



BLAKE PIERCE

the
perfect
facade

a jessie hunt psychological suspense--book 12

t h e p e r f e c t f a c a d e

(a jessie hunt psychological suspense—
book 12)

b l a k e p i e r c e

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising fifteen books (and counting); of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books; of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising six books; of the ADELE SHARP mystery series, comprising ten books (and counting); of the EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy mystery series, comprising six books (and counting); of the new LAURA FROST FBI suspense thriller, comprising three books (and counting); of the new ELLA DARK FBI suspense thriller, comprising six books (and counting); of the new A YEAR IN EUROPE cozy mystery series, comprising three books (and counting); and of the new AVA GOLD mystery series, comprising three books (and counting).

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.

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EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE

Claudia was afraid to move.

She felt like she was on the verge of throwing up and worried that any kind of physical action, no matter how small, might exacerbate things. Her hope was that she'd just drift off to sleep again and when she next woke up the flip-flops her stomach was doing would be gone.

She rolled over in the bed, away from the half-open bedroom door. Someone had left a light on in the main room of the hotel suite and a beam was streaming through, illuminating the bedroom more than she liked. She tried to ignore it and curled up in the fetal position, looking out through the crack in the curtains at the twinkling lights of the Hollywood Hills in the distance.

She pretended not to notice that her hair, sweaty and limp, was clinging to the back of her neck. She hugged the sheets closer to herself in a futile attempt to warm her clammy skin. As she tried to focus on the distant hills rather than her discomfort, she resolved never to drink like this again, whether it was a birthday celebration or not. When she got home, she would hug her kids, take a long shower, and spend the weekend in sweats.

The thought was comforting enough that she relaxed slightly. She pictured Callie and Joey running up to her as she came through the front door, asking if she'd missed them after one whole night apart. Suddenly her eyes felt droopy and the twinkling lights through the window got blurry. Her body sank into the mattress. She sank into sleep.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been out when a shadow crossed through the light from the suite, making her stir slightly. Despite the wishes of her stomach, she rolled back in that direction and blinked slowly.

It took her a second to understand that the shadow blocking the light from the other room was caused by a person

beside her bed. It took her another moment to process that the person's arm was swinging downward and that there was something large in their right hand.

But she didn't have time to do anything about it—not to move, not to scream, certainly not to comprehend that she was about to die.

*

The inside of Veronica's mouth felt like sandpaper.

She tried to swallow but her throat was so dry she thought she might choke. With enormous reluctance, she started to open her eyes. It required effort as they had stuck together slightly, likely a result of being too drunk to take out her contacts and sleeping on her face most of the night.

She rolled carefully onto her side and slowly pushed herself up into a sitting position on the converted sofa bed. Her head pounded and she felt slightly nauseated, but there was no immediate desire to vomit. Heartened by that small blessing, she glanced around the hotel suite.

Kimberly was lying next to her on the bed, sprawled out on her stomach, her red hair jutting out in every direction, almost as if it had been electrified. Lauren, completely naked, was lying on the floor beside the loveseat, which she'd apparently rolled out of during the night. Veronica couldn't be sure, but from this distance, it looked like her friend might have bits of vomit in her blonde hair.

Veronica looked away. She couldn't handle seeing that in her condition, especially at this hour. As she slowly stood up and staggered across the massive suite, she struggled to remember the events of the prior evening. The place was trashed, with food on the floor, empty glasses everywhere, and what appeared to be ceramic shards from a broken vase.

She had no recollection of how that happened. In fact, much of last night was a blur. Her brain was a convoluted mix of images that included club-hopping, endless shots, wild

flirting, and perhaps more than that. She could have run naked through the street last night and she might not remember it. The possibility was embarrassing and a little scary. She closed her eyes tight at the thought of it all.

As she approached the bathroom, she glanced through the open door to the main bedroom, which birthday girl Claudia had gotten all to herself. Her friend was lying on her back, her arms and legs splayed out lazily.

Veronica turned back toward the bathroom and was about to step in when her brain caught up to her eyes. She glanced back in the bedroom to make sure she'd seen correctly. There was a large stain on the sheets near Claudia's head. Blinking aggressively, she stepped into the bedroom.

It was hard to accept what she was seeing. The stain was more of a liquid pool, so large that it had dripped down the side of the bed into a small puddle on the carpet. As she got closer, Veronica looked at Claudia. Her friend's eyes were open. Just above the left one was a massive indentation near her temple. That was the source of the liquid, which Veronica now understood to be blood.

It was only after her brain had taken in all of these seemingly disparate facts that she was able to connect them. And only then did the screaming start.

CHAPTER ONE

Jessie Hunt was on a high as she walked out of the lecture hall.

Whenever she did these monthly Saturday morning seminars, she worried that there would be an embarrassingly sparse turnout. But just as with the last two, the room had been packed, not only with students from her own class, but with all the ones who hadn't gotten in and apparently wanted some other way to hear her speak.

It had been almost three months since she'd accepted the lecturing position at UCLA and it had gone much better than she'd expected. So well in fact, that she'd turned down Captain Decker's multiple requests to consult on cases for the LAPD. She hadn't worked one since a high-powered entertainment lawyer was murdered at the home of a billionaire mogul back in September.

She'd simply been too busy. There was all the prep work required for her weekly lecture in criminal profiling, plus these monthly Saturday morning seminars, which were an unmitigated hit. Each one focused on a different element of profiling, usually using one of her cases as an example. Beyond that, she was supervising her boyfriend's rehabilitation and trying to keep up with the mood swings of her teenage sister. It was a lot.

"I think that went pretty well," Kat said, snapping her out of her thoughts.

Katherine "Kat" Gentry, her best friend, was walking beside her along the tree-lined path of the quad. Kat had been her special guest at today's seminar. That was because, in addition to being Jessie's friend, she'd also served as the head of security for several years at a facility that incarcerated multiple mentally unstable criminals, including the notorious serial killer Bolton Crutchfield, the subject of the seminar.

Her tenure had ended badly, with Crutchfield and others escaping while she was out of town. But that didn't mean she couldn't offer valuable insight into the challenges of operating a place charged with housing men intent on killing people for sport.

"Me too," Jessie agreed. "You were a big hit."

"I'm not so sure," Kat said. "I thought I saw some judgy faces when we talked about how Crutchfield escaped on my watch."

"First of all, it wasn't on your watch," Jessie corrected. "You weren't on site and your right-hand man turned out to be working for Crutchfield. And second, did you see people's faces when you said you were now a private eye? They were smitten. I bet you get a dozen referrals because of today."

"That'd be nice," Kat said. "Because for every quality case I get these days, the next five are suspicious spouses who want evidence of infidelity. Those wear on you after a while."

"Don't worry," Jessie assured her playfully. "I bet you get a bunch of rich college students asking you to track down their stolen PlayStations after this."

"From your lips," Kat replied.

They made their way down a steep flight of stairs that opened onto a large courtyard filled with a collection of brightly colored flowers. Jessie marveled once again at how different this work environment was from LAPD's downtown Central Station, a large, bland, rectangular building just blocks away from skid row, with a courtyard highlighted by a solitary tree. This was vastly preferable.

"How's Ryan doing?" Kat asked, referencing Jessie's boyfriend.

Detective Ryan Hernandez had nearly died over the summer when he was stabbed in the chest by Jessie's ex-husband. He was in a coma for weeks. When he regained consciousness and eventually left the hospital, he'd moved in with Jessie and her half-sister, Hannah. Since then, he'd been

engaged in intense daily physical therapy in the hopes of rejoining the force.

“He’s getting there,” Jessie said. “We got rid of the night nurse this week and it seems to be going okay so far. He doesn’t need help getting to the bathroom anymore. We still keep the day nurse since he’s alone in the house while I’m here and Hannah’s at school. But therapy’s going well. He’s getting stronger and has put some weight back on. He still uses the walker most of the time but he can walk several dozen feet unassisted. We’re going to try some stairs this weekend.”

“That’s awesome,” Kat said. “And you and Hannah are good?”

That was a loaded question. But even before Jessie could start to answer it, her attention was distracted by a tall, skinny young man in his early twenties walking briskly toward them. He was easily six-foot-four with bouncy, wiry legs and thin glasses. By the way Kat stiffened next to her, Jessie knew she’d noticed him as well.

The guy was about twenty feet away from them when he slid his backpack off and reached into the open top for something. Both women stopped walking and reached for their weapon holsters, though neither made any additional move.

Jessie reminded herself to breathe. She hadn’t had any kind of physical confrontation in months and her body was tingling with an unusual amount of adrenaline. The man pulled his hand out of the backpack and she involuntarily knelt down on one knee behind a flowering bush and unholstered her gun.

“I was hoping you could si...” the guy started to say, looking up as he extended what looked like a newspaper. “What?”

He looked across the courtyard to see two women pointing guns at him. Jessie watched his eyes widen and his grip on the newspaper falter. As it fell to the ground, she reholstered her gun and stood up.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“My name’s Mark Haddonfield,” he said shakily. “I’m a student here.”

“What were you holding there, Mark?” Kat asked, her voice even.

He swallowed hard and seemed to regroup slightly.

“I couldn’t make your seminar but I was hoping to catch you to ask you to sign this newspaper from when you killed Bolton Crutchfield. I’m kind of a fan boy.”

Jessie allowed herself a deep breath, even as she silently chastised herself.

Good job, Jessie, almost shooting a student. That’s a surefire way to make certain no college ever hires you again.

“Come over here,” she said, her tone less intense than before.

Mark picked up the newspaper and gingerly moved in their direction.

“You don’t mind if I take a peek in your backpack, do you?” Kat asked.

He shook his head and handed it over.

“Sorry for pulling guns on you, Mark,” Jessie said. “But if you’re such a fan boy, you should probably have guessed that I wouldn’t react super well to some random guy pulling something out of his bag as he approached me.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, red-faced. “I guess I wasn’t really thinking. I was just so excited to have found you. So could you sign the newspaper?”

She shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m not comfortable signing this like it’s some program from a baseball game. I get the significance. But it feels wrong, no matter how much of a bastard Crutchfield was. But if you come by my office during office hours, I’m happy to give you a priority pass to my next seminar.”

That seemed to buck him up and he nodded enthusiastically.

“That’d be great,” he said, scurrying off before she could change her mind.

“Interesting collection of fans you have,” Kat noted as they continued through the courtyard to the parking garage.

“Frankly, I’d be happy not to have any.”

Kat shrugged as they approached her car.

“Better he be a fan of yours than a fan of Crutchfield’s,” she noted.

Jessie couldn’t disagree with that. Kat popped her trunk and tossed in her own backpack. Jessie noticed that the space was filled with a huge jug of water, several flares, and a first-aid kit. She wasn’t surprised. Kat, a former Army Ranger in Afghanistan, was not the type to be found unprepared in any situation. It had happened to her once, which explained the long vertical scar running down her face from her left eye.

“So what’s up with you the rest of the day?” Jessie asked, changing subjects.

“I actually have a non-infidelity case,” Kat said. “A girl’s gone missing and her parents have me backstopping the cops. I’m retracing her steps the day she disappeared. That’ll consume most of my day.”

“Mitch isn’t coming down?” Jessie asked, referring to Kat’s long-distance boyfriend, who was a sheriff’s deputy up in the mountain town of Lake Arrowhead.

“No. He’s on call this weekend so it’s all work and no play for Kitty Kat.”

“Is that what he calls you?” Jessie asked, stunned.

“Maybe,” Kat said defensively before turning the tables. “What about you—anything exciting on the agenda?”

“I hesitate to jinx it, but this should be a quiet Saturday. Maybe I’ll pretend to care while Ryan watches a football game.”

“Ah, domestic life,” Kat teased.

Jessie smiled as they said their goodbyes and parted ways. She was more than happy to live that cliché.

*

When Jessie got home, Hannah was in her room and Ryan was doing his morning rehab with the physical therapist, so she went to the bedroom to change into more casual attire.

As she pulled on sweats, she glanced at herself in the full-length mirror on the wall. Despite the dozens of scars on her body, she thought she looked pretty good. Having a regular routine the last few months had allowed her to work out consistently.

Her athletic, five-foot-ten frame had regained some of the muscle tone she lost after multiple injuries over the summer. She'd even taken a refresher self-defense course to brush up on what she'd learned when she attended the FBI Academy's ten-week training program for local law enforcement the previous year. To her surprise and delight, Hannah had asked to come along, and had proven to be a natural.

Jessie's good health even extended to the little things. Her skin glowed. Her shoulder-length brown hair was actually styled rather than pulled back in her standard ponytail. And her green eyes had none of the redness associated with constant sleep deprivation.

Even the scars looked less angry. The burns on her lower back weren't as red as they'd been even weeks ago. The knife cuts on her legs were mostly white now, though the one that extended clear across her collarbone, a gift from her father when she was six, was still prominent. Luckily her boyfriend, who had more than his fair share of scars too, seemed not to care.

Once she'd changed, she went out to the backyard and looked out at the leaf-strewn grass. There were enough on the ground that if she raked them into a pile, she thought she could

dive in safely. It was tempting. The array of yellows, golds, browns, and even a few reds made her feel warm, despite the chill in the air.

It was early December, and for the first time in years, she was excited about the holidays. Thanksgiving had gone well. They'd hosted it and invited Kat, Detective Alan Trembley, who lived alone, Ryan's old buddy from West L.A. division, Detective Brady Bowen, and even FBI agent Jack Dolan, who claimed to despise such gatherings.

Hannah, a talented cook, had presided over the kitchen. Jessie watched her beam with pride at all the compliments she got on the meal. Watching her sister, who'd been through so much in the last year, look and behave like something close to a normal, healthy teenager was more of a gift than any wrapped item she might get this Christmas.

And seeing Ryan doing squats, planks, and bicep curls gave her even more hope. She knew he was focused on returning to the force as a detective. She also knew he was secretly determined to regain his old physique. Though he'd never admit it, Ryan was clearly proud of his once-ripped torso. But since the stabbing and coma, the formerly six-foot, 200-pound mound of muscle had dropped closer to a gaunt 160 pounds before slowly gaining back about fifteen of them.

Sometimes he still looked like Ryan, with his short black hair and warm brown eyes. But other times he looked like a ghostly imitation. It was at those times that simple activities like raking leaves in the yard and walking down the block unassisted seemed like major triumphs. It was slow going, but at least it was going.

She was just debating whether to grab the rake herself when she heard Ryan call out to her from the living room. When she walked in, he was stretching on the floor.

"The therapist already left?" she asked.

"Yup," he said. "His next session is in Beverly Hills so he couldn't dawdle."

He was still speaking slower and more methodically than he used to, a result of the lingering twinge of pain in his chest where he'd been stabbed. But the words were no longer halting or difficult to decipher.

“How did it go?” she asked, plopping down on the floor beside him.

“Pretty good,” he said, his brow beaded with sweat. “He’s really starting to push me. He thinks I should be able to do a 5K by January.”

“What?” she asked, stunned briefly before she realized he was messing with her. “Very funny.”

“What’s funny?” Hannah asked, coming out of her room.

“Ryan says he’s running the marathon in March,” Jessie said, deadpan.

“That’s great,” Hannah said, walking to the kitchen, clearly oblivious.

“And then he’s starting training for NASA’s first mission to Mars,” she added.

“Uh-huh,” Hannah muttered, her eyes never leaving her phone.

Jessie looked over at Ryan, who smiled resignedly.

“At least she spoke to us,” he said. “That’s better than some days.”

It was true. Hannah was still moody and intermittently surly, seemingly without rhyme or reason. But in recent months it had settled down a bit. She was doing well in school, an impressive feat considering she’d been dropped into a new high school for her senior year. She had made a few friends. And she was sleeping through the night more often than not. Jessie wasn’t certain of the origin of all this positive change, but she was loath to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Agreed,” she said, deciding not to pursue the issue. “So what did the therapist really say about your progress?”

“He said I should target New Year’s Day to walk all the way around the block. He thinks it’s realistic. You want to join me?”

“It would be my great honor,” she said, leaning over and kissing him on the forehead, despite the sweat.

Her phone, on the kitchen counter, began to buzz. Hannah, who was closest, glanced at it.

“It’s Decker,” she said without enthusiasm.

Captain Roy Decker, Jessie’s former boss at LAPD Central Station, hadn’t called in weeks. To do so on a weekend was even rarer these days. Despite her inclination to let it go to voicemail, she got up and answered the call.

“Good morning, Captain,” she said pleasantly. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Sorry to call you on a Saturday morning,” he said. “But I’ve got a situation and I could really use your input.”

“Captain, you know how busy I am these days. I don’t think I can be of much help.”

“Come on, Hunt. I’m just asking you to hear me out. I know you’ve finished your fancy college seminar for the day. School doesn’t start again until Monday. Are you telling me you can’t spare a few hours to help an old man?”

“Are *you* telling me you can’t handle this without the assistance of a sometime-consultant who hasn’t worked a case in months?” she countered, trying to keep the curiosity out of her voice.

There was longer than expected silence on the other end of the line. When Decker finally responded, he sounded much more serious.

“Maybe I could,” he told her. “But the detective assigned to the case *is* in need of your assistance.”

“Who’s that?” Jessie asked, annoyed at how effectively he was reeling her in.

“Bray,” he told her.

Karen Bray was a detective from Hollywood Station. She'd been instrumental in helping Jessie solve the last two cases she'd worked. Though their time together had been limited, Jessie had found her to be a capable, hard-working investigator with little patience for politicking or pretension. Even more impressive, she managed to do that while juggling a marriage and a small child. If she'd asked for Jessie's help, it made it harder to avoid involvement.

"Bray asked for me?" she said.

"She waiting for you at the hotel right now," Decker replied.

Jessie glanced over at Ryan, who had heard Decker through the phone and was smiling at her, apparently certain how she'd respond. He silently mouthed the words *Go. We'll be fine*. She scowled at him before answering.

"I'll give it a few hours, Captain," she answered. "I've got leaves over here that aren't going to rake themselves. Should I meet you at the station?"

"No," he said, surprising her. "I'm texting you an address. Head over there and I'll brief you over the phone on the way. This one is extremely time sensitive."

CHAPTER TWO

She knew the case was different the second she saw the address.

Normally, Central Station handled cases in downtown L.A. But she was being directed to the Hollywood Center Hotel in the heart of Hollywood, less than a block from where the Academy Awards were held.

As she drove there, Decker told her what he knew.

“A woman has been murdered at the hotel while spending the night in a suite with multiple wealthy female friends. I don’t know much more than that but I would think that those details alone would be enough to spark your interest.”

“Why?” she pressed.

“Bray will fill you in on all the particulars,” he said, pointedly not answering her question. “For now, the case is still under Hollywood Station’s purview. But if you feel like HSS needs to take ownership, let me know.”

HSS, or Homicide Special Section, was a celebrated unit of the LAPD, tasked with solving cases that had high profiles or intense media scrutiny, often involving multiple victims or serial killers. Decker ran it out of Central Station, and until he was attacked, Ryan Hernandez had been the lead detective for the unit. With him on medical leave and Jessie only consulting on special occasions, HSS had lost a bit of its cachet.

She knew Decker was anxious to reassert its primacy, and any case that made that more likely was one he hoped to claim. At least based on the initial description, this didn’t sound like it fit the profile. But Jessie kept that to herself, not wanting to irritate Decker, who already had enough to deal with.

She hung up and focused on finding the parking structure for the hotel. As she circled the block, she thought back to her brief conversation with Ryan just before leaving the house.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay?” she had asked.

“Of course,” he’d insisted. “I was just going to watch football all day anyway. And Hannah’s doing her own thing. I know she wanted to meet some friends this afternoon.”

Jessie had smirked at him.

“You just want everyone out of the house so you can watch your games in peace.”

“How dare you,” he said, feigning offense even as he smiled.

