's willingness to consider her story at face value, while at the same time asking whether she would accept responsibility for her crimes, even if she didn't remember them. The question had rocked her world.

She'd been holding onto her wiped memory as an excuse for committing horrors there

was no way to deny. She'd seen surveillance footage of her killing multiple people, and while she couldn't reconcile that person with who she was now, it was clearly her.

She just wanted to shut it all out. She closed her eyes, feeling the same headache from earlier today coming on again. She was about to press the nurses' button to ask for some medication when the pain suddenly escalated. It was as if someone was chipping into her skull with a hammer and chisel .

Images of Jessie Hunt Rya,n Hernandez Han,nah Dorsey Kat, Gentry, and Dr. Lemmon all jumbled around in her brain like kernels in a popcorn maker. She felt nauseated and squeezed her eyes tight, hoping to force all the faces from her mind.

And then in a flash, it all came flooding back—everything she done, everyone she'd killed or harmed. She remembered it all now.

As soon as that happened, the headache went away. And then, after a long, relieved sigh, Ash smiled.