That had been less than a half hour ago. Now she was searching for parking on an extremely crowded morning in Hollywood while he lounged on the couch. For a woman who prided herself on teasing out the manipulations of others, she felt like she’d been played. Still, Ryan was right. She would have felt guilty and she *was* curious. If she really hadn’t wanted to be here, she wouldn’t be.

She saw the sign for the parking garage and headed that way. As she waited at a red light, she craned her neck to look up at the building. It was twenty stories high, overlooking Hollywood Boulevard. The crosswalk was crowded with tourists wandering among nearby landmarks, including the famed Chinese Theatre, with its collection of handprints out front. Next to it was the Dolby Theatre, home of the Academy Awards, and the rest of the Hollywood & Highland complex, where celebrity impersonators mingled with barkers selling questionable maps for self-tours of stars’ homes. Across the street was the legendary El Capitan movie house.

The light turned green. Jessie pulled into the garage and the valet handed her a ticket. She took the elevator to the lobby, where several uniformed officers stood discreetly in the corner, blocking access to a hallway. She headed toward them, crossing the shiny floor and passing the glass-encased bar and retro-chic sofas that looked like something out of a 1970s airport lounge. The whole place seemed to be winking at itself. When she got to the collection of cops, she pulled out her ID, indicating her role as a criminal profiling consultant for the LAPD.

“I’m looking for Detective Bray,” she said to the most senior-looking officer, a guy in his early forties with a name tag that read “Richter,” a slight paunch, graying hair, and an impressive mustache. “I’m consulting on her case.”

“She’s in the Academy Suite,” he said, his eyes widening as he processed who he was talking to. Jessie knew she still had a reputation in the department. Depending on who she encountered, she was alternately revered and vilified. She couldn’t tell where this guy stood.

“Can you tell me where that is?”

“Twentieth floor, end of the hall,” Richter said. “Do you need an escort?”

“No thanks, I’m good.”

He nodded.

“There’s an officer by the elevators who can help you out,” he said.

“Why would I need help?”

“Because of all the rowdy visitors in the immediate vicinity, the hotel has taken to assigning dedicated keycards to each guest,” Richter told her. “That way, they can trace the source of any inappropriate entry. Since you don’t have one to get up there, he’ll give you access.”

She headed to the elevator bay, acting like she didn’t notice the eyes of all the cops watching her go. She silently ordered herself to get back into professional mode. It had been months since she’d investigated a case, much less had to deal with all the intimidated gawking and suspicious side-eye that came from simultaneously stopping multiple serial killers while alienating the department’s old boy network. She was out of practice at pretending she didn’t care.

The officer by the elevator seemed to have been alerted to her presence. He waved to her as he held the door open with his foot. When she arrived, he didn’t even ask for her ID as he swiped the card to let her access the proper floor.

Once the doors closed, she shut her eyes and took several deep breaths. No one cared that she was out of practice, least of all the victim in this case. If she was going to be of any use to her, she needed to be at the top of her game, with her senses fully alert.

That didn't allow any room for self-doubt, at least not around others. She'd save the second-guessing for when she could do it privately. For now, she had to come across as the person so many saw her as: renowned, unwavering criminal profiler Jessie Hunt.

She opened her eyes just as the elevator doors did the same. When she stepped into the hall, she was greeted by chaos.

CHAPTER THREE

The corridor was a madhouse.

It was filled with hotel staff, guests, and officers trying to contain them. Police tape blocked off one end of the hall. Several cleaning crews, along with their carts, were waiting along one wall for the go-ahead to start their work. Multiple guests clambered to access their suites, but were prevented from leaving the elevator vestibule.

Two men who appeared to be hotel security were trying to keep the rowdier guests in check while a pair of cops stood off to the side in case things went sideways. Jessie approached the cops, holding up her ID. As she did, one of the security guards grabbed her arm and tugged her backward.

She stumbled slightly, surprised at his aggressiveness. Turning to face him, she looked more closely. The man was big, easily six-foot-two and approaching 225 pounds. But he was sloppy around the waist and had the day-old stubble and bleary eyes of a guy who'd either worked well past the end of his shift or been called in early to help out. She tried to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"You're going to want to let of my arm," she said calmly but firmly. "I'm here on official business."

"Save it," he said sourly, still gripping her left wrist tightly. "I've heard enough excuses for one morning. You'll get into your room when we're given the all clear by the police, not before."

"As I said," she told him, using the most polite tone she could muster at the moment, "I'm not a guest. I'm here in an official capacity. I was about to show my credentials to the officers over there when you grabbed me, which you're still doing. Please let go."

"You don't look official," he grunted skeptically as he eyed her up and down with a less than professional expression.

Jessie glanced at his fellow security guard and saw that he was shifting uncomfortably, clearly not on board with his partner's attitude. She looked over at the cops, who were only just now starting to pay attention to the situation.

"You're *still* holding my arm," she reminded the guy, her cheeks flushing with anger. "I've asked you politely to release it. I won't ask again."

The guard squinted at her. He seemed slightly less certain of himself than he had moments earlier but his eyes were now filled with what Jessie judged to be wounded pride. She knew he wasn't going to back down.

"And I want you to go back over with the others," he said, squeezing her forearm even tighter. "I won't ask *you* again—"

Before he could finish the sentence, Jessie spun around quickly to face him and jabbed her right knee up into his groin. He immediately let go of her and doubled over. Without hesitation, she put her palms on his hunched shoulders and pushed him back into the elevator vestibule. He tumbled backward, slamming into the window and crumpling to the ground.

Jessie turned her attention back to the cops. Both of them were wide-eyed, too stunned to react. Lifting her ID as she stepped toward them, she spoke loudly and clearly.

"Gentlemen, I'm Jessie Hunt, consulting criminal profiler for the LAPD. I'm here on official business. Detective Bray is expecting me. Can someone please direct me to her?"

Behind her, she could hear the fallen security guard scrambling to his feet.

"I wouldn't, Gordo," she heard the other guard warn him under his breath.

"Listen to your buddy, Gordo," Jessie said without turning around.

Gordo seemed to have second thoughts and the movement stopped.

“Last door on the right,” one of the officers said, finally finding his voice as he pointed down the hall.

“Thanks,” she replied, dipping under the police tape and heading in that direction, pointedly never looking back and enjoying the lingering, shocked silence from those behind her.

“Jessie Hunt,” she said, announcing herself to the officer guarding the door of the Academy Suite. “Detective Bray is expecting me.”

He let her in without a word. She stepped inside, putting the altercation outside in the past as she focused on the scene of the crime.

As she walked into the entrance corridor, she wasn't initially impressed. There was a bathroom off to the left and a sitting nook at the end of the hall. But when she stepped past the first wall, she realized she'd underestimated the place.

The room opened up as she rounded the corner. Laid out in front of her was an enormous living room with a second seating area off to the left and a dining table beyond that. The entire living area was enclosed by one massive window that looked out on the Hollywood Hills. The Hollywood sign was visible in the distance. Closer, she saw the iconic Capitol Records Building.

The room was abuzz with crime scene techs fingerprinting the room's surfaces and collecting hairs. She didn't envy them. No matter how good the hotel cleaning staff was, the suite was certain to be covered in prints.

She moved through the room, careful to avoid the techs. The floor was littered with plates and what looked to be food. Close to a dozen empty or half-empty glasses rested on the bar and various tables. The pull-out couch was still open and there were blankets and pillows lying on the floor nearby. The out-of-place cushions on the loveseat suggested someone had slept on it as well.

There were no obvious signs of foul play in here, which made her suspect that the murder had been committed in the bedroom beyond the door at the far end of the room. She could

hear multiple voices coming from that direction and headed toward them.

As she did, she tried to imagine the night before. According to Decker, the victim had been staying here with several female friends. He'd said they were wealthy, which seemed a prerequisite to book a suite like this. She wondered if it was just some gals having fun or a special occasion, maybe a birthday or bachelorette celebration.

As she approached the bedroom, she noticed a massive balcony with a table and multiple lounge chairs. She suspected it was bigger than some rooms on the lower floors in the hotel. She stepped through the bedroom door and looked around. A couple of uniformed officers milled about. Two people in coroner's office jackets were wrapping up their work.

There was no dead body in the room but Jessie could tell where she had been. A large, dark stain covered the sheets at the head of the bed and trailed down the side of the mattress onto the carpet below. She could still see the indentation in the bed where the body had likely laid for hours.

She was just starting to move in that direction when Detective Karen Bray stepped out of the bathroom. Maybe it was because it was the weekend, but she appeared less frazzled than usual. Her typically brittle, untidy, dirty blonde hair looked more under control. Her gray eyes appeared well-rested. She was dressed more casually than usual, in jeans and a Cal State-Fullerton sweatshirt. There was no sign that her child's breakfast had ended up on her clothes, as it had the first day they met. She saw Jessie and, despite their grim surroundings, smiled broadly.

"Long time, no see," she said. "How's it going, Jessie?"

Jessie smiled back.

"I'm doing okay. You?"

Karen shrugged.

"This wasn't how I anticipated spending my Saturday, but it could be worse, I guess. I could have been in her situation."

She glanced over at the now empty bed and her smile faded.

“Well, thanks for thinking of me,” Jessie said. “I wasn’t inclined to join up. But when Captain Decker told me you asked for me, I couldn’t say no.”

Karen looked at her, puzzled.

“He said what?”

Jessie’s heart sank as she realized she’d been played by the captain.

“Let me guess,” she groaned. “You didn’t specifically request me. Decker suggested the idea to you.”

Karen nodded.

“He said that you had special expertise that could come in handy in this case and that I would be wise to avail myself of you. He didn’t explain what made this case different from any other, but I didn’t question it. I’m happy to have you, assuming you’re willing to stick around.”

Jessie had no intention of taking her irritation with Decker out on Karen or the woman who had died in this room.

“Of course,” she said. “I’ll deal with the master of deception later. Why don’t you fill me in on what we’re dealing with here?”

Karen pulled out her notebook and referenced her notes.

“The victim’s name is Claudia Wender. Yesterday was her fortieth birthday. She and some girlfriends came up from Orange County yesterday to celebrate in Hollywood. Apparently they partied pretty hard. One of them woke up late this morning to find Wender lying here with her head bashed in. Officers did basic questioning when they arrived but we’ve got all three of her friends in a downstairs conference room. I was planning to question them momentarily. You in?”

“Sure,” Jessie said. “You find anything useful up here so far?”

“Not much yet,” Karen conceded. “We did locate the murder weapon under the bed. It was a heavy, ornate, metal clock from the living room. It crushed her skull. No prints have been found yet. We’re still testing for DNA. With everyone you see hard at work, we should have some lab results tomorrow but I’m not optimistic we’ll find anything of note that way.”

“Why not?” Jessie asked.

“Because if someone somehow snuck in during the night, it looks like they didn’t linger. Walk in, grab clock, bash head, drop clock, and walk out. Not much for us to work with. And if it’s one of her friends, they’ll be able to explain finding their prints and DNA everywhere. If the vomit we already found in two trash cans is any indication, these ladies weren’t worried about what they spread where.”

Jessie let that detail go without comment, choosing to spotlight another option.

“What about surveillance footage?” she asked.

“It’s being processed right now. Hopefully it’ll offer something useful. In the meantime, I was hoping to get a tick-tock of the night’s activities from the ladies downstairs. I’m figuring a timeline can help us start to narrow our focus a bit.”

“Lead the way,” Jessie said.

Bray did exactly that. They left the suite and returned down the hall, where the slovenly hotel security officer was now standing again. He gave Jessie a sheepish, disgruntled stare but said nothing. Neither did she.

Downstairs, Karen headed straight for the cops that Jessie had first seen upon entering the lobby. They stepped aside to let the two women pass. Karen stopped at a conference room with an officer standing outside. He opened the door and they stepped in, where two more officers stood silently and three women sat, unspeaking, at a circular table in the middle of the room. They looked up.

Jessie froze.

CHAPTER FOUR

There was nothing particularly unusual about the women. They were all attractive, ranging in age from early to late thirties. That's not what threw Jessie. What left her temporarily speechless was that she knew one of them.

Kimberly Miner had lived across the street from Jessie back when she was married. Though it felt like a lifetime ago, it had only been a couple of years since Jessie had left Westport Beach, the wealthy, seaside Orange County enclave known for yacht clubs and McMansions.

Jessie and her husband, Kyle Voss, had moved into one of those McMansions when he'd been transferred from his firm's downtown Los Angeles office. Within months, Jessie would return to DTLA after learning in short succession that Kyle had caused her to miscarry by poisoning her, had an affair with an escort whom he later murdered, tried to frame Jessie for the crime, and ultimately tried to kill her when she discovered his plan.

But before all that, back when she thought she had a shot at a normal, suburban life, she'd gotten friendly with the petite redhead across the street named Kimberly who brought her brownies when they moved in. They hit it off; that is, until Jessie told her new friend that she'd seen Kimberly's husband parading around their house naked with the family nanny.

It turned out that the couple had an arrangement, as did many couples in the neighborhood, and Kimberly didn't appreciate having it thrown in her face. Though they eventually patched things up, their friendship was never really the same after that.

Jessie wondered if Decker had been aware of their personal history when he'd involved her in the case or if it was happenstance. Over the years, she'd learned that the captain was much more Machiavellian than he appeared. And it

seemed awfully convenient that she didn't just know how these women thought, she actually *knew* one of them.

Kimberly was staring back at Jessie, her own mouth open in shock. The others in the room seemed to sense something was off but no one said anything. Finally Karen broke the silence.

“Ladies, my name is Karen Bray,” she said, taking a seat at the table and motioning for Jessie to join her. “I’m a detective with LAPD’s Hollywood Station. This is Jessie Hunt. She’s a criminal profiler who consults for the department from time to time. She’ll be assisting in this investigation. First, let me offer our condolences on the loss of your friend. I know this must be a scary, overwhelming situation.”

All three women nodded their acknowledgment, but none seemed willing to speak so Karen proceeded.

“In my experience, the best way to get through something like this is to push forward as quickly and directly as possible, getting as many answers as fast as we can. You may even find that focusing on the specific questions we ask will allow you to temporarily set aside your grief and focus your brain elsewhere. With that in mind, I’d like to get started. Can you each please identify yourselves and explain your connection to Ms. Wender?”

She looked at the woman to her left, a platinum blonde who’d managed to find time to put on full makeup, despite what had happened. Jessie guessed she was approaching forty herself.

“I’m Lauren Kiplinger,” she said, her voice hoarse and scratchy. “Sorry about how I sound. I did a lot of yelling last night. My daughter and Claudia’s were in the same daycare when they were toddlers. We’ve known each other for years. I thought of the idea to have a big overnight event. We just wanted to give her a big blowout on her fortieth birthday.”

Kimberly spoke up next.

“I’m Kimberly Miner,” she said quietly. “Claudia and I were on the PTA board together a few years ago. We hit it off

and have been friends ever since. She introduced me to Lauren and Veronica.”

“My name’s Veronica Rhett,” said the statuesque, raven-haired woman beside her. “I went to the same church as Claudia. Same thing for me—Claudia introduced me to these two and we all got along, had wine nights, that kind of thing. Claudia was the first one of us to hit forty so we wanted to do it up big for her.”

“So you booked the suite upstairs and arrived when?” Karen asked.

“We left early to avoid Friday afternoon rush hour traffic,” Lauren said. “I think we checked in a little after four.”

“What happened then?” Jessie asked, speaking for the first time since she’d entered the room.

Kimberly, who’d never seen her in her professional capacity, looked taken aback. In the days when they knew each other, Jessie was still pursuing her master’s. Veronica, seeing that her friend was at a loss, spoke up.

“We started pre-partying right away,” she said. “Our dinner reservation wasn’t until seven so we got pretty toasted. By the time we got to the restaurant—”

“What place?” Jessie asked.

“Chanticleer over on La Brea,” she said. “We were there for a couple of hours, before moving on to a club on the Sunset Strip called Fête. We reserved a table for the night but ended up coming back here before midnight.”

Lauren raised her hand.

“Veronica’s being polite,” she said. “I got kicked out for getting a little too wild. One of the bartenders was super hot and I got the clever idea to jump over the bar to chat him up a little more personally. A bouncer threw me over his shoulder like a bag of flour and carried me outside. The other ladies graciously went with me.”

“Did you alienate anyone else while you were at the club?” Karen asked. “Get into any fights?”

“I remember getting into a couple of shouting matches with other women,” Lauren conceded. “I don’t really remember what they were about. But it’s not like anyone threatened us.”

“She’s right,” Veronica confirmed. “The arguments were no big deal. I think one was about which Kardashian was the best, or maybe which was the worst. It’s a bit hazy. By the time she got kicked out, all that was forgotten. I wasn’t as drunk as everyone else and I remember looking around while we waited outside for our rideshare. I didn’t see anyone who Lauren got into it with earlier in the evening.”

“So what happened after you got back here?” Jessie prodded, turning her attention to her former friend. “Kimberly?”

The woman seemed startled to be asked so directly. Clearly thrown, she mumbled incoherently for several seconds before finding her voice.

“We just kept partying in the suite,” she said, sounding nervous. “We had brought a bunch of liquor with us from home and we ordered some room service. At some point, people just ran out of steam. Eventually everyone passed out.”

Jessie looked at Karen and could tell the detective was thinking the same thing. The group interview wasn’t proving very fruitful. It was time to separate these women and see if they could get less cautious answers.

“Give us a moment, ladies,” Karen said as she and Jessie got up and went back into the hall.

“Who do you want to start with?” she asked after closing the door.

“Definitely Kimberly Miner,” Jessie said.

“Okay,” Karen replied, her eyebrows raised. “I get the sense that there is a bit of history between you two.”

“Just a little,” Jessie told her. “We used to be neighbors. We were friendly until I told her that her husband was cheating on her. Turned out they had an open marriage, at least on his end. She didn’t appreciate me butting in.”

“That seems like a lot of baggage,” Karen said. “Are you going to be okay conducting this interview?”

“I guess we’re about to find out.”

CHAPTER FIVE

As the rideshare pulled up to Kat's office, Hannah felt a pang of guilt about lying.

Because guilt was such an unfamiliar emotion for her, it took a second to identify it. When she finally did, she was too far along to back out, as she was already at Kat's building.

Deceiving Jessie was one thing, and not something that weighed her down too much. But lying directly to Ryan was a different matter. There was something about looking an invalid in the face, one who was simultaneously trying to get some semblance of his old life back and be a parental figure for her, and saying she was going to a friend's house that felt off. It gave her a slightly hollow sensation in her chest.

But this was for a good cause, she reminded herself, and the feeling quickly faded. She knew Kat would be out of the office, working a case in the field, one involving a missing girl. That phrase—missing girl—was like catnip for Hannah.

Just a few months earlier she'd been instrumental in busting up a sex-trafficking ring by secretly posing as a potential candidate. She knew her sister had mixed emotions about it. Jessie was clearly proud of what she'd done. But she was also understandably upset that Hannah had put herself in harm's way.

Still, even Jessie couldn't deny that because of her actions, dozens of young women were free and a billionaire media mogul who'd been involved in the ring was facing decades behind bars. In Hannah's mind, that outcome far outweighed the risks she'd taken.

There was also the small matter of her having lied about one of the traffickers attempting to rape her. It wasn't true, but it was his word against hers. Realizing the allegation would make his situation even worse, the guy agreed to plead out and roll over on his higher-ups, so she considered it a reasonable

trade-off. She got the sense that Jessie had some doubts about her story, though she never called her on it.

The whole experience had been such a rush that she was anxious to recreate it. Unfortunately, there hadn't been much opportunity. Between school, sessions with her therapist, Dr. Lemmon, and helping out around the house with Ryan, she didn't have much free time. So this seemed like fate: a missing girl, an empty office with information on her, and an unsupervised Saturday afternoon. How could she pass it up?

She hopped out of her rideshare and entered Kat's downtown building. The place wasn't fancy and didn't spring for a security guard on the weekends. As a result, she was able to walk right in and take the elevator up to Kat's third-floor office.

On the ride up, she checked herself in the elevator's dirty mirror. She had intentionally dressed up to avoid questions or skeptical looks. Though she was only seventeen, she thought she could pass for early twenties.

At her full height, she was five foot nine, just an inch shorter than her sister. She had on tan slacks and an unfussy sweater. Her sandy blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail so it wouldn't get in the way of what she planned to do. She wore a pair of non-prescription glasses she'd shoplifted from a drugstore because, to her mind, they added a few years and gave her a bookish vibe that minimized the impact of her typically fiery green eyes. As the elevator doors opened, she silently hoped that her efforts would help her seamlessly blend in.

Hannah knew that as a paranoid private investigator, Kat had surreptitiously set up a camera across the hall from her door, which meant that trying to hide her identity would have consequences later. So she made no attempt to do so, instead walking right up to the door and making a big display of knocking. After pretending to wait a few seconds for someone to answer, she moved in close and turned the handle. As expected, it didn't give.

But now, with her back to the camera, she was able to use the copy of Kat's key, which she'd "borrowed" and duplicated a few weeks ago, to open the door. Once inside, she punched in the security code for the alarm. On her last visit here, she'd used her phone to secretly record Kat entering the digits. Only when the light turned green did she take a deep breath.

If Kat was so inclined, it wouldn't be hard to bust Hannah. She could get in and out without leaving a trace, turn the alarm back on, and lock the door. But if Kat had set up the system so that she got an alert on her phone when her office alarm was disarmed, or even if she just periodically checked her camera footage, Hannah would be found out. But by being so seemingly transparent, she hoped that she'd be able to play it off as no big deal if she got caught.

Either way, that was a matter for another time. Right now, she was here with a purpose and she needed to get to work. She sat down at Kat's desk, which was covered in neat stacks of paper with Post-it notes on top of them, and looked for the relevant file.

She'd heard Jessie mention the name Stokes when discussing the missing girl. A quick news search revealed that a fourteen-year-old girl from the West Adams district named Mindy Stokes was abducted on Thursday. That's the name she looked for as she rifled through the papers on Kat's desk.

It only took a minute to realize her information wasn't there. It wasn't a huge shock. Whatever papers Kat hadn't taken with her wouldn't just be lying around. After taking a moment to think, Hannah sat down in Kat's chair and tried to put herself in the woman's shoes. Where would she keep her most important documents?

She opened several desk drawers, none of which contained anything of value. There was one locked drawer, but she didn't even try looking for the key. Knowing Kat, it was unlikely that was where she'd put anything important. A locked drawer begged to be opened. It was almost an invitation. Hannah was nearly certain that Kat locked it as a diversionary tactic to throw a thief off.

Rather than waste time on it, she looked around the office. She knew from the few weeks that she and Jessie had lived at Kat's apartment before moving into their current house that the woman had some quirks when it came to security. Maybe it was her time in Afghanistan. Maybe it was running a lockdown facility for crazy killers. Whatever the reason, Kat had a habit of hiding items of significance in unexpected places.

She had a fireproof lockbox in the apartment but it only held photos. Documents like her passport, social security card, and birth certificate were actually kept in an envelope taped inside a hardcover book about California flora and fauna, which she kept on a shelf along with several other incredibly boring-sounding books. Assuming that was representative of her security style at her office too, the relevant file would be kept somewhere so uninteresting that no one would even think to look there.

Hannah scanned the office, staying alert for anything that might make the average person's eyes glaze over. It didn't take long to find a likely target. On the far wall was a series of three framed prints all in a row. Two were interesting images of rugged mountain vistas. The last one on the right was a close-up of an unremarkable, weathered fence post.

Hannah got up, walked over, and removed the frame from the wall. She knew almost immediately that she'd guessed right. The frame was oddly heavy considering how cheap it looked. Turning it over, she noticed that there was an extra layer of particle board on the back. She slid it out. Behind it were several folded-up sheets of paper.

Trying to contain her excitement, she moved back over to the desk, laid out the four pages, and, after glancing at them briefly to confirm they dealt with Mindy, took a photo of each. Then she quickly returned the pages and put the frame back on the wall. She desperately wanted to look over the documents now but knew that even being here was a risk. Kat could come back at any time.

She put the fake glasses into her purse and undid her ponytail on the elevator ride down. The doors were just

opening onto the building lobby when someone stepped in. They almost collided. It was Kat, who was clearly surprised to see her.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“That’s kind of rude,” Hannah replied playfully, hiding her own shock as she scrambled for an explanation. “I was looking for you. I just left a friend’s house and was passing by here so I thought I’d surprise you. I just knocked on your door. I thought maybe you’d want to get a coffee or something.”

“That’s sweet,” Kat said, clearly not totally buying her explanation. “Normally, I’d be all over that but I’m in the middle of a case and I can’t really take the time. Rain check?”

“Of course,” Hannah replied, trying to look disappointed instead of relieved.

Kat studied her with mild concern.

“How are you doing?” she asked. “Everything okay? We haven’t really talked much lately.”

“I’m good,” Hannah assured her.

“No burning desire to put yourself in harm’s way lately? You haven’t accosted any drug dealers or sex traffickers this week, have you?”

Hannah forced a chuckle.

“No,” she said. “But the week’s not over yet.”

She could tell from Kat’s skeptical frown that she wasn’t entirely convinced.

“Remember our deal, Hannah,” she said seriously. “You don’t put yourself at personal risk in order to get cheap adrenaline highs and I don’t tell your sister that you like to do exactly that.”

“I remember,” Hannah said, making sure to add a little petulance to her voice in order to mask her apprehension that she might be found out. “Don’t you trust me, Kat?”

Kat stared at her for several seconds before finally replying.

“I want to. Can I?”

Hannah’s rideshare pulled up. She waved to the guy and turned back to Kat.

“Of course you can,” she lied.

She couldn’t help but notice that the guilt she felt at deceiving Ryan earlier was entirely absent now.

CHAPTER SIX

Jessie was nervous.

She wasn't sure if it was because she was out of practice at interrogating people or if it was just this particular witness. Either way, she took an extra couple of deep breaths before joining Karen in the small conference room where they'd moved Kimberly Miner.

Her former neighbor looked up anxiously. Despite her pert cuteness, her little button nose, her gleaming white teeth, and her perfectly Pilates-fit body, she was on edge. That somehow set Jessie at ease. She reminded herself, as she should have been doing all along, that Kimberly had far more reason to be apprehensive than she did.

After all, Kimberly was the one who'd been in the suite where her friend was murdered. She was the one being questioned. And she was the one who'd been part of an extremely unconventional marriage *and* a member of a yacht club that was shut down after it turned out to be a glorified escort service for local husbands. She had lots of secrets and she knew Jessie was privy to several of them.

Rather than use that advantage right away, Jessie decided to ease in.

"It's been a while, Kimberly," she said as warmly as she could. "How are the kids? What are they, six and four now?"

"That's right," Kimberly said, impressed. "You've got a good memory."

"They were very cute," Jessie said, "hard to forget."

"Thank you."

"Still bake brownies for new neighbors?" she asked with just a hint of an edge in her voice.

Karen gave her a sideways glance but said nothing.

“Not many new neighbors lately,” Kimberly answered, pretending not to notice the tone. “We’ve had more folks moving out than in since all the...unpleasantness.”

“I’ll bet,” Jessie said. “Well, as much as I’d love to catch up, we should probably talk some more about last night, don’t you think?”

Kimberly nodded, her already pale skin seeming to get somehow whiter.

“So you’re a lot younger than your friends. I was surprised to see you showing up at a fortieth birthday party. Aren’t you closer to thirty?”

“Thirty-three next month,” Kimberly said. “But I have lots of different friend groups and Claudia and I really hit it off when we served on the PTA board together. When she introduced me to the others, it was a natural fit. They’re a little less buttoned-up than some of the women our age.”

“Gotcha,” Jessie said, wondering if that was a dig at her. “So before we dive into the particulars of last night, what can you tell us about Claudia? What kind of person was she?”

Kimberly was quiet for a moment, seemingly trying to gather her thoughts and maintain her composure at the same time. When she finally spoke, it was in an unusually subdued voice.

“She was very sweet. She had trouble conceiving, so she was really grateful when it finally happened for her. And then it happened again. She was a super-devoted mother. She wasn’t as wild as some of us. Lauren and I can get pretty boisterous, even Veronica sometimes. We’d gossip about our personal lives, other people’s too. Claudia was always quieter about that stuff; never a bad word to say about her own relationship or anyone else’s. She knew how to have a good time but she wasn’t a big partier. We had to trick her into coming to Hollywood by telling her we’d booked dinner at a fancy restaurant. Of course, that was true. But we didn’t tell her about the rest of the evening until we got here.”

“So,” Karen pressed, joining in, “you got to the hotel, started drinking, went to dinner, went to a club, and then returned to the hotel? Am I missing anything in there?”

Kimberly hesitated before replying.

“I don’t think so,” she eventually said. “But the truth is, I don’t remember it all that well. Everything from our time at Fête on is kind of a blur. I don’t even remember Lauren getting carried out. One minute I was dancing and the next, Veronica was dragging me outside. At some point we got back to the hotel, I don’t remember when except that it was before twelve because Lauren told Claudia that the party wouldn’t end until at least midnight and her birthday was officially over.”

“Do you recall what happened when you returned to the room?” Karen asked.

Kimberly scrunched up her nose, trying to recollect.

“I know someone ordered room service because I remember chowing down on a burger at some point. We drank more, played that old high school game, ‘Never Have I Ever.’ There was some more dancing in the room. At some point we all passed out. I don’t remember who crashed first. I just know that I shared a bed with Veronica and that I woke up to her screaming from the bedroom. Lauren and I rushed in and found...well, you know what we found.”

They were all quiet for a moment. Jessie weighed Kimberly’s words, trying to glean whether the woman was playing up her drunkenness for effect. Eventually, she broke the silence.

“Veronica said that the arguments Lauren had at the club were no big deal,” she prompted. “Were there any arguments among the four of you that night? Any simmering tensions that might have boiled over?”

Kimberly stared at her and suddenly looked very tired.

“Jessie,” she began, sounding exhausted. “I’d love to tell you ‘no way.’ But the honest answer is I just don’t remember. People could have scratched each other’s eyes out and I could have missed it. I don’t think there was any of that. We were

having fun. The biggest squabble I recall was over who could have a personal trash can in case they had to throw up.”

Jessie looked over at Karen, who shrugged. It seemed that they were on the same page in thinking that Kimberly was of little use. They sent her back to the main conference room and told her to have Lauren take her place.

*

After they finished interviewing both Lauren and Veronica, Jessie and Karen stayed in the conference room, hoping to hash out what they’d learned.

“Lauren was even less helpful than Kimberly,” Karen noted, frustrated.

“Agreed,” Jessie said. “She basically acknowledged that she was completely hammered before they even left for dinner. She didn’t even remember making the midnight comment.”

“True,” Karen replied. “But *she* did admit that it sounded like her. Plus she seemed to think that she was the one who ordered the room service, though she couldn’t be sure. And she remembered crashing on the loveseat. She just had no idea when.”

“Hard to nail down a timeline with such hazy memories,” Jessie sighed, reviewing the notes she’d taken. “At least Veronica was slightly more accommodating. She says they went straight from Fête back to the hotel. She also thought they returned before midnight. She didn’t order the room service but recalled asking for French fries. She remembered playing ‘Never Have I Ever’ and doing shots when she lost. She remembered dancing in the living room. But she didn’t remember any major blowups, or any confrontations beyond the ones at the club. So that helps a little.”

“A little is right,” Karen muttered.

The one thing both women agreed on was that Kimberly’s description of Claudia was on the money. The consensus was

that she was nicer than all of them, less catty and more generous, quieter and more private. They all said she was a good person.

Jessie looked up from her notes at Karen, who shrugged back helplessly. Neither of them seemed sure how to proceed with the women. They'd hit a wall.

"I was thinking," Karen finally said, her tone suggesting she didn't necessarily believe what she was about to say. "This could be the start of a pattern—one woman in a group of drunk friends, targeted by a killer hoping to take advantage of her diminished situational awareness."

Jessie smirked at her.

"You sound a lot like a person looking for an excuse for HSS to take over this case from Hollywood Station."

"Would that be so bad?" Karen countered. "You guys have more resources. Everyone responds more promptly when you're involved. Plus you have that whiz kid at your disposal."

The whiz kid she was referring to was Jamil Winslow, the police researcher who had transferred to Central Station from the Manhattan Beach Police Department after working with Jessie and Ryan on a case in that ritzy beach town.

Jamil was a godsend. Despite his diminutive, frail appearance, the twenty-four-year-old was not just unbelievably smart, with an amazing facility to navigate complicated tech and dry paperwork, but also relentless in pursuing leads and seemingly impervious to fatigue.

Having him available to help them work through the cavalcade of credit card receipts and the avalanche of video from the hotel, the club, and the restaurant would be a huge bonus. That alone pushed Jessie from being dubious at having HSS take over to being an enthusiastic proponent. She knew Decker wouldn't balk if she asked. In fact, he was likely counting on it.

She was just about to make the call when one of the crime scene techs stepped into the room. He was holding an evidence bag.

“What’s that?” Karen asked, looking at the formless mess inside.

“We missed it on our first pass of the suite,” he said sheepishly. “It was covered in vomit and no one bothered to look too closely. But we caught it on the final go around.”

“I still can’t tell what it is,” Karen said, hesitant to touch the bag.

Jessie leaned over and looked more closely.

“I can,” she said after a moment. “It’s a black bowtie. It would seem that it wasn’t just the girls in that suite last night.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jessie dropped the evidence bag on the conference room table and watched to see how the women reacted.

At first no one understood what they were looking at. But eventually Veronica leaned over and gasped. That made the other two look closer as well. They seemed to process what they were seeing at the same time. All three of them turned red.

“This doesn’t look good,” Karen said with real venom. “We’re trying to solve your friend’s murder and not one of you mentioned that there was someone else in that room. I’m assuming it was a stripper?”

They nodded.

“This is cover-up stuff,” Karen told them. “Not only are you all at risk of being charged with a crime, but you neglected to share information that could be crucial to determining who did this to Claudia.”

“I’m so sorry,” Veronica said. “We should have told you. It’s just that—”

“We were embarrassed to admit it,” Kimberly jumped in. “We didn’t want to do anything to tarnish Claudia’s memory.”

“Besides,” added Lauren. “He was gone before Claudia crashed for the night so it didn’t seem relevant.”

Jessie watched as Karen turned a shade of purple she’d never seen on her. Though she was just as upset, she tried hard to hide it. She didn’t want three potential suspects to see her out of control.

“Typically, it’s the police investigating the murder who decide what’s relevant,” Karen growled. “Who’s to say he didn’t steal one of your room keycards and sneak back in later, hoping to rob you or worse?”

Lauren looked sheepish.

“I didn’t think of that,” she muttered.

“Give me the guy’s contact information,” Karen snarled.

As Lauren searched her purse, Jessie watched the three women. Something felt off. She got the distinct impression that they still weren’t sharing everything. She wondered what exactly happened in the suite with that stripper.

“Here you go,” Lauren said, pulling out a business card and handing it to Karen. “His name is Rock Harder.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” the detective replied.

“That’s what he called himself,” Lauren told her, shrugging. “This is the phone number for the company I booked him through.”

Karen looked at the card. Jessie could tell she was still seething. She was pissed too but didn’t want her colleague to make a rash decision.

“Detective Bray, can I get a minute outside?” she said.

They closed the door and moved into an adjoining room. Before she could speak, Karen started in.

“We should bring all these rich bitches in and file charges for obstruction, or at least keep them in a holding cell for a few hours—let them sweat for a while.”

“I get it,” Jessie said calmly. “They absolutely deserve it. But I have another idea.”

“I’m all ears,” Karen replied.

“I think we should let them go.”

“What?” Karen demanded incredulously.

“I know it sounds crazy, but I know these kinds of women. I literally know one of them personally. I know how they think. I traveled in their circle for more time than I care to think about. If we let them go home, they’ll get comfortable. They’ll get arrogant. In here, they’re all on their best behavior, being super cautious about everything they say. But if we get them each alone in their natural habitat, with their expensive furniture and maids on call, they’ll feel more relaxed. That’s

when they're more likely to make a mistake or inadvertently reveal something. That's when they'll backbite and try to throw each other under the bus. Trust me, Karen. We'll get so much more out of them if we let them go."

"What if one of them killed her and tries to run?" she asked. "These women have the resources to get out of the country."

Jessie had an answer for that.

"We insist they turn over their passports until the investigation is complete. That gives us an excuse to go see them tomorrow—to collect their documents. In the meantime, we have local cops sit on their houses overnight. If someone tries to run, we'll have solved this thing in record time. What do you think?"

Karen still seemed irked but couldn't find a compelling reason not to go along with Jessie's plan.

"Fine," she finally said. "I'd rather be talking to a stripper anyway."

Jessie smiled.

"You're about to get your wish."

*

His real name was Jerry Blatt.

At least according to his employer, It's Raining Men Entertainment, which gave them his home address in West Hollywood. Jessie left her car at the hotel and Karen handled the driving so she could reach out to both Decker and Jamil. As Jessie suspected, the captain was more than happy to have HSS take on the case.

"There's a not insignificant chance that the theory you mentioned is right," he said. "If there is someone out there hunting women who are partying on the town, we should take this case as a precautionary measure."

Jessie was impressed that she couldn't hear any hint of B.S. trickle into his tone. They both knew HSS taking over this case was a stretch. Maybe this murder was part of a pattern. Maybe wealthy women at girls' night out parties were in imminent danger all over the city. But so far, they didn't have anything to justify that suspicion. Right now at least, it seemed like an intriguing but isolated incident.

Still, if the lead detective from the assigned station didn't have a problem with handing over the case to HSS, Decker was clearly more than happy to take it on. Jessie decided to hold off on calling him out for tricking her into signing on. After all, she was in the middle of it now. She'd save the guilt trip for when it served her purposes.

Once they were done, Decker transferred her to Jamil Winslow. Amazingly, he didn't answer. Jessie left a message. It was only after she hung up that she remembered it was Saturday afternoon and a twenty-four-year-old guy might not be hanging out at work.

It took less than a minute for him to call her back.

"Are you in the office?" she asked, surprised.

"No," he said. "I'm home. But I've linked my work number to my cell so it alerted me to your message. I'm heading in now."

"That's not necessary, Jamil. I don't want to ruin your afternoon."

"Are you serious?" he asked. "I was bored just sitting around. This gives me something to do. Have the Hollywood Station people send me everything: video, forensic data, financials. I'll start in as soon as I get there."

"You're a prince," Jessie marveled.

"I know," he agreed. "I'll update you when I have news worth sharing."

She hung up and looked out the window. As they drove west along Sunset Boulevard to the apartment of Jerry Blatt (aka Rock Harder), they passed Fête on the right. Jessie sank

in her seat as she realized it was the last place Claudia Wender had visited before her death at the hotel.

She imagined the woman, a decade her senior, half-drunk and happy, shimmying with her friends on the dance floor, enjoying a night away from domestic life. She pictured Claudia laughing as her friend was forcibly removed from the club and following her outside into the chilly December night, the sweat from her evening of revelry disappearing when met by the cold air of the Hollywood Hills.

Jessie opened the file of photos of Claudia that Karen had sent her. They included brutal crime scene images and a perfunctory driver's license photo. But they also showed screen shots from her Facebook page, including a night out with her husband and a family vacation somewhere tropical.

Most heartbreaking of all, she came across a photo dated barely over a month ago. It was from a school Halloween parade. Claudia wore a skin-tight Black Widow costume and her kids, a girl and boy, were dressed as Wonder Woman and Batman. None of them seemed troubled by mixing up different superhero universes as they smiled broadly for the camera. Claudia draped an arm around each of them, who leaned in tight against her.

“We’re here,” Karen said, pulling her back into the present.

Jessie looked up. They were parked in front of a modern-looking apartment complex on a small residential street just off San Vicente.

“Has anyone contacted her husband?” Jessie asked.

“We asked Westport Beach PD to do it. Since her friends could ID her, we didn’t see any need to have him come all the way up here, especially with the kids and all.”

“That was thoughtful,” Jessie said. “We’ll need to interview him, of course.”

“Yeah,” Karen agreed. “I thought we’d give him the night and talk tomorrow, when we go down to re-interview the birthday friends.”

Jessie nodded quietly and opened the car door. Hearing Karen mention tomorrow caused a swell of mixed emotions. This assignment was supposed to be a few hours of consulting. That's what she had promised Captain Decker. But now that she was in it, could she really just leave Karen to handle everything on her own? Could she abandon her when the next step was to go into the belly of the Orange County beast, a place Jessie knew all too well?

As she silently weighed her options, Karen led the way up to the building. It was a bland, cookie-cutter design, like so many others that had taken the place of quirkier complexes in recent years. Someone was leaving the main entrance as they arrived, allowing them to enter without buzzing up to announce themselves.

They took the elevator up to the second floor and approached the door to unit 216. There was no sound coming from inside. Karen released the holster cover and rested her right hand on top of her gun as she knocked on the door with her left. There was no response. She waited about twenty seconds before knocking again. As she did, Jessie checked that her own weapon was accessible.

After another thirty seconds, they heard a shout from somewhere in the back of the apartment.

“What?” came an agitated, male voice.

“Mr. Blatt, this is Detective Karen Bray with LAPD. Please open the door. We need to speak with you.”

There was an extended silence followed by a sudden, heavy thump, as if someone had been thrown against a wall or the ground.

“Mr. Blatt, are you all right?” Karen shouted. “We need you to open the door immediately.”

No one spoke but they heard a loud groan from the other side of the door. It sounded less than ten feet away. Both women unholstered their guns.

“Step back,” Karen told Jessie, who immediately moved to the side.

Karen leaned back, then moved forward, quickly driving her foot against the door near the handle. The wood cracked and splintered and the door buckled but didn't open. Jessie was impressed by the force and precision of the maneuver. It was clear that Karen had done this many times before.

“No!” someone shouted from behind it.

But it was too late. Karen kicked again and this time the door flew open. They dashed inside.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rock Harder was sprawled out face down on the floor in front of them, completely naked, hugging his left shin.

A blanket rested on the floor beside him. He looked up at them with pained, watery eyes and managed to grunt.

“What the hell?”

“Jerry Blatt?” Karen asked.

“Yes,” he said, still clutching his shin. Underneath, Jessie could see blood seeping through his fingers. “What is happening?”

“Mr. Blatt,” Karen said, making no attempt to help him. “We’re investigating the death of Claudia Wender. We have some questions for you. Can you please put some clothes on?”

He winced as he tried to readjust himself. Jessie averted her gaze slightly so that she wasn’t staring directly at the man’s naked, muscular body. It was immediately clear, with his rippled, tan torso, sandy blond hair, and surfer dude good looks, why he might be popular at his job.

“I’d love to, but I’m in a bit of pain here,” he said, rolling over from his front to his back and exposing more of himself than either woman cared to see. “I slammed my leg on the coffee table trying to get to the door before you broke it down. Thanks for that, by the way.”

Jessie holstered her gun, grabbed the blanket on the floor, tossed it to him, and then extended her hand to help him up. He reached out but she shook her head.

“Your hand’s bloody,” she told him. “I’ll grab you by the arm.”

“Thanks,” he said as she heaved him up. He limped over to the couch and settled down gingerly. “Did you say someone died?”

“Yes,” Karen said, keeping her weapon out as she tossed him a dish towel to put on his leg. “You don’t recall the name?”

“Remind me again,” Jerry asked as he delicately pressed the towel over the impressive gash.

“Claudia Wender,” Karen repeated. “You performed for her last night at the Hollywood Center Hotel.”

“Oh right. Everyone just called her Cloudy so I didn’t make the connection. You’re saying she died?”

“She was murdered, Mr. Blatt,” Jessie said flatly.

He looked up from his leg and for the first time, seemed to focus on the situation.

“What?” he asked. “When?”

“Sometime after you did your routine,” Karen said. “So you can understand why we’re here.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said softly, before blinking a few times, finally seeming to realize they weren’t just here out of courtesy. “But I don’t know anything about it. I did my thing and left. She was fine when I saw her.”

“When was that exactly?” Jessie asked.

Jerry repositioned himself on the couch, valiantly attempting to pretend he wasn’t in pain. Jessie could tell he wanted to ask for a minute to go clean himself up but didn’t want to look like a wuss. That wouldn’t comport with his Adonis image.

Even if he asked, she wasn’t inclined to let him. The more exposed he was, both physically and emotionally, the more likely they were to get the truth out of him.

“I was booked for midnight. I was there for about an hour. When I left, she was still alive, though I wasn’t sure all her friends would make it through the night.”

“What does that mean?” Karen asked.

Jerry sat up straighter, sensing that he’d been too blasé in his tone.

“I just mean they were pretty drunk. When I was leaving, one of them looked like she might have already passed out, though I can’t be sure.”

“Which one?” Jessie asked.

“I didn’t get any of their names other than the birthday girl, ‘Cloudy.’ But she was blonde, I think. That one was especially rowdy during the show, really grabby. But they were all pretty wild.”

“So you arrived at midnight and left at one a.m.,” Karen reconfirmed.

“I don’t remember the exact time I left. I was booked for an hour and it was my last show of the night, so I wasn’t as tied to the clock as I usually am. I remember getting back here around one thirty and it’s not that far away, so that timing seems right.”

“Are you confident about that?” Jessie pressed. “Was your judgment compromised at all?”

Jerry smiled despite the pain.

“If you’re asking if I was drunk too, the answer is no. I don’t drink. I’m on scholarship, getting my degree in engineering, and it’s tough enough to study while moonlighting as a stripper. Seeing how sloppy all of them were didn’t tempt me to change my habits.”

He seemed to sense that the comment came off as cold and continued before they could reply.

“I don’t mean to be a jerk. I’m just telling you the truth. They were a raucous group. Cloudy, or Claudia I guess, was actually the most under control of them all. She was definitely drunk but she wasn’t obnoxious. She was actually kind of quiet. She seemed nice. I was glad the show was for her rather than some of the others. I’m really sorry to hear that this happened to her, but I didn’t have anything to do with it, I swear.”

Jessie and Karen exchanged a look and Jessie nodded for the detective to go ahead.

“While swearing to is nice,” she said, “we’ll need you to do so more formally, so here’s the plan. Put something on that wound, get dressed, and join us down at the station to give a statement under oath. We’d also like you to submit a DNA sample and provide us with your phone data. Is any of that a problem for you, Rock?”

He shook his head.

“No, of course not,” he said. “But please call me Jerry. No one around here knows what I do and I’d like to keep it that way. It’s going to be hard enough to explain the door.”

Jessie looked over at the thing, barely clinging to its hinges.

“The department will reimburse the building,” Karen assured him. “That is, assuming your story bears out.”

Jerry got to his feet and limped toward the bedroom.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to accompany you,” Karen said. “We can’t have you trying to sneak a weapon along.”

As she followed him to the bedroom, she gave Jessie a playful wink. Sometimes the job did offer a few perks. But once she was alone in the living room, Jessie’s good humor faded quickly.

She pulled out her phone and looked once more at the Halloween photo of Claudia Wender with her kids. She imagined those kids learning how their mom died, seeing pictures of her bludgeoned skull.

The thought of it made Jessie’s blood pump faster. Someone needed to get this woman justice. Somewhere out there, a killer was breathing fresh air while Claudia Wender lay in a body bag. Jessie aimed to change that soon.

And that’s when it became clear to her that she wasn’t just consulting for a few hours. She knew this was what Decker had hoped for all along—that she’d feel compelled to see the case through. He’d baited the hook and now she’d bitten. She felt manipulated but despite that, she couldn’t bail. Not on Karen. Not on Claudia Wender. She was all in.

CHAPTER NINE

The sky outside was getting dark.

As late afternoon bled into early evening at Central Station, and after he'd given his statement and provided his phone for analysis, Jessie and Karen sent Jerry Blatt on his way.

They walked back to the research department to learn if Jamil had any success breaking down the data he'd gotten from Hollywood Station. They were just about to go in when Jessie saw Captain Decker at the end of the hall.

"I'll catch up to you," she told Karen and headed in his direction.

As she approached, she saw the older man sigh in resignation, preparing for her to blow up at him. Even on a Saturday evening, he was dressed smartly in a jacket and tie. But his body language betrayed his exhaustion. His face was a mass of wrinkles, making him look a decade older than his sixty years. His sunken posture masked his tall, skinny frame. Tufts of hair sprouted atop his otherwise bald head. His sharp nose was red, as if he were fighting off a cold. Only his beady eyes looked fresh. They were sharp and focused, taking in everything.

"How's it going, Captain?" she asked pleasantly, keeping her power dry for now.

She could tell he was surprised that she didn't immediately mention how he manipulated her into taking the case and was wondering if she had figured it out.

"Busy day," he said, revealing nothing more. "How about for you?"

"We're about to review some footage that Jamil has cued up for us. Hopefully that'll provide us some leads. So far, we're not having much success in the interviews. Everyone's still a suspect, including all three of her friends and the stripper

they didn't tell us about, but no one's broken yet. We're going to Westport Beach tomorrow to talk to each of them again."

She let the Orange County comment linger in the air. They both knew this was why he'd brought her on board, to make use of her knowledge of how wealthy women from the OC operated, even if that meant unearthing her own traumatic memories from her time there. But he gave no hint that he got the dig.

"Well, keep me apprised," he said blandly, as if she'd told him she was going to file a report.

"I'll do that, Captain," she assured him with just a little extra kick in her voice, then added, "By the way, I'll be here tomorrow, but I won't work a minute into Monday. I'm not putting my job at risk."

Jessie left him without another word, refusing to look back to see if she'd had any impact. She tended to doubt it. When she entered the research department, she saw that Karen had already pulled up a chair next to Jamil. She wandered over and looked over his shoulder.

"What have we got?" she asked.

"Nice to see you, Ms. Hunt, how are you?" Jamil asked, refusing to dispense with the standard pleasantries. In addition to being a near-genius, the kid was also unfailingly polite.

"Sorry, Jamil, I'm good. How are you doing?"

"Peachy," he said sincerely. "What about Detective Hernandez? I hear he's improving. Do I hear correctly?"

"You do," Jessie assured him. "He's making real progress. He's a bit of a rehab fanatic."

"I'm glad to hear that. I'm hoping to see him back here one day soon."

"He is too," Jessie said. "I'll pass along your well wishes. In the meantime, let's see if we can do some good."

"Right," Jamil said, suddenly all business as he turned his attention back to the computer monitor in front of him. Here's what we've got so far. I made a timeline."

“Of course you did,” Jessie teased.

Jamil smiled, clearly not minding. Then he launched in.

“I went through the receipts from the evening and most of it bears out with what the women told you, although their claims start to vary from the data as the evening progresses.”

“Not a stunner, considering they got more smashed as the night wore on,” Karen noted.

“They checked in at the hotel at four sixteen p.m.,” Jamil said. “After that, there’s a lot of in and out of the suite for the next few hours—tons of keycard logs and video footage. But as best I can tell, they were mostly in their suite for the next few hours.”

“So far, everything matches,” Karen said.

“Right, at six forty-five they go downstairs to get their ride to the restaurant, Chanticleer,” Jamil said. “They got there at seven-oh-two p.m. and paid the bill at nine eleven p.m. Their first round of drinks at Fête was ordered at nine twenty-seven p.m., followed by multiple additional rounds.”

“Any footage of the alleged arguments inside with other patrons?” Karen asked.

“I’m still waiting for interior camera footage from the club,” he replied, toggling between screens and pulling up a feed from an exterior camera. “But we do have security footage from outside that shows Lauren Kiplinger being carried outside at eleven thirteen p.m.”

All three watched as the woman was gently but unceremoniously placed outside the ropes in front of the club. The other three women soon followed. It was clear from the video that all of them were at least somewhat inebriated. Lauren could barely stand up. Jamil switched screens again, this time showing the lobby of the hotel.

“They got back at eleven twenty-eight and returned to the suite,” he said. “But over the course of the next half hour, several of them went in and out to do everything from get buckets of ice, let room service enter, and in one case, sneak

down to one of the first-floor restaurants to steal a bottle of ketchup.”

“You were able to glean all of that?” Jessie asked, impressed.

“Yes, but I’m sure I’m missing some stuff. A lot of this is piecemeal. The hotel’s video surveillance system is older and prone to glitches. The camera in one elevator doesn’t work at all. Feeds cut out intermittently throughout the evening and early morning. At a couple of points during the night they shut down completely and the system had to be rebooted.”

“That seems suspicious,” Karen noted.

“I thought so too, but when I talked to their on-call security manager, he told me it’s par for the course. Apparently it’s a rare night when they don’t have to reboot the system at least once. Sometimes they have to do it as many as three times. They’re getting an upgrade in the New Year but until then, they’ve gotten used to it.”

“How long does it take to reboot the system when it goes down?” Jessie asked.

“He told me that it’s usually between five and twenty minutes before everything is up and running again.”

“That seems like more than enough time for someone to sneak in or out without being discovered,” Jessie muttered.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Jamil agreed. “That’s why I’m doing everything I can to fill in the blanks with the footage we do have, along with keycard swipes and phone GPS data.”

“Any good news?” Karen asked.

“A little,” he answered. “I was able to confirm most of Jerry Blatt’s version of events.”

“You mean Rock Harder’s?” Karen kidded.

“I refuse to say that name,” he replied solemnly as he pulled up a series of screenshots. “Mr. Blatt knocked on the suite door at exactly twelve a.m. He remained inside until one-oh-seven a.m., at which point he left via an elevator with a working camera. He can be seen leaving the lobby and

walking to his car on the street at one twelve a.m. All that seems to match the timeline he gave you, correct?”

“Correct,” Karen admitted, clearly disappointed. “I guess we have to cross him off as a suspect.”

“Probably,” Jessie said. “But he’s still valuable as a witness. If his description can be believed, that means we can narrow the time of death. Claudia Wender was alive when he left at one-oh-seven in the morning. So we can hone in on folks who came and went after that.”

“That does help a little,” Jamil said in a tone that made Jessie certain he had reservations. “But we still have a lot to slog through. It turns out that there’s a lot of action in a fancy Hollywood hotel, even in the middle of the night. Keeping track of all the people moving around is a bit of a challenge.”

“It is too much for you, Jamil?” Jessie asked, knowing him well enough by now that poking his ego a bit was an effective tool to get the most out of him.

He looked up at her, clearly aware of what she was doing. And yet, his furrowed brow was evidence that it was working on him anyway.

“Give me a few more hours and I’ll be able to account for every minute in that hotel,” he told her.

“I figured as much,” she said, smiling. “Of course there’s one problem even your tech skills can’t solve.”

“What’s that?” he asked, ready to be offended.

“None of this does us much good if Claudia’s murderer was one of her friends. Everything that happened in that suite from just after one a.m. until her body was discovered is a mystery to us. And I’m not sure there’s any easy way to solve it.”

As she said it, a flash of Claudia Wender hugging her kids in that Halloween photo popped into her head. She didn’t say anything out loud but silently, she swore to find the truth. Those kids deserved it.

“Let’s dig into it,” she said, unable to hide the exhaustion in her voice.

Jamil and Karen exchanged a look.

“*We* will,” the researcher said. “You should go home and get some rest.”

“I can’t leave you guys in the lurch,” she protested.

“We’ll be fine,” Karen assured her. “Besides, you don’t work for the department anymore. You’ve got a boyfriend at home recovering from a stabbing, not to mention a teenager, which might be more daunting. Go home. Rest. Come back tomorrow. That’s not a request.”

Jessie didn’t mention that Karen didn’t have the authority to give her orders.

“Okay,” she relented. “But we pick right up first thing tomorrow. Got it?”

CHAPTER TEN

The cold cut straight through her.

On the drive home, Jessie intentionally left the windows open, hoping the crisp, biting air might spark some revelation. But nothing came to her. By the time she pulled into the garage, it was almost 6 p.m. and she didn't feel any better about the case.

Something else was dragging her down too. Though she hadn't intended it, she'd been gone all day and hadn't called to check in once. After months of having a regular schedule, she worried at how easily she'd slipped back into obsessive workaholic mode. She suspected the other members of her household might feel the same way and prepared for a verbal smack down from either Hannah or Ryan when she walked in.

But before she faced the music, she decided to allow herself a brief reprieve. After the garage door closed behind her and the extra grasping locks clicked into place, she got out of the car, entered the pass code and voice confirmation for entry to the main house, and quietly made her way down the side hallway to her office.

She used the handprint verification pad to unlock the door. Once inside, she closed and locked it again, turned on the light, and settled in at the desk. After three months, she was finally starting to think of it as her office rather than Garland's.

Garland Moses, her friend and professional mentor, had willed this house to her upon his death at the hands of her vengeful ex-husband. Jessie was still working through the sense of culpability she felt at his loss. Even though it wasn't her fault, she carried some shame that the most celebrated criminal profiler in LAPD history, who had survived run-ins with multiple killers, had died because of his connection to her.

Sensing herself beginning to spiral, Jessie forced that thought from her head and instead focused her attention on the

small, metal paperweight in the shape of a coffee mug on the corner of his desk. She reread the tiny inscription on the side, which was a constant source of comfort to her:

Whoever kills one life kills the world entire, and whoever saves one life saves the world entire.

She reminded herself that she was trying to live up to those words right now, by getting justice for Claudia Wender. The guilt faded a bit and she leaned back in the chair, spinning it around slowly so that she faced the wall, looking directly at a framed, classic film still of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall in the movie *The Big Sleep*.

The image from the film noir about a private eye was a not-so-subtle hint that not everything was as it seemed. Indeed it wasn't, as hidden behind the frame was Garland's safe, which held information on two dozen cases he'd never solved. In a fireproof lockbox inside the safe was material on the one serial killer case she knew had haunted him to his grave: the Night Hunter.

Garland never talked about the case with her, but after he'd died, she eventually worked up the courage to skim through his files. After reading a few case details, including that he seemingly chose victims based solely on their names and subsequently tortured them using X-Acto knives, she put them back in the safe. There was too much material for one, or maybe even ten sittings. Frankly, she didn't care to dive in too deeply.

It was enough to know that Garland had barely survived a confrontation with the man, one in which he'd been tortured, and that after their brutal encounter, the Night Hunter dropped off the radar. It was widely believed that the man who had killed and dismembered over fifty people along the East Coast in the 1990s was now dead.

Jessie suspected that Garland never quite bought that, which may have been partly why he'd turned his modest-seeming house into a fortress, with security measures she still hadn't completely mastered. Every few weeks or so, she uncovered some new form of protection that he'd installed,

including remote-controlled door locks, motion-activated infrared cameras, and even a storage locker with tear-gas canisters and smoke grenades.

Most impressive of all were the bomb-proof doors under the dining room floorboards, which led to a basement bunker. That one was surprising, not just because of its thoroughness, but because the basement—a rarity in Southern California—wasn't even listed in the construction plans on file with the city.

A knock on the door brought her back into the present.

“Hello?” she called out.

“Soup’s on,” Hannah said.

Jessie opened the door to find her sister staring at her, perplexed.

“Is everything okay?” Hannah asked.

“Why?” Jessie countered, trying not to sound defensive.

“No reason. I just heard you come home a few minutes ago but you went straight to the office. I was worried you were stewing over something.”

Jessie smiled to herself at her little sister’s powers of perception.

“I was a little. But to be honest, I was also hiding out to avoid getting reamed for getting home so late.”

Hannah gave her a wry smirk.

“You’re kidding, right?” she said. “Both Ryan and I knew that you agreeing to take this case meant an end to our domestic tranquility, at least for a little while. Don’t sweat it, sis. As long as this doesn’t drag on too long and you don’t get hurt, we’re good.”

Jessie tried—and failed—to hide how reassured those words made her feel. She heard herself exhale in relief. That got a giggle from her little sister.

“Thanks,” she said quietly.

“Come on,” Hannah replied. “Dinner’s going to get cold.”

Jessie followed her into the kitchen to find Ryan waiting and a full spread on the table, including salmon fillets, roasted potatoes, and a spinach salad.

“This looks amazing,” she said.

“Hannah figured you’d have worked up a solid appetite,” Ryan told her. “Now please sit down because my stomach is grumbling.”

*

Throughout dinner, Jessie could sense that both Ryan and Hannah were deliberately avoiding asking her about the case. She knew they were trying to give her a mental break and was happy to take it. After the meal ended, Jessie washed the dishes.

“I’m going to my room for a bit,” Hannah said. “I have some homework I’ve been procrastinating on and I want to knock it out.”

“On a Saturday night?” Jessie asked, stunned. “Who are you and what have you done with my sister?”

“Don’t get used to it,” Hannah replied, smiling. “This is almost certainly a black swan event.”

Only when she closed the door to her room did Ryan turn to Jessie.

“Okay, spill,” he demanded.

“What?”

“I know you want to hash out your ideas on the case. I’m giving you carte blanche for the next five minutes. But then we set it aside and watch a movie. Deal?”

Jessie chuckled at his transparency.

“Don’t act like you’re doing me some favor,” she chided playfully as she put the last plate in the dishwasher. “I know

you're dying to hear all the details."

He shook his head with dramatic vehemence.

"I'm just trying to be a supportive boyfriend," he insisted unconvincingly.

Jessie saw right through him. Walking over, she glanced down at him with her eyebrows raised in amusement.

"I will tell you about the case, but only if you admit that you're desperately curious."

He stared at her for a good five seconds before finally replying.

"Fine, I'm curious," he admitted.

"Desperately curious?"

"Don't push it," he growled.

She let him off the hook. After helping him over to the couch, she settled in next to him and filled him in on the particulars. When she was done, he sat quietly for a few moments before speaking.

"So no one could access the floor that their suite was on without a keycard, right?" he finally asked.

"In theory, no," she agreed. "In fact, as a security measure, this hotel assigns specific keycards to individual guests, although I suppose someone could have taken the elevator up with folks staying on the floor. I'm not sure anyone would have even noticed."

"Too bad that one elevator camera doesn't work," he said. "It sounds like someone could have taken it up and back down without anybody ever knowing."

"But," she reminded him, "even if they took that elevator and got access to the twentieth floor via another guest, they'd need a keycard to access the party girls' suite."

"Only if it was a stranger who did this," he countered. "If Claudia or one of the other women knew the killer, they might have just invited the familiar face in."

Jessie couldn't disagree.

"To be honest," she said, "they were all so drunk that even if it was a stranger, they might have let the person in. Or they could have just accidentally left the door open. They were in and out of there so often they could have easily forgotten to close it. The whole thing is a cluster."

"You know," he suggested in a tone that hinted she wasn't going to like what he had to say, "it could be a lot less complicated than that."

"What do you mean?"

"If these women really were that wasted, it's not inconceivable that while the other two were passed out, one of them had an argument with Claudia, got angry, hit her in the head, and passed out herself, then forgot the whole thing."

Jessie was skeptical.

"It's hard to imagine someone completely forgetting something like that."

"I've seen it before," Ryan said, "more than once."

A troubled expression passed across his face and Jessie decided not to press him on it.

"I'm not dismissing the possibility," she said. "But none of their prints were found on the clock that was used as the murder weapon."

"It was wiped clean?"

"No. There were lots of other prints, just not from any of these women, which suggests that either it wasn't one of them, or if it was, that they had the mental wherewithal to wear gloves, which makes it premeditated."

Ryan looked especially troubled by that suggestion.

"If it's the latter, you're dealing with a whole other level of evil. To spend all night celebrating with this woman, drinking with her, and then later that night put on gloves, bludgeon her to death, and go back to sleep just one room away afterward—that requires a level of heartlessness you don't see often."

Jessie thought about it. He was right. She almost hoped it was a crime of passion. The alternative was much more disturbing. With a shiver, Jessie realized she had no idea what she was getting into tomorrow morning, but she was determined to find out.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hannah wasn't doing her homework.

Instead, she was researching the disappearance of Mindy Stokes. She'd spent the last hour poring over the documents she'd copied from Kat's office. They included basics like her address, school schedule, a list of friends, and several photos, which showed a girl with brown, shoulder-length hair, glasses, and a crooked, disarming smile.

There was also the police missing persons report, as well as interviews with friends and family, GPS and call data pulled from her phone, and summarized notes from her pediatrician and her therapist. Most of it was of little use.

Mindy's phone had been found in some bushes halfway along the fifteen-minute route she walked home from school. The cops had checked camera footage from nearby homes but they proved fruitless. She hadn't made any unusual calls or gone anywhere out of the ordinary in the days prior to going missing. Her home life seemed stable. She was physically healthy. The therapist visits were because her parents worried she might struggle after her best friend moved out of town. But according to the session notes, she'd adapted well and the visits were more just periodic check-ins.

Hannah saw that the police interviews had included several men on the sex offender registry who lived nearby. Though those complete notes weren't available, the report included their names and whether officers felt that any of them deserved follow-up questioning. Apparently none did.

Hannah figured that was as good a place as any to start. She knew from unpleasant personal experience that some predatory-minded men were especially adept at hiding their true intentions. She suspected that her own ability to see through them was at least as strong as that of the authorities who had hurriedly questioned them.

She punched up the sex offender registry on her laptop and set up a search for anyone within a two-mile radius of either Mindy's home or school, using the working assumption that a possible abductor would have likely seen her on a regular basis. The number that came back stunned even her: sixty-eight.

That included five women and sixty-three men, twenty-nine of whom were "in violation" of some kind of registration requirement. Though the list was daunting, Hannah dived in, cross-referencing the people on the list with those who had been interviewed. That total came to sixteen people, all men. It took Hannah a few seconds to realize that everyone questioned lived within a mile of both Mindy's home and school, meaning they likely saw her walking that route every day.

She pulled up the past offenses of each person on the list. In many cases, the offender's last conviction was decades old. That didn't automatically eliminate them. But she decided to focus on the guys who had been released back into the community more recently, within the last five years. That knocked the number of candidates down to six.

She reviewed each of their records closely. Three had been convicted of possessing obscene matter, which she assumed was a euphemism for getting caught with child porn. Two had engaged in lewd or lascivious acts with a child and one was convicted of rape of a child. She focused on him.

The man's name was James "Jimmy" Poston. He was thirty-seven years old and according to his arrest sheet, was five-foot-nine and 170 pounds. His mug shot showed a pale, blemish-ridden face and thinning, unruly blond hair.

He had served several stretches in prison. Most recently, he'd completed nine years for sexually assaulting an eleven-year-old girl. He was released eight months ago and had lived at his current address for the last three. That address was in a rented house on one of the streets Mindy walked along every day.

The note next to his name in the police report said simply "alibi verified via GPS data." Hannah assumed that meant his

phone confirmed the story he gave them. But she knew that just because your phone was at home during a certain time, that didn't mean you were too. She'd seen Jessie solve enough cases in which a suspect intentionally left their phone somewhere while committing a crime elsewhere to know it wasn't uncommon.

She did an additional search and found that his home was a thirteen-minute drive away. All it would take was one quick rideshare to get there. She closed the laptop and looked at the time: 7:42. If she spent the rest of the night in here, especially on a Saturday, her sister might get suspicious. She put everything away, washed her face, changed into sweats, and headed out to the living room.

Tonight she'd watch TV with Jessie and Ryan. Tomorrow, she'd visit a rapist at his home.

*

Jenavieve Holt was bummed.

Her boyfriend, Chad, was supposed to come over for a night of Netflix, Chinese takeout, and red wine. But because of a bus accident on the I-10 freeway, he'd been called back in to the hospital. He told her they were short-staffed for the night and that he'd probably be there until morning.

Jenavieve didn't complain. She couldn't very well tell an ICU nurse that watching a mediocre romantic comedy with her was more important than attending to critically injured patients without sounding like a bitch. So now she was stuck with way too much vegetable fried rice as she popped the cork on the wine and turned on the TV.

She was just getting settled in when the doorbell rang. Excited that Chad might have gotten a reprieve, she popped up and dashed to the door. But when she opened it, she was disappointed to find an elderly man wearing a gray windbreaker and holding a small, brown, beaten-up travel bag.

"Can I help you?" she asked, irked.

He looked at her apologetically, almost pathetically. His gray hair was neatly parted to the side and looked to be held down by a thick hair cream. His face was wrinkled and his back was hunched. He was shivering violently in the cold and looked like he might collapse at any moment.

“I’m so terribly sorry to bother you, miss,” he said. “I’m visiting my grandson for the week. He lives nearby. I decided to go out for a walk to give him a break from entertaining an old man. But I seem to have turned myself around a bit. I was going to call him but I can’t seem to find my phone. I think I may have left it at his place. In any case, I have his phone number in my wallet. I saw your light on and hoped I might give him a call and see if he could come collect me. He can’t be more than a minute or two from here.”

Jenavieve looked him over. After half a decade as a yoga instructor, she knew better than to assume that just because a man was older, he couldn’t be a threat. That’s why she took self-defense classes every month. This guy didn’t look capable of doing her harm but she wasn’t taking any chances.

“Sure,” she said, keeping her foot on back of the door so it was only partly open as she pulled her phone out of her pocket. “Give me the number and I’ll call him.”

“Thank you so much,” he replied with a wan smile as he fished out his wallet and handed her a slip of paper.

She dialed the number and immediately got a message. She handed him the phone.

“It went straight to voicemail,” she said. “Better let him know what’s up.”

He took the phone and spoke into it in a soft, embarrassed voice.

“Garland, it’s Grandpa,” he said. “I’m afraid I got a little lost on my walk and I don’t have my phone. I’m at the home of a nice young lady who let me borrow hers to call you. We’re at...what’s the address here?”

“224 Currant Lane,” she told him. “I’m Jen Holt.”

“224 Currant Lane,” the old man repeated. “The angel is named Jen Holt. If you could stop by as soon as you get this, I’d appreciate it. So sorry for the hassle.”

“Just have him call me back when he gets this and I’ll walk you over,” Jenavieve heard herself offer reluctantly. The sooner this got resolved, the sooner she could get back to her crappy movie.

“Please hurry, Garland,” he whispered. “I’ve already put Ms. Holt out enough.”

He hung up and handed back the phone. They stood there silently for a second. Despite the realization that she didn’t really have a choice, Jen was unenthusiastic about inviting him in. He seemed to sense it.

“Ms. Holt, I will of course wait out here until we hear anything. But if it’s not too much of an imposition, I was wondering if I might borrow your lavatory briefly. It’s mortifying to say, but the years have made my bladder more restless than I care to admit.”

Jen sighed. Not being a bitch was becoming a real pain in the ass. First she couldn’t tell off Chad. Now she had to be polite to this aged scarecrow. She moved her foot away and opened the door. He shuffled in as quickly as he could, which meant slowly. She closed the door behind him and waited for him to get to the end of the hall. It took painfully long.

“The bathroom’s over there,” she said, pointing to the door in the corner of the room.

“Thank you so much,” he said, heading in that direction, then stopping to ask, “May I put my bag down on the counter here?”

“Of course,” she said.

He put down the travel bag, which made a curious clinking sound as it hit the counter. She wondered why he even carried the bag on a neighborhood walk. It hardly seemed worth the effort.

As he passed by the coffee table, he tried to return his wallet to the back pocket of his slacks. But his fingers fumbled

and he couldn't push it in. He lost his grip and the thing fell to the floor, sending several cards spilling onto the carpet. He bent over slowly, his knees creaking as he reached down for it. Jen couldn't bear the sight of it. At this rate, he would pee his pants before he picked it all up.

"I've got it," she told him as she walked over and knelt down beside him.

"Thank you dear. I do apologize," he said as she scooped up the cards, slid them into the wallet, and started to stand up again.

It was only as she returned to her feet and looked up that she saw the syringe. There was a glint as the needle caught the light just before she felt it plunge into the side of her neck. She reached up to grab at it even as she tried to push the man away with her other hand. But before she could do either, he'd taken a step back, with the empty syringe in his hand. She couldn't help but notice that he was moving much quicker than before.

"What did you do?" she demanded.

She wanted to charge him but suddenly felt unsteady, as if she might lose her balance.

"Let me help you off your feet," he said soothingly, not answering her question.

"Nooo!" she heard herself moan, noting that she had trouble getting the word out.

Despite her objection he stepped forward. She tried to lift her hands to keep him away but they weren't responding properly. Her legs felt heavy and distant. He was now right in front of her. She felt herself swaying and starting to fall backward. As she did, he reached out, wrapping his arms around her as if to hug her. But instead, he eased her down so that she was lying on her back on the coffee table.

She felt pressure under her armpits as he dragged her back so that only her feet dangled off the edge of the table. Every part of her felt numb. She could breathe but it was labored. She could see but not blink. She could think but not act.

“You probably have a lot of questions,” the old man said as he walked over to the counter, unzipped his travel bag, and took out what looked like a small toolbox. “I promise to answer them all in due course, Jenavieve.”

As he approached her, she realized that she’d never told him her full name. The logical assumption most people made was that Jen was short for Jennifer. It was at that moment that her confused fear gave way to full-on terror. If he knew her full name, that meant he’d planned this in advance; that he’d chosen her.

The old man placed the toolbox on the couch beside her and opened it. From her angle, Jen could see several items in the box. They looked more like surgical tools than hardware. The old man studied them, admiring them lovingly for a few seconds before selecting one. It was an X-Acto knife.

Jen heard herself groan gutturally. It was the closest she could get to a scream.

“I know, I know,” he said sweetly as he moved toward her. “I promised to answer your question and I will honor that promise. But we have some work to do first. It’s time to begin.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Her skull had been shattered.

According to the medical examiner's notes, the decorative clock that the killer had used to smash in Claudia Wender's forehead had connected with such force that the skull had broken into multiple fragments, like a window splintered apart after being hit by a baseball.

Jessie was flipping through the M.E.'s report on her phone as Karen drove them from L.A. south to Westport Beach. During normal rush hour traffic, the drive could take an hour and a half, but on this quiet Sunday morning, they'd reached the city limits in less than half that time. That was more than enough, as Jessie had seen her fill of photos, diagrams, and test results for a while.

"All done?" Karen asked, seeing her put the phone up.

"For now," Jessie said. "The photos were already a challenge. Looking at those numbers and figures in a moving car is really making me nauseous."

Karen nodded in understanding.

"Better to take a break anyway," she noted. "I know Jamil's going to have a lot of surveillance footage for us to review later on today."

"I can't wait," Jessie said acidly. "How much longer until we get to the Wender house?"

Karen glanced at the route on her phone.

"We should be there in less than five minutes. You okay?"

Jessie nodded.

"Yeah, sorry. It's just that coming back to this town dredges up some bad memories. It's got me in a foul mood. I'll work it out before we get there."

Karen didn't respond, apparently not wanting to make things worse by asking questions. Jessie was happy for the silence. As she looked out the window, she saw familiar spots, most of which only poured salt in a wound she thought had healed.

There were restaurants she and Kyle had frequented back before she'd discovered her husband was a sociopathic murderer. She saw an oceanfront walking trail she frequented when she was trying to make sense of his odd behavior.

As they approached the harbor, she could see the outline of what had once been Club Deseo, the yacht club he'd pressured her to join, and which turned out to be a front for the male members to take advantage of on-site escort services. She'd heard that it had been closed and was now vacant and boarded up. But that didn't give her as much satisfaction as she might have hoped.

Karen pulled into a gated community overlooking the water and flashed her credentials to the guard. He let them through and two minutes later they were parked in front of a McMansion exactly like the one Jessie had lived in and hoped to never see again.

"Wender is expecting us, right?" Jessie asked, though Karen had already said as much earlier.

"Yes," Karen answered patiently, before adding. "I know you're uncomfortable being here. But remember, even though Captain Decker manipulated you into this case, he wanted you on it for a good reason. You know how these people think. You can see through them better than most. Use that."

Jessie knew she was right. It was time to set aside her reservations and put her past experience, however painful, to some good use. She stepped out of the car and took advantage of the long walk up to the Wenders' door to clear her head and prepare for what was to come. She needed to be at full strength if she was going to get Claudia the justice she deserved.

They stopped at the front door. Karen rang the bell. The massive house looked so much like Jessie's old one that she wondered if they'd had the same builder. They had the same

faux-distressed wooden porch, the same oversized front doors. Some primal part of her feared that Kyle might open it.

Instead, it was opened by a tall man wearing jeans, a sweatshirt, and a baseball cap pulled down low over his eyes. Jessie had seen him in family photos and immediately recognized him as Claudia's husband, Joe Wender.

"Hi, Mr. Wender," Karen said gently. "I'm Detective Karen Bray of the LAPD. This is Jessie Hunt, a profiler we work with. I believe you were expecting us. May we come in?"

For a second he looked like he might actually say no. But then he nodded and held the door open for them. Jessie was tempted to speak as she stepped past him but wasn't sure what to say, so she held her tongue.

Once inside, he silently led them down the hall and through the expansive living room. The fireplace mantel was a chronological collection of photos showing the evolution of the Wender family, from a couple, to a family with one child, and then two children, who got bigger in each successive image.

Above those photos was one large one, a professional portrait of the Wenders on the beach with a wave crashing in the background. They were dressed casually, each outfitted in some shade of purple. Claudia and her daughter both wore summer dresses. Jessie noticed that they had the same eyes. Joe Wender was in jeans and a dress shirt. Their little boy wore shorts and a purple T-shirt with a Captain America shield on the chest. They were all smiling broadly and genuinely, as if the photographer had just told a good joke.

He continued into a smaller dining room with an ornate table that looked out on the large backyard. Jessie saw a play structure next to a gated pool. There was a baseball and an aluminum bat in the grass nearby. Wender sat down heavily at the dining room table.

"I know these chairs aren't that comfortable," he said, speaking for the first time. His voice was scratchy and rough. "But this is the only room where I think I can do this. We

didn't use it very much so the memories don't hit me so hard in here."

"This is fine, Mr. Wender," Karen assured him. "We understand what a difficult time this is for you."

As he took off the cap and looked up at her, Jessie got her first real chance to study him. His blue eyes were red and puffy. His blackish-gray hair was uncombed. He clearly hadn't shaved and from his haggard expression, she doubted he'd slept much either.

Under normal circumstances he would have been very attractive. In his early forties, he had a square-jawed, all-American vibe and a fit, athletic frame that suggested he still played whatever sport he'd excelled at during high school.

"Where are your children?" she asked. "You have two, correct?"

She knew the answer but wanted to gauge how he responded.

Yes," he replied. "Callie is nine and Joey Jr. is six. They're at my sister's in Laguna Beach. They're spending the weekend there with their cousins. They still don't know. I'm not sure how to tell them. I can hardly believe it myself. I didn't sleep much last night, but when I did, I woke up and rolled over in bed to tell Claudia about the nightmare I'd had. She wasn't there and I remembered that it was all real."

He paused for a moment.

"How do you tell children that their mommy is dead?"

Neither woman had any suggestions for him. Jessie glanced over at Karen and could tell that even the thought of such news being shared with her own little boy was upsetting. She decided to change tacks.

"Mr. Wender, there's no easy way to do this," Jessie said. "What I can tell you is that the quicker we can get answers from you, the more likely we are to catch Claudia's killer and the sooner this will all be over."

He looked at her blankly, as if he didn't understand where she was going with this. She continued.

“So with that in mind, are you okay with us just diving in with our questions?”

Now getting it, he sighed deeply and nodded.

“Go ahead,” he said.

Karen pulled out a small notebook and a pen. Jessie, who preferred to keep her eyes on Wender, leaned back in her chair as the detective began.

“You said the kids were spending the whole weekend at your sister's house. Was that planned in advance?”

“Yes,” he said, rubbing his closed eyes with his palms as he spoke. “I'd always planned for them to spend last night there. I was going to take Claudia out for her birthday. But then Lauren Kiplinger told me about their plan for Friday night, how they wanted her to think they were just taking her to dinner but would make it an overnight thing. So I decided to take advantage of the night without her and asked my sister if she'd keep the kids both nights. She said yes and I dropped them off a little while after Claudia left.”

“What did you do for the night?” Karen asked, impressively making it sound like mild curiosity rather than an attempt to discern his whereabouts.

“I did a marathon rewatch of the *Raid* movies.”

“What are those?” Jessie asked.

“They're super violent martial arts crime movies from Asia. Watching them is weirdly cathartic for me.”

“Did you have anyone over?” Jessie wondered. “Maybe to share in the violent catharsis?”

“No. It's more of a solitary experien—” he started to answer before suddenly stopping. “Wait, are you asking me for my alibi?”

“It's standard procedure,” Karen jumped in. “Don't take offense, Mr. Wender. We need to know where everyone was

and verify it as best we can.”

“You think I could have done that to my wife?” he demanded, his hoarse voice cracking slightly as he got louder. “The officer who came to see me yesterday told me how she died. He said someone bashed her head in. You think I’m capable of that?”

His fists clenched into balls as he pushed himself upright, towering over them.

Jessie suddenly feared everything was about to spiral out of control.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

She was still debating what to do when Karen stood up too, with her hand prominently visible on her gun holster. Wender's eyes went from her face to her hand and then back again. It felt as if all the air had been sucked out of the room.

Despite that, Jessie didn't respond, instead letting Karen deal with him while she remained seated, studying his body language. He was agitated, whether out of genuine horror at the insinuation or anxiety about something darker. Unfortunately, his bleary-eyed exhaustion and general dishevelment made it hard to discern which.

"Mr. Wender," Karen soothed. "I'm sorry the officer told you that. It was inappropriate. But this is our job. We have to ask these questions. Don't draw any conclusions from it. We're doing the same thing with all her friends from that night. But we do need a clear answer about your activities on Friday night."

Wender looked wiped out from his objection and slumped forward, resting his forehead in his hands. After a few moments, still with his head down, he replied.

"I helped the kids pack up and dropped them at my sister's a little after five. I picked up a bunch of pizzas for dinner for them on the way there as a thank-you to my sister. I stopped at the grocery store on the way back to get some beer and a steak. I got back around six I think. I grilled the steak, watched the movies, and crashed afterward. I'd guess it was sometime between eleven p.m. and midnight."

"Did you try to check in with Claudia at any point?" Jessie asked.

He lifted his head from his hands to look her in the eye.

"Actually, she called me from the restaurant. She sounded buzzed and happy. She was acting pretend-angry that I'd been in on the scheme to surprise her. Then I texted her before I

went to sleep to tell her I loved her. I didn't hear back but I figured that she was too busy to notice."

"And the next morning?" Jessie pressed.

He scrunched up his nose as he tried to recall.

"I woke up on Saturday around seven, went to the gym, and came back home. I was going to watch a college football game when the cops showed up at my door."

"You hadn't tried to reach her at all prior to that?" Karen asked.

"No," he answered, doing his best not to take umbrage at the insinuation that he didn't care. "I figured she probably had a really late night and was sleeping in. I remember thinking that if she didn't text by noon, I'd check in, if only to get a sense of when she'd be back. I had dinner reservations for six that night and tickets to a comedy club after that."

Jessie knew it was likely to cause furious blowback but she needed to return to the night before.

"To be clear, Mr. Wender, you spent all of Friday night home alone. You didn't order any food on your phone and talk to the deliveryman or go out front to get your mail and wave to a neighbor? No one saw you after you got home from the grocery store?"

To her surprise, he didn't look angry but resigned, as if he somehow sensed that this would be his life for days and perhaps weeks to come—people asking invasive questions, doubting his motives, suspecting him.

"Maybe someone saw me," he finally said. "But I didn't see them. Even if I did, I don't remember it. It's not like I had any reason to commit those kinds of interactions to memory. It was just a lazy night at home as far as I was concerned."

"Do you have an alarm system?" she asked. "Security cameras?"

"We did," he said forlornly. "But the company was sued recently for not responding to calls in a timely manner. So we

dumped them a few months ago. We've been looking for a new one but kind of dropped the ball. It was on our to-do list."

He said that last line with a self-flagellating edge.

"Are you willing to let us access your phone data?" Karen asked.

"Sure," he muttered absently.

Jessie decided to switch subjects.

"What do you think of her friends, the ones from Friday night?" she asked. "How close were they?"

He stared into the distance, not seeming to fully register the question. Jessie was about to ask again when he replied.

"They're okay, I guess. I didn't spend a ton of time with them. We'd occasionally have the Rhetts over for dinner. Claudia and Veronica got friendly through our church. She was pretty nice, a little blah. The other two I knew less well. Kimberly Miner served on the PTA board with Cloudy but I never really saw her socially. She's very high energy and being around her was exhausting. We've known Lauren Kiplinger since our daughters were in daycare together. The girls are still friends so we sort of have to be. But she's a lot—kind of wild. She tends to get pretty toasted too. I think she's probably an alcoholic."

Jessie looked over at Karen to see if she wanted to follow up but the detective nodded that she should continue.

"So you said that they're 'okay,'" Jessie prompted, "but it doesn't sound you're a big fan of any of them."

"I didn't have to hang out with them so I never thought about it too much."

"Do you remember Claudia ever having a serious falling-out with any of them?" Karen asked.

He shrugged.

"Claudia said they were always sniping and gossiping about each other and complaining about their marriages. She told me she got a kick out of it because it reminded her how

good she had it,” he said, pausing for a moment to recover from the sudden catch in his throat. “That was nice to hear.”

Both women gave him a moment to regroup before proceeding.

“Nothing more than sniping among them though?” Karen double-checked.

“Detective,” Wender said, sounding twice his age, “to be honest, Cloudy didn’t tell me much about that stuff because she knew I wasn’t interested. I don’t know what that says about me, but it’s the truth. Are we almost done here?”

“Why?” Jessie asked.

“It’s just that I’m really tired and I was hoping to take a quick nap before getting the kids. After that, who knows when I’ll get to sleep again?”

Jessie looked at Karen, who seemed to be satisfied for now. She nodded that she was too.

“We’ll leave you be,” Karen said, standing up and starting for the front of the house. “But we’ll be reaching out for that phone data today.”

“That’s fine,” Wender said, oblivious as he walked them out.

“We’re going to get to the bottom of this, Mr. Wender,” Karen assured him, making a promise that Jessie wouldn’t have spoken aloud, though she also intended to keep it.

Joe Wender looked at them. His expression was a mix of sorrow and ambivalence.

“Whether you do or not, the love of my life is gone. Nothing will change that.”

Though Jessie tried to hide it, the words hit her like a gut punch. As she and Karen walked back to the car, she tried not to let his anguish become her own. He could afford to give in to it. But she had to channel it into something productive. And she was about to get a chance to do just that. She hoped Lauren Kiplinger was ready for her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Joe Wender's words were still gnawing at Jessie as they pulled up to Kiplinger's house one gated community over.

Assuming he was innocent, she could hardly blame him for considering solving his wife's murder a secondary issue right now. And with only instinct to go on until they got his phone data, she was inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt for the time being.

It wasn't impossible for him to drive up to Hollywood, sneak into the hotel suite to kill his wife, and then return home. But it wasn't the most likely scenario. And while he could have been giving them an award-worthy performance, the man did seem truly bereft. That might be why knowing Claudia's killer wasn't his priority. He was suddenly a single dad with two young kids.

But moving on wasn't Jessie job. Finding Claudia's killer was. And while doing so might not change anything for the Wender family, they might feel differently down the line. Either way, two things were true: justice needed to be served, and a murderer, one who might kill again, needed to be taken off the streets.

They parked across the street from the Kiplinger home. It wasn't quite as large as the Wenders' but the family wasn't in any danger of running out of living space. Jessie pointed to the unmarked car half a block down the street. Karen nodded and called the Westport Beach PD dispatcher and gave her name and authorization number.

"You can have your teams pull their surveillance," she said. "We've arrived to conduct our interviews. Thanks for your assistance."

After she hung up, they walked to the front door. The Westport PD vehicle passed by and the plainclothes officers inside waved a greeting, which the women returned. As they

reached the porch, Jessie heard the loud yelling of children somewhere inside.

Karen rang the bell. When no one answered after a minute, she rang it again and gave several hard knocks. Soon after, the door was opened by a little boy about four years old wearing a jammie top but nothing down below. He was holding a cinnamon roll in one hand and white frosting covered his lips and nose.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“We’re here to see your mommy,” Karen said in the friendliest tone Jessie had ever heard from her. “Is she home?”

The kid turned his head and screamed, “Mommy, are you here? There are ladies asking!”

“What ladies?” came a familiar, frazzled voice from somewhere in the back of the house.

“Tell her police ladies,” Karen suggested.

“They say they’re cops!” he shouted.

“Hold on!” the even more frazzled voice shouted back.

The boy turned back to them and smiled broadly.

“I’m Miles,” he said.

“Hi, Miles,” Jessie said. “Where are your pants?”

He took another big bite of cinnamon roll before answering.

“I peed them,” he said, his mouth full and crumbs falling out. “So I had to take them off. Mommy’s making clean undies so I’m waiting.”

“I see,” Jessie replied.

Just then, Lauren Kiplinger rounded the corner in yoga pants and a sweat top. The sight of her half naked son eating a pastry while talking to the LAPD made her gasp.

“Where are your pants, Miles?”

“I peed them,” he reminded her.

“But I told you to wear your brother’s until I finish the laundry.”

“They’re too big. They kept falling down. I’m okay like this,” he insisted.

Kiplinger’s whole face sank. Without the makeup, the cute outfit, and the buzzy Hollywood energy from yesterday, she looked worn down and borderline sickly. Jessie wondered how much of that was due to the challenge of domestic life, how much was grief over the loss of her friend, and how much was another possible lost, boozy night.

“You can’t go around opening the door without pants on,” she said with forced patience. “Go wrap a towel around yourself until I give you a clean pair. And wipe your face. It’s dripping with sugar.”

Miles took his last bite of roll and walked off without another word. Once he was gone, Kiplinger’s face quickly turned from harried to overtly concerned.

“Why are you here?”

“We have a few more questions for you, Mrs. Kiplinger,” Karen said. “Rather than ask you to come all the way to the city, we decided to come to you.”

“Am I the only one you’re talking to?” she asked anxiously.

“You don’t need to concern yourself with anyone else, ma’am. Is there somewhere private we can talk?”

The woman thought for a moment. Jessie started to wonder if the answer might actually be no. Finally she seemed to come up with an idea.

“Follow me,” she said, turning around without another word. As Karen did, Jessie closed and locked the front door to make it harder for her son to flash the rest of the neighborhood.

Kiplinger led them back into the bowels of the home. Jessie had to dodge everything from toy trucks to dolls to random Lego pieces, all of which were scattered among the

various rooms. They passed through the kitchen, which looked like it had been the victim of a small, isolated tornado. Flour was on every counter, an open syrup bottle lay on its side as liquid dripped out into a brown puddle on the floor. The sink was piled high with dishes. On a cabinet in the corner stood multiple empty liquor bottles.

They continued on into the living room, where a boy of about seven and a girl around nine were sitting on the floor, throwing small discs that looked like pieces of cereal into each other's mouth. The floor around them was littered with bits that hadn't found their mark. In an easy chair nearby, a guy in sweatpants and a rugby shirt sat watching a football game on TV. He looked up as they entered.

"Dale, don't let the kids out back," Lauren said. "I'm going to be having a private conversation out there."

"Who are they?" he demanded. Now Jessie knew where little Miles got his manners.

"They're investigating..." She paused, glancing at the kids on the floor before continuing, "What happened on Friday?"

"Oh," he said, clearly wishing he hadn't asked. "Okay."

Kiplinger opened the sliding glass door and pointed them toward a patio table. Jessie wandered over and zipped up her jacket before taking a seat. It was a chilly mid-morning and the Kiplingers' backyard, which was on a hill exposed to cutting ocean winds, wasn't helping.

"I thought I answered everything yesterday at the hotel," Lauren said, even before sitting down.

"Some new questions came up," Karen said matter-of-factly. "We're hoping you can help us clear them up."

"I can try, but it's all pretty hazy."

"You coordinated for the stripper to arrive at midnight, correct?" Karen said.

"Yeah. And he showed up right on time. I remember thinking that was a good sign. You never know how professional a company like that is going to be."

“It sounds like Rock Harder was on better behavior than you,” Jessie poked. If she was going to get these women to open up more than they had yesterday, she knew the best bet was to get them sniping at one another.

“What does that mean?” Kiplinger asked, clearly irked as she glanced over her shoulder.

Jessie suspected that the woman was making sure the sliding door was closed and that her husband couldn't hear them.

“We were told you got pretty grabby that night,” she said flatly.

“Who told you that?” Kiplinger demanded.

“Is it true?” Jessie pressed, ignoring her question.

Realizing she couldn't order law enforcement to answer her, she gave a resentful sigh.

“I'm sure I was,” she said defensively. “I like to have a good time. He was a big boy. If I went too far, he could have told me, and he didn't.”

“Are you sure about that?” Jessie pushed. “We heard you were on the verge of passing out at that point. How do you even remember what he said or you did?”

Kiplinger seemed about to retort angrily before a thought popped into her head.

“Actually, I may have passed out. I don't remember him leaving. I have a vague recollection of him dancing, and then he wasn't there. The next thing I remember is falling off the loveseat I was sleeping on in the middle of the night. Everything in between is a blur.”

Jessie decided now was the time to let the woman's stewing bitterness at being called out flower fully. Lauren Kiplinger was pissed and she was under the mistaken impression that having passed out at some point gave her an impenetrable alibi. She was primed to rip her gal pals and Jessie was happy to let her.

“So Lauren, you were completely out,” she said leadingly, using the woman’s first name to make things seem more casual. “In that case, who do you think could have done this? Did one of the others have a beef with Cloudy?”

Lauren looked down at the table, giving the impression that she was really pondering the question. Jessie glanced at Karen, whose eyebrows were raised, and gave her best “I told you so” look. It looked like the decision to let these women go yesterday and chat now in their natural habitat was about to pay off.

“I would never accuse either of them of something like that,” Lauren said, looking back up with robotic sincerity. “But you never know what someone’s capable when they’re not in their right mind.”

“What do you mean?” Karen asked curiously, playing into the gossipy vibe.

Lauren leaned in conspiratorially, even though there was no one else around.

“Like, Veronica seems like such a goody-goody church mouse. But when she lets loose, she really goes all out. She’s so buttoned up most of the time that when she finally lets her hair down she tends to overdo it.”

“How so?” Jessie asked, leaning in as well.

“For example, that night she was making out with some guy in the club. Then they went off to a dark corner. I couldn’t see everything but there was a lot of writhing around going on. And that’s not the first time.”

“But that doesn’t mean she would kill her friend,” Karen pointed out.

“No, of course not,” Lauren said, straightening up again. “My point is just that when she’s drunk, which isn’t often, her brain turns off and she starts operating on instinct.”

“Isn’t that kind of true for anyone who gets drunk?” Jessie said.

“Sure, but some of us, who drink a little more on the regular, know when we’re pushing up against the limit. Veronica would bust right through. I don’t think she’d ever intentionally hurt Claudia. But I know she was jealous of her—happy marriage, good kids. I could see her accidentally snapping if she was really smashed and Cloudy said the wrong thing to her. All it takes is a second of anger, you know?”

Jessie didn’t point out that the same “second of anger” could lead anyone, including her, to accidentally snap.

“What about Kimberly?” she asked.

Lauren shook her head.

“Kim will do some wild stuff too, but she doesn’t need to be in an altered state to do it. She used to be real prim and proper. But a couple of years ago, she found her husband was nailing their nanny. He convinced her to let it continue, saying that an open marriage would be better for their relationship long term. But then there was this big bust at the yacht club they belonged to. It turned out it was basically this fancy whorehouse masquerading as a fancy club and he’d been using that for kicks too.”

As she talked, Karen looked over at Jessie incredulously. They were clearly thinking the same thing. How could Lauren Kiplinger not realize that the big bust she was referring to happened as a result of the woman sitting across from her? Then again, Lauren didn’t seem to Jessie like the type who committed details of news stories to memory, especially not ones from more than a week ago.

“After that,” she went on, oblivious to the expressions of the other two, “Kim was done with putting up with the double standard. She decided to give as good as she got. If she saw a guy she liked, and he was game, she’d have her way with him. She didn’t even try to hide it. Her husband, Morgan is his name, couldn’t say boo. They have two kids. She runs everything in that family, keeps the trains running. He knows if he said a word, she’d bail and his life would fall apart. So she has her fun and he keeps his mouth shut.”

“So you don’t think she’s capable of this?” Karen tried to clarify.

“Never say never,” Lauren said, now in total “chatty” mode. “She was pretty far gone on Friday too. But I don’t think she had as much reason to resent Cloudy. I mean, maybe she wished her husband wasn’t an asshole and was more like Joe. He’s a real solid guy. And I say that knowing he doesn’t like me that much. But Cloudy loved him, so I’d never say a bad word about him. Anyway, Cloudy never rubbed it in Kim’s face and that doesn’t seem like enough of a reason to kill your friend, drunk or sober.”

“Did *you* resent her marriage?” Jessie asked.

Lauren didn’t seem as offended by the question as expected.

“Not resent,” she said. “I mean, I wish my husband wasn’t such a lazy lay-about who watches sports every night and can barely keep track of his kids’ names. But I’m not exactly a walk in the park either, so I can’t really complain too much.”

It was about as honest-sounding an answer as Jessie could have hoped for. Whether it was actually true was another matter.

“Anyone else that had a problem with Claudia?” she asked, sensing that their hostess was running out of steam.

Lauren shook her head.

“Not that I know of. She was a hard person to hate. Besides, she never said a bad word about anyone. When we had our gripe sessions, she listened but never joined in. So I don’t know where anyone would get the ammunition to come after her, you know?”

Jessie nodded, though she didn’t necessarily agree. Sometimes people create their own ammunition. And in her experience, her old neighbor Kimberly Miner was good at manufacturing bullets. She decided now was a good time to find out for sure.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jessie was pretty sure this was what a panic attack felt like.

She and Karen were so immersed in breaking down their interview with Lauren Kiplinger that she'd somehow forgotten that Kimberly Miner's house was right across the street from where she used to live.

But as they rounded the corner and both places came into view, her chest tightened and she started to hyperventilate.

"Are you okay?" Karen asked, pulling over just a few homes away.

"No," Jessie grunted.

"What is it?"

Jessie, not sure she could speak, pointed at her old house, where she had lived with a husband who poisoned her while she was pregnant, inducing a miscarriage. It was the house where she slept each night beside a man who cheated on her, eventually tried to frame her for murdering his mistress, and then tried to kill her when she found out. After getting out of prison for those crimes, he would go on to kill her mentor, nearly kill her boyfriend, and try to do the same to both her and her sister. All that madness began in the house less than half a block away.

Karen knew most of that and seemed to understand the gist of what was happening without being told.

"Okay, listen," she said calmly and slowly. "Here's what you're going to do. Take a deep breath in through your nose and out through your mouth. Then do it again. I'm going to come around and help you out of the car. Standing up in the fresh air will do you good. While I come over, I want you to focus on a spot on the dashboard. Don't look anywhere else."

Jessie did her best to follow Karen's instructions. She fixated on a dusty patch on the detective's dash, though her eyes watered with the effort. She inhaled as deeply as she

could, allowing the cold air to fill her lungs before she slowly expelled it.

The passenger door opened and Karen extended her hand. Jessie reached for it, allowing the other woman to bear the brunt of lifting her out of her seat. Once she was upright, she leaned her back against the car and took several more deep breaths.

She was just starting to feel like she was regaining control when a memory of Kyle, hovering over her as he plunged a fireplace poker downward, popped into her head, followed by another of him coolly convincing her that *she* had actually killed his mistress in a drunken, angry rage. She felt a cascade of additional memories lining up to invade her mind and sensed that if she didn't gain control now, she might never.

“Stop!” she ordered.

“What?” Karen asked, her lips pinched in worry.

Jessie forced a smile.

“I'm telling myself to stop this spiraling. I don't live there anymore. The man responsible for my anxiety about it is dead. I killed him myself. The only claim that place has on me is what I allow it to have.”

“That's exactly right,” Karen agreed. “That thing is just wood and drywall, nothing more.”

Jessie took another deep breath.

“Now I just have to get myself to believe it,” she said, wincing.

Something about the line, about the absurdity of her trying to convince herself that she ought not to be haunted by her old home, made them both laugh. It was enough to break the spell.

“You okay now?” Karen checked.

“I will be by the time we talk to Kimberly.”

“You sure?” Karen said. “Because we can't have you go all *Cuckoo's Nest* in the middle of the interview. It'd kind of undermine our ability to determine her credibility.”

“Noted,” Jessie said. “Maybe we just walk the rest of the way from here to give me a little more time to get my bearings.”

“Not a problem,” Karen said. “Maybe on the way over you can fill me in on what you know about Mrs. Miner. I get the distinct feeling that it’s more than you’ve shared so far.”

Jessie chuckled uneasily as she grabbed her coat from the car and put it on.

“That’s an understatement,” she said as they walked along the sidewalk to the Miner house. “I was trying to be discreet to protect her privacy earlier because I didn’t think my connection to her was material to the case. But now I’m reconsidering that. We knew each other pretty well back when I lived here.”

“As neighbors?”

“At first, yes,” Jessie told her, stopping for a moment to catch her still too-rapid breathing. “She was very sweet when we first moved in—brought us food, invited me over. I met her husband and her kids. We hung out a few times. Unfortunately, that all changed when the nanny incident happened.”

“The one Lauren mentioned,” Karen recalled.

“Right,” Jessie confirmed, finally sensing her frayed nerves settling. “But what Lauren didn’t know and I wasn’t going to tell her was that *I* was the reason Kimberly found out about her husband and the nanny. I saw them walking up the stairs, naked, toward a darkened bedroom in the middle of the night. I told Kimberly, thinking she deserved to know. She did *not* react well.”

“How so?” Karen wondered aloud.

“I won’t bore you with all the ugly details, mostly because they’re too cringy to think about. But it turned out that she already knew. She’d found some way to trick herself into thinking it wasn’t a big deal or that it didn’t mean anything or...I don’t know what. But when I told her directly, she had to face the truth and she took it out on me.”

“That sounds brutal,” Karen said quietly.

“It was. She didn’t speak to me for two months. But eventually we smoothed things over. I think she eventually just decided where the real blame belonged. And that was around the time things started falling apart with Kyle. I didn’t know everything he was doing on the side, but we were fighting. I know she heard at least one of them. And then—”

Jessie stopped short, surprised by the wave of emotion that hit her. This time it wasn’t panic but grief.

“What is it?” Karen asked.

Jessie forced a smile as she wiped away a tear with the back of her wrist.

“I had kind of blocked out this part,” she said. “But I was pregnant. Kyle apparently wasn’t excited because he poisoned me, which I didn’t learn until much later. I lost the baby. But the night it happened, I nearly died. I was calling nine-one-one and crawling to the front door. I barely made it outside before I collapsed. When I woke up in the hospital, Kimberly was asleep in a chair across the room. She had found me on my porch. She stayed with me all night in that room. We never really talked about it after. It was too painful. It’s a little weird that we don’t know each other that well and yet we were both present for one of the most traumatic experiences in the other one’s life.”

“I’m really sorry that happened to you,” Karen said, focusing on the one part of the story Jessie still hadn’t found a way to process. Even two years later, she still felt a hole in her gut when she thought about it.

“Thank you,” she said, before blowing her nose. “But don’t worry. I won’t let any of that affect how I handle this interview. If Kimberly Miner is responsible for Claudia’s death, she needs to pay, no matter what she’s suffered or what kindness she showed me in the past.”

Karen seemed reassured to hear it.

“So how do you want to play this?”

Jessie smiled, happy to get back to the task at hand.

“If she’s anything like the Kimberly I remember, we can’t go at her like we did with Lauren. She’s not a mean-spirited gossip. But she’ll engage, just in more of a concern-trolling way, worrying about the well-being of the neighbor who drinks too much or hoping the husband who’s cheating doesn’t bring home a venereal disease. If we can appeal to her sense of righteous neighborliness, we can get her chatting.”

“Sounds good,” Karen said, as they approached the door. “I assume you want to steer clear of the nanny thing?”

“At first, sure,” Jessie agreed. “But if she tries to roll us, I don’t have a problem busting it out. I’ll use whatever tool is at my disposal to get at the truth, even if it means reminding her of the night my pregnancy ended. Claudia Wender deserves everything I have. I won’t be holding back.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Morgan Miner almost dropped his beer.

Kimberly's husband, the man who liked to carouse around naked with nannies, clearly never expected to encounter Jessie Hunt again. When he saw her, he fumbled with the bottle and barely caught it before it hit the porch step. His sheepish face was as red as his hair.

"May I help you?" he muttered, failing horribly at pretending he didn't know who was in front of him.

"Hi, Morgan," Jessie said with extra pep, happy to keep him off-balance. "We're here to see Kimberly."

His eyes widened briefly before he recovered.

"Um, is she expecting you?" he mumbled.

"No, she's not. But I'm confident she'll make herself available."

"Um—"

She cut him off.

"Morgan, I'm being courteous because of our warm history together," she said, still chipper but with more of an edge. "But this isn't really a request. This nice lady with me is Detective Karen Bray of the LAPD. You can either invite us in to have a friendly chat with your wife or we can formalize things. I don't think Kimberly would appreciate you escalating the situation like that. But it's your call."

Morgan squirmed for a few seconds before opening the door and calling out to his wife.

"Kimberly, we've got visitors!"

As they stepped inside, Jessie leaned in close to him.

"That's the best you can do to warn her?" she muttered under her breath. "Seems like you're leaving her kind of naked, no?"

She kept walking so she couldn't see his expression but she did hear a satisfyingly ill-at-ease grunt. The house looked much as she remembered it as she led the way down the hall. It was just as huge and ostentatious as her own had been, though with two kids, it had an understandably more lived-in feel.

She noticed a few crayon marks on the walls and small stains on the carpet. It wasn't the chaotic mess that Lauren's place had been but it didn't have the "don't touch anything" energy that Jessie remembered from her own mega-house. They reached the large living room, where a girl of six and a boy, about four, were both playing games on iPads, with headphones over their ears.

Kimberly was in the kitchen, facing away from them, washing dishes. As they approached Jessie saw that she had ear buds of her own in and was quietly singling along to a tune. She had no idea they were there. She stepped into the woman's line of sight and gave a wave.

"What the—" Kimberly yelped in shock as she dropped a plate in the sink, shattered the dish. Trying to ignore that, she wiped her hands and removed the buds.

"Hi, Kimberly," Jessie said in her non-interrogatory voice. "I guess you couldn't hear Morgan announce us."

Kimberly looked over at Morgan, whose face had either gotten red again or never changed back in the first place.

"No," she said, recovering quickly. "I missed that. I assume you're here for the obvious reason?"

"We are," Jessie confirmed. "We need a few minutes of your time."

"Okay. If you'll just give me a minute to clean this up," she said, motioning to the sink, "I'll be right with you. Why don't you wait over there in the dining room?"

"Take all the time you need," Jessie said.

As they walked off, Kimberly called out to her husband.

"Morgan, I need to you to take the kids to the park for a half hour."

“But the game’s on,” he whined.

Jessie couldn’t help but turn back around to see how this would play out. Kimberly was staring frozen daggers at him. Very slowly, she responded.

“I need you to take our children to the park. I’ll text you when you can come home.”

Morgan, appropriately chastened, averted his eyes, put down his beer, and began to collect the kids. Jessie and Karen continued on to the dining room and sat down.

“Looks like he’s still doing penance,” Karen noted.

“Not very well though,” Jessie replied.

Within a few minutes he and the kids were gone and the house got deathly quiet.

“Can I offer you tea?” Kimberly called out after cleaning up the remaining shards of porcelain.

“Sure,” Jessie said, happy to let her hostess do something that made her feel comfortable before her bubble of security was punctured.

Kimberly moved about the kitchen, first boiling water in a hot pot and then getting out mugs.

“The kids have gotten a lot bigger,” Jessie called out, starting things off innocuously.

“Yeah,” Kimberly agreed, as she got out the teabags, “and a lot rowdier. I can’t just toss them in playpens and be done with it.”

Though Jessie pretended to be casually watching Kimberly prep the tea, she actually studied her like a hawk. She’d twice been drugged by suspects dropping something into her drink. Admittedly, the first time was impossible to predict. But the second incident was a result of her own arrogance and lack of focus. She was intent on making sure there wouldn’t be a third time.

“So, it seems like you’ve come a long way since we last saw each other,” Kimberly said, addressing one of the many

elephants in the room as she got out sugar and cream. “It feels like just a couple of years ago, you were just a student. I think I called you an aspiring Clarice Starling. Now you’re the real thing, a big-time profiler. I think you’re more famous than some of the celebrities we were hoping to see up there in Hollywood.”

“Your friend Lauren didn’t seem to recognize her,” Karen noted, speaking for the first time since entering the house.

Kimberly gave an amused snort, almost spilling the water as she poured it into the mugs for them.

“If it doesn’t involve juice cleanses or the Kardashians, Lauren’s not interested. In fact, it was the latter that got her into that argument at the club.”

She brought the mugs over on a tray, along with the cream and sugar, and sat down across from them. She didn’t seem to notice that she was still wearing an apron. Jessie didn’t mention it.

“It seems like you’ve made a few personal changes too,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Kimberly asked, grabbing her mug to take a sip with her left hand while she brushed the hair out of her eyes with her right.

“It’s pretty clear that you’ve taken a bit more control of your life,” Jessie told her. “Lauren suggested as much when we spoke to her and what I saw earlier seems to reinforce that.”

“Ah, I can guess what Lauren said,” Kimberly said, with a hint of bitterness.

“She just gave the impression that you don’t wait around for what you want anymore, that you’re more apt to go after it.”

“That’s a nice euphemism,” Kimberly said tartly.

“I’m just trying to be polite,” Jessie countered with equal bite.

Kimberly offered a tight smile.

“I think we’re well past that,” she said. “We’ve both seen each other in some pretty rough moments. There’s no need to tiptoe around. Why don’t you ask me your questions and I’ll try to answer them as best I can.”

The abruptness of her response took Jessie by surprise. She could feel the power dynamic shifting in the room and she didn’t like it. So she decided to get it back.

Slowly and with great deliberation, she dropped two sugar cubes in her tea. Then she poured in some cream. After that, she took the teaspoon on her saucer and swirled it around, letting the metal clang repeatedly against the inside of the mug. It was the only sound in the room. The whole process took a good twenty seconds. Eventually, she saw Kimberly gulp hard as she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Her moment had passed. Jessie was in control again. After placing the spoon back on the saucer, she finally replied.

“Okay, why don’t you start, Detective Bray,” she said, deferring to her partner.

Karen nodded and took her notebook out of her purse. Kimberly used the pause to take another sip of tea. Her face looked calm but Jessie noticed the slightest shake in her left hand as she brought the mug to her lips. She was nervous.

“Before we review the actual events of the evening a little more,” Karen began, “I wanted to address something I found a little odd. Why such a big suite? Was it just part of the whole birthday blowout? Because according to the hotel, that suite could have easily held another two to four people. It seemed a little excessive.”

Kimberly offered a wry smile.

“It’s funny that you say that,” she said. “There were actually supposed to be more of us, but two people bailed at the last second. We couldn’t switch suites without incurring a penalty, which would have almost equaled the cost of the one we had, so we just stayed put.”

“Who bailed?” Karen asked.

“Two other friends in our circle, Breanne and Markie,” she told them. “It’s probably better that Breanne didn’t make it.”

“Why do you say that?” Jessie asked, doing her best not to sound frustrated that this was the first time anyone had mentioned other possible attendees.

“She’s as wild as Lauren. We call them the Barbie Bimbos—not to their faces, of course.”

“How come?” Karen pressed.

Kimberly shrugged, only slightly embarrassed to reveal the origin.

“They’re both blonde. They both have big boobs. They both like to party. Hell, if Breanne had been at Fête with us, we might have all ended up arrested.” She paused briefly before adding far more somberly, “Maybe that would have been a good thing. Claudia might be alive right now if we’d gotten hauled in earlier in the night.”

Jessie said nothing, but Karen didn’t wait long before pushing the issue.

“Why didn’t she come?”

“She got sick at the last minute. She thought it might be food poisoning. She almost came anyway but Veronica told her a night of drinking and dancing would only make things worse. She was really disappointed but she knew it was true. Still, she was a sweetie about it. She at least paid her portion of the hotel bill, which is more than I can say for Markie.”

“Who’s Markie?” Jessie asked.

“Markie Trevor—she was Claudia’s oldest friend. They’ve known each other since middle school. She’s not the most pleasant person I’ve ever encountered—pretty sour actually. But Claudia was loyal to her, always tried to involve her in girls’ nights out. Anyway, she called literally an hour before we were going to pick Claudia up and said she couldn’t come. Her husband didn’t like the idea of her cavorting at Hollywood clubs with a bunch of bad influences like us.”

“She said that?” Karen asked, surprised.

“Not in so many words,” Kimberly admitted. “But it was pretty obvious what she meant. I was actually half-glad she backed out until she said he was refusing to pay since she wasn’t going. She didn’t sound all that sorry about it either.”

Though neither of the women who bailed on the evening sounded like credible suspects, Jessie made a mental note to have the Orange County folks look into their alibis. And after deciding that she and Karen had stirred up enough petty slights, she figured that they could get down to the important stuff.

“So Kimberly,” she began, “we’re trying to lock down the timing of the evening. The stripper came at exactly midnight, according to Lauren. Does that sound right to you?”

Kimberly’s forehead wrinkled as she tried to recall.

“I was pretty far gone by then but it sounds about right.”

“And Lauren had passed out by the time he left just after one a.m.?” she continued.

“I think so,” she replied, before inhaling suddenly and quickly adding, “but I can’t be sure. Like I said, it was all pretty hazy at that point.”

Jessie watched her backpedal and could almost see the gears grinding in her head. The woman had clearly realized that if Lauren was confirmed to be passed out, that left only two other major suspects still potentially conscious in the suite at the time Claudia was killed. At this point, there was no way to determine definitely if she was telling the truth or just covering her ass. Jessie let it go for now, pursuing another angle instead.

“I know we covered this yesterday, but do you remember Claudia getting into any arguments or fights that night, either with others while you were out on the town or with Lauren or Veronica?”

“No,” Kimberly said with certainty.

“And nothing out of the ordinary happened back at the hotel prior to you all going to sleep?” she pressed.

Kimberly studied the bottom of her mug for a second before looking up.

“Uh-uh,” she said quietly.

Jessie leaned back in her chair and took a long sip of her lukewarm tea.

“Kimberly,” she said slowly. “It’s been a while since we saw each other, but not that long. I can tell you’re holding something back. I don’t know if it’s big or small, important or inconsequential. But you are hiding something. And I can’t help but hold that against you.”

Kimberly swallowed hard before responding.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said unconvincingly.

Jessie looked over at Karen.

“Can I borrow those?” she asked, pointing at the detective’s notebook and pen.

Karen pushed them over to her. She picked up the pen and tore out a sheet of paper, which she slid across the table to Kimberly. Then, without warning, she tossed the pen at her.

Kimberly managed to snag the pen with her left hand just before it hit her in the face.

“What the hell?” she demanded.

Unfazed, Jessie explained.

“I’m giving you the chance to write down your secrets in case you’re afraid to say them out loud.”

Kimberly looked at the sheet of paper, then back up at Jessie.

“I’ve got nothing for you,” she said. Her voice was full of conviction but her eyes were not.

For the briefest of moments, Jessie was tempted to use either Morgan’s indiscretion or her own health emergency to induce a sense of responsibility in her former neighbor. But ultimately she chose not to, doubtful that it would work.

Besides, taking the high road now would allow her to go low later if necessary. She looked over at Karen, who shrugged, and then back at Kimberly.

“Then I guess we’re done here for now,” she said, standing up. The other women did the same.

“I’ll walk you out,” Kimberly said softly.

She led the way. Behind her, Karen gave Jessie an “are we really letting this slide?” look. Jessie smiled at her, hoping the gesture would let her partner know she hadn’t given up yet.

“Thanks for your time, Mrs. Miner,” Karen said when they reached the door. “Here’s my card if you think of anything else.”

Kimberly reluctantly took it.

“Best of luck, Kimberly,” Jessie added sharply. “Information on Claudia’s funeral should be available soon. Of course it will have to be a closed casket, what with her skull being bashed in and all.”

She turned and walked off without another word. Karen had to jog to catch up.

“What’s the plan, Jessie?” the detective muttered as they walked down the walkway away from the house, “Because I think she’s calling your bluff.”

Jessie realized she’d been nervously holding her breath and released the air in her lungs before responding.

“I had hoped to appeal to the better angels of her nature,” she replied quietly, her optimism fast fading. “But I guess that when it comes to how people act in this town, I’m still a little naïve. We’ll have to—”

“Wait!” Kimberly called out from behind them.

Before Jessie turned around to face her, she made sure she’d wiped the smile from her face.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Kimberly didn't seem to notice that she was barefoot.

As she ran up the walk toward them, Jessie wondered how long the woman would last in this cold in just her house clothes and apron. But not wanting to do anything to complicate the situation, she said nothing.

"Yes?" Karen asked when the petite, short-legged redhead finally reached them.

"There is one other thing you should know," Kimberly whispered, though there was no one in sight on the neighborhood street. When she said nothing else, Jessie prodded her.

"Go ahead."

"Everything I told you was true," Kimberly insisted, before adding, "But I left something out."

Neither Jessie nor Karen spoke, choosing to let her get there in her own time. Finally she did.

"The stripper we had that night, he didn't just dance. At one point he went into the bathroom in the master bedroom with Claudia. We could hear them. There was definitely more than dancing going on."

Jessie stared hard at her.

"This is no time to be coy, Kimberly," she said sternly. "What exactly happened?"

"They had sex," she told them, wincing as she said the words.

"How can you be sure?" Karen asked. "Did Claudia tell you that?"

Kimberly looked like she'd prefer to do anything other than answer the question but ultimately she did.

“No. She was completely closed-mouthed, which is typical for her. But the next morning, after Veronica found her and we called the police, I felt ill and went into the master bathroom to throw up. I managed to stop myself, but in the trash basket, I saw a used condom.”

She lowered her head, apparently preparing for what she knew was coming next.

“We didn’t find that when we arrived,” Karen said.

“I know,” Kimberly said, her head still down, “After I saw it and told Lauren and Veronica, we calmed down enough to process that everything about that night would come out, including the stripper stuff. We couldn’t bear the thought of the world knowing what Claudia had done the night she died. We didn’t want that to be the final image people had of her. We didn’t want her husband, or especially her kids, to have to deal with it. So we agreed to throw it out.”

“Who did?” Karen asked.

“Me. I tied the bag up and ran it down the hallway to the trash chute next to the housekeeping closet.”

“You realize you committed a crime,” Karen said.

Kimberly was shivering. Apparently now that the tension of holding in her secret was gone, her body had become aware of the elements.

“I do now. In the moment, it made sense. Claudia was alive when the guy left. We were even teasing her about not being the goody-goody she portrayed herself as. She was fine. I mean, she was conscious. So there didn’t seem to be any reason to let the encounter come out if it didn’t have anything to do with her death.”

“But you don’t know that,” Jessie told her. “Maybe he got aggressive with her. Maybe he forced her. If so, he might have snuck back in later when you were all asleep to make sure she didn’t accuse him of something the next day.”

“But we would have heard him,” Kimberly protested. “How would he even have gotten in?”

“You said you were all toasted,” Jessie reminded her. “Apparently Lauren couldn’t even stay conscious until the guy left. Would any of you really have noticed if he snagged one of your keycards? If he came back in when you were all passed out?”

“You think that’s what happened?” Kimberly asked, aghast.

“I have no idea. We have experts reviewing surveillance footage as we speak. The point is, the investigators are supposed to determine what evidence is relevant, not the victim’s hungover friends.”

Kimberly was now shaking violently. She wrapped her arms around herself in a vain attempt to stay warm but made no request to go back inside. It was like she viewed her discomfort as some sort of atonement for her deception.

“Are you going to arrest me?” she asked meekly.

Jessie looked over at Karen to make sure she was on the same page before replying. The detective said nothing but rolled her eyes slightly, which Jessie interpreted as a sign she wouldn’t go to the mat over this. She turned back to Kimberly.

“Your bigger concern is that we arrest you for Claudia’s murder,” she said sharply. “We haven’t ruled you out on that front yet. Getting charged with destroying evidence will seem like a walk in the park compared to that.”

The shaking continued but it wasn’t clear whether it was the result of cold or fear.

“You know me, Jessie,” Kimberly pleaded. “You know I would never do something like that. Claudia was my friend. Our daughters played together. It’s just not...it’s not possible.”

Jessie was inclined to believe her, but not for the reasons she suggested.

“Go back inside, Kimberly,” she told her. “Don’t talk to Lauren or Victoria about this. You’ve done enough conspiring with them for one weekend. If we find that you’re communicating with them, it won’t look great.”

“What should I do then?”

“Hang out with your family. Play with your kids. Avoid committing additional crimes. We’ll be in touch.”

Kimberly nodded and hurriedly returned inside without another word. Jessie and Karen moved just as quickly to get back to Karen’s car and out of the whipping wind.

“To Veronica Rhett’s next, I assume?” Karen said.

“I think so,” Jessie agreed. “Let’s see what crime she confesses to.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

They knocked and rang the bell multiple times without an answer. There were no cars in the driveway and Karen even used a small mirror with a long extension handle to see if any vehicles were in the garage. She saw one but the other space was empty. They returned to her car, unsure how to proceed.

“What do you want to do?” Karen asked. “I hate to head back without talking to her.”

“Me too,” Jessie said. “At some point today we should pay Rock Harder a visit so he can explain himself. But I think we should hold out here a little longer. It’s late morning on a Sunday. Maybe they’re at church or breakfast.”

“Or maybe she’s trying to leave the country,” Karen half-joked. “I knew we shouldn’t have let those surveillance cars go.”

“Let’s give it a few minutes before we put out an APB,” Jessie replied with a wry smile.

“I guess I’ll trust your judgment on this one,” Karen said. “You called it right on Kimberly Miner.”

Jessie shrugged modestly.

“I guess I knew her better than I thought. It was clear she was hiding something. Maybe Captain Decker was right to put me on this, even if he was sneaky about it. Don’t tell him I said that though.”

“Never,” Karen replied.

“Anyway, I’ve learned not to make too many assumptions, but I’m skeptical that she’s our killer.”

“Because of the hand?” Karen said, smiling deviously.

“You noticed that too?”

“Not at first, I’ll admit,” Karen conceded. “But after you pulled that pen toss trick, I caught on. I realized what I guess

you already had—that she’s a lefty.”

“Yeah,” Jessie said. “She poured the hot water with her left hand. She drank from the mug with it. Catching the pen with her left hand just sealed it. And the medical examiner’s report I was looking at on the way down here indicates that because of the angle of the blow to the head, Claudia was likely attacked by a right-handed person. I wouldn’t definitively exclude Kimberly based on that alone. But she definitely drops lower on my list.”

Before Karen could reply, an SUV pulled into the driveway. The garage door opened and four people got out: Veronica, her husband, and two children. Jessie observed that they were all dressed in matching outfits. The boy wore a miniature version of his dad’s suit and the girl had the same dress as Veronica. She flashed back to Lauren Kiplinger’s “goody-goody church mouse” jibe, and wondered just how much of a facade that was.

“Looks like you were right about church,” Karen noted.

“I guess we should see if Veronica’s in a confessional kind of mood,” Jessie said as they got out of the car.

Veronica saw them coming and stopped in her tracks.

“Take the children in, honey,” she told her husband. “I need to have a chat with our guests.”

He husband glanced over and quickly ascertained the situation.

“Come on, kids, let’s get in where it’s warm,” he said enthusiastically to the kids before turning to his wife. “Let me know if you need me.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, blowing him a kiss.

Jessie and Karen stopped at the garage entrance, waiting for everyone to go in the house before speaking.

“So where do you want to do this?” Veronica asked, beating them to the punch. Jessie was surprised by how controlled she seemed.

“Probably somewhere with privacy,” Karen said. “You don’t want your kids listening in.”

Veronica thought for a second.

“We’re building an additional wing to the house. The kids know it’s off limits because of all the dangerous equipment. It’s not the most comfortable place but it’s secluded.”

“Lead the way,” Karen said.

They followed her as she passed through the dining room and foyer, carefully avoiding a route where her kids might see them. They continued over to the other side of the house, through a small sitting room to a clear, plastic tarp that served as a door to the area under construction. She unzipped it and led them into a large, enclosed open space with exposed wood beams, partially dry-walled sections, and lumber everywhere. Veronica Rhett looked mildly ridiculous standing amid it all in her elegant, navy Sunday dress.

“What is this?” Karen asked.

“It’s going to be a visitors’ wing,” Veronica said. “Like a guest house but connected to the main house. It affords privacy but accessibility.”

“Must be nice,” Karen muttered sourly.

Jessie saw Veronica tense up at the comment, apparently realizing that she wasn’t making any friends with her ostentatious description. With her on the defensive, it seemed a perfect time to start asking questions.

“So we know Claudia slept with the stripper,” she said loudly, letting the words echo around the empty room.

Veronica stumbled slightly and reached out for something to steady herself.

“Stop!” Karen ordered.

Veronica pulled back her arm and looked over to see that she’d almost rested her hand on the exposed blade of an upturned automatic wood saw. She gasped in shock.

“Why don’t you have a seat?” Jessie suggested, nodding at some bags of cement piled three high just beyond the saw.

Veronica nodded and settled in on them, trying to adjust herself in her dress. She brushed the dark hair out of her eyes, searching for any familiar habit to regroup.

“You kept what happened with Rock Harder from us,” Jessie said, boring in on her again. “That doesn’t reflect very well on your credibility.”

Veronica nodded before whispering, “How did you find out?”

“Not really important right now,” Jessie countered. “Why did you lie?”

“We were trying to protect her memory.”

“Are you sure about that?” Karen asked.

“What?”

Jessie knew where the detective was headed and steeled herself for the potential ugliness.

“In the course of our investigation, it’s been suggested that you were seriously envious about Claudia’s seemingly perfect life—great husband, good kids. Maybe also getting to have a consequence-free night with a hot stripper was a bridge too far. Maybe the more you thought about it, the angrier you got. You’re lying awake looking at that clock. She’s snoring in the other room, helpless. And something just snapped. How does that sound?”

“It sounds crazy,” Veronica hissed, quaking with fear, anger, or some combination of both. “I never thought about Cloudy that way. She was like a sister to me. You got some bad information and I can guess where it came from.”

As she spoke, Jessie noticed her hand brush the handle of a hammer on the floor beside her. She didn’t seem to register it, but all the same, Jessie casually moved her own hand on top of her gun holster.

“Where’s that?” Karen demanded.

“Probably the person who *really* resented Claudia, the one whose whole life is a carnival fun house of chaos and alcohol. Only Lauren would try to pull that crap.”

“Is this the same Lauren who ruined your night of grinding in a dark corner of Fête by getting thrown out?” Karen batted back.

Jessie stared at the detective in awe, stunned at her willingness to go for the jugular. Veronica’s mouth dropped open in shock.

“That was a moment of weakness,” she insisted once she’d recovered. “I don’t drink a lot and when I do, it hits me hard.”

“How hard?” Karen challenged. “Maybe hard enough to completely forget bashing in your friend’s skull in the middle of the night, so that you were genuinely shocked when you found her the next morning?”

“I didn’t do that!” Veronica screamed.

Her hand had rested on the hammer now. Karen noticed it too and glanced at Jessie, who nodded down at her waist to indicate she was prepared. Neither of them spoke.

“Look,” Veronica continued, only slightly more controlled now. “I’m far from perfect. Yes, I behaved badly at the club. I drank more than I should have. I wasn’t forthright about the stripper. But I would never hurt my friend. I was there to help her celebrate a milestone. And I ended up finding her lying on a bed with a caved in skull. I can’t get it out of my head—her eyes staring lifelessly at me, the blood dripping down the white sheets. I’m afraid to close my eyes because every time I do, that’s what I see. I didn’t do this.”

As she said those last words, she took her hand off the hammer and wiped away the tears streaming down her cheek.

“Everything okay in here?” someone asked from behind them.

Jessie turned around to find Veronica’s husband peeking through the plastic tarp, a worried look on his face.

“We’re good,” Karen told him. “Why don’t you go on back with the kids?”

“I’d like to hear it from my wife, if you don’t mind,” he shot back. “Should I be calling someone, Veronica?”

She looked up blankly. It took her several seconds to register that he was asking if she needed a lawyer. Jessie saw her mentally playing out how that would go down: admissions of furtive foreplay in a Hollywood club and a stripper in her hotel room. She shook her head.

“I’m fine, John,” she assured him. “This is all just upsetting to talk about. Go back to the kids. I’ll be back in soon.”

Reluctantly, he left. Once he was out of earshot, Veronica posed a question to them.

“Was I lying? *Will* I be back in soon?”

It was a good question. Did they have enough to bring Veronica in to the station? Or was she just a woman who made some bad choices under incredible stress?

Jessie realized that after spending all morning questioning the people who’d last seen Claudia alive, she was no closer to an answer. That reality left her feeling the one emotion she hated most: helpless.

The truth was that they couldn’t arrest Veronica. Despite all the smoke, there wasn’t any fire, at least not yet. So despite spending most of the morning in Orange County, they would be returning to L.A. frustrated. They’d conducted four interviews, and with the possible exception of Kimberly, they still had three credible suspects, including Claudia’s husband and two of her friends.

That meant their next best hope was waiting for them back in the city, where they would try to put the squeeze on a stripper named Rock Harder.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hannah wondered if this was what people meant by having butterflies.

She had the rideshare drop her off a block from convicted sex offender Jimmy Poston's house in the West Adams District. As each step got her closer, she became aware of an unusual feeling. It was as if small creatures were fluttering their wings in her stomach. She relished it.

The house came into view and she forced the giddiness to settle. If Jessie or Kat was approaching the home of a dangerous felon, they wouldn't allow nervousness or excitement to blind them to their task. She couldn't either.

She had to keep her mind focused on the reason she was here: to determine if this man, once convicted of raping a sixth grade girl, had also abducted Mindy Stokes. The tree-lined sidewalk and manicured lawns that adorned most of the houses on the street offered a deceptive façade, a sense that nothing truly bad could happen here.

Hannah knew better. Only a year ago, she'd lived on a perfect-seeming street in a family-friendly neighborhood. But that didn't stop her own birth father, a notorious serial killer she'd never met, from abducting her and her adoptive parents and butchering them in front of her. She'd seen her own sister tortured in a house like these. Just months earlier, she'd learned that a gorgeous seaside mansion was the headquarters for a sexual slavery ring. She'd learned not to be fooled by appearances.

She stopped briefly at the house adjacent to Jimmy Poston's to review her plan one last time. It wasn't complicated. Convince him to let her in to his place, look around for anything suspicious, get out, and call the authorities if need be.

She knew it might not be as simple as that, which was why she had both the can of Mace and the retractable baton Jessie

had given her for protection. Armed with those and with the training from her periodic self-defense sessions with her sister, she felt equipped to handle whatever situation developed.

She walked up to his house. Like many neighborhoods in this part of town, the variations in the style of residences varied wildly. There could be impressive, hundred-year-old, three-story affairs right next to matchbook-sized dwellings that looked like they might collapse at any moment. The rental place Jimmy lived in was among the latter.

The grass out front was brown and overgrown. The exterior needed a good paint job. Some roof shingles were missing and the ones that remained were in bad shape. Many windows had been painted over in black and others had brown butcher paper taped to the insides of them. The wooden front door was rotted through in places. She imagined that a couple of well-placed kicks from someone who knew the right technique would splinter it into pieces.

She pulled a clipboard out of her backpack and looked for a doorbell. Seeing none, she knocked on the door. There was no response so she knocked again. As she waited, she noticed that there was no peephole. Poston would have to open the door to see who was there.

“Who is it?” demanded a surly, male voice from behind the closed door.

“Hi, I need your help please, sir,” she said in her most enthused, girly voice.

“Not interested.”

“Please,” she pleaded. “Just hear me out. If you’re still not able to help, okay. But at least listen to what I have to say.”

After several seconds, during which she could hear him breathing heavily on the other side of the door, it opened slightly. There was a chain lock on it. She could barely see Poston, who stood back in the small slit amid the darkness of the room behind him.

“You have thirty seconds,” he grumbled.

“Yes, hi,” she began, hoping she sounded excitably flustered. “I go to Our Lady of Guadalupe Girls’ School and we’re doing a candy sale to raise money for our cotillion with St. Francis Boys’ School. A third of the proceeds will go to school supplies for students in rural African villages. Are you able to help?”

“You made it sound like you had some kind of emergency,” he said, still hard to see through the tiny opening.

“It is an emergency for the kids in those villages, sir,” she insisted. “Please, each candy bar is only a dollar. You’d get some sweets and you’d get to be sweet.”

She had come up with that line on the way over and thought it was pretty good. But she could tell from Poston’s grunt that he was unimpressed.

“Sorry. Can’t help.”

Seeing him start to close the door, Hannah realized her window was also literally closing and jammed her foot in the opening, making it bounce back slightly. She thought she heard the door bang his forehead but pretended not to notice.

“If you won’t buy anything, could you at least let me use your bathroom really fast? I really have to go and there are no businesses for a full block. I don’t think I’ll make it.”

“Move your foot,” he snarled. “You’re on my property. You’re invading my privacy. Leave or I’ll call the cops.”

Hannah replied before she could stop herself.

“And tell them what? That you felt threatened by a Catholic schoolgirl who asked to use your potty?”

She knew it was mistake before the words were even out of her mouth. Jimmy Poston’s eyes narrowed and she watched in real time as he went from viewing her as an annoying girl who might inadvertently cause him to violate the rules of his parole to a young woman with ulterior motives, one who seemed to be intentionally provoking him.

“Fine,” she said petulantly, removing her foot and spinning on her heel as if he were a parent who’d told her she couldn’t

have dessert that night. “I guess some people don’t care about anyone but themselves.”

She stormed off in a dramatic huff, though she listened carefully for the sound of the chain sliding loose or footsteps following her. But there was nothing like that. Nor did he say a word. She was halfway down the walk when she heard the door close and the click of a lock.

She moved on to the next house, just in case he was watching her. She pretended to ring the bell, though she didn’t actually touch it. After waiting a half-minute, she went to the next house down and followed the same routine. Then she walked away from that one and headed to the end of the block, where someone watching might assume she was looking for a business with a restroom.

When she was sure she was out of sight, she darted behind the bushes in the yard of a house that was for sale and skulked back near the porch. Glancing inside to make sure she wasn’t being watched by the owners, she saw that the home was empty.

That gave her an idea. As she played it out in her head, she could almost hear Jessie’s alarmed voice, telling her to stop right now, that she was putting herself at risk for no good reason. She could picture Kat standing beside her, nodding in agreement.

But then their images faded, replaced first by the school photo of Mindy Stokes, with her crooked smile and glasses sliding down her nose. She visualized her in that decrepit home—scared, alone, facing unspeakable horrors.

Then she remembered the shadowy, pasty face of Jimmy Poston, sneering nastily as he tried to slam the door on her. She imagined him sighing in relief now that the threat was gone and he could get back to what he was doing.

But more than either of those things, she felt the high, the adrenalized anticipation of being in a dangerous situation without a net, with only her wits and lack of fear as her weapons.

She pictured it all in her mind and she knew—she wasn't going anywhere.

CHAPTER TWENTY

As they drove back to the L.A. to re-interview the stripper Jerry Blatt, whom Karen insisted on gleefully referring to as “Rock,” Jessie called Ryan to check in.

“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Okay,” he said. “I finished physical therapy and just wrapped up a shower. The rest of the day looks a lot more relaxed.”

There was a pep in his voice that Jessie found reassuring. Even as things were generally improving for Ryan, sometimes small setbacks could send him into temporary bouts of melancholy. It sounded like he’d avoided those so far today.

“That’s great,” she replied. “And how’s Hannah?”

“She’s out, said she had a few errands to run.”

“She didn’t say where?” Jessie asked, trying to keep her natural suspicion and worry under control.

“She wasn’t specific but I got the impression it might have had something to do with Christmas gifts so I didn’t press her.”

Jessie decided she’d do well to follow his lead. The struggle to be supportive of her sister’s independence while still keeping her safe was an ongoing one that she didn’t always win.

“Okay,” she said. “Keep me posted on any exciting developments,” she said, ready to hang up.

“Hold up,” he countered. “Don’t I get any updates on the case?”

She sighed in frustration at the lack of them.

“Here’s the short version. Lots of suspects but nothing firm to tie any of them to the crime. We’re about revisit a stripper

named Rock Harder who slept with the victim, so you know, it's more interesting than the average Sunday, I guess."

"Is it weird that I'm jealous?" he asked.

"Of the stripper? You shouldn't be."

"No, of you," he said. "Why can't I interview Mr. Harder?"

"If I wasn't emotionally secure, my feelings would be hurt," Jessie teased. "Maybe you should spend the afternoon sharpening your wooing skills."

"I love you," he said, not at all concerned.

"I love you too," she replied. "Talk later."

"Everything okay?" Karen asked after she hung up.

Jessie smiled.

"Yeah," she answered. "Just because he can't walk that well doesn't mean I can't keep him on his toes."

Karen smiled back as the light turned green and she hit the gas.

"You're in such a good mood that I hate to puncture it with a non-romance update."

"Story of my life," Jessie sighed, pretending to be put out. "Go ahead."

"I was checking my e-mail at the red light. We just got the statement from the Westport Beach PD officer who was sent to question Claudia Wender's two friends who couldn't make her big night. He said everything checked out with both of them, although he also noted that while Breanne the blonde was polite, talking to Markie Trevor was one of the most unpleasant professional experiences of his life."

"You know," Jessie mused, "some might say that putting a line like that in his official statement is kind of unprofessional. Sounds like that fella could use a review of proper police procedure."

“I’ll let you tackle that one,” Karen said. “As far as the case goes, we figured those two would be a dead end anyway.”

“Well, hopefully *this* won’t be a dead end,” Jessie said as they pulled up to Jerry Blatt’s place.

Almost immediately, the lightness gave way to intense focus. Both women had been doing this long enough to know that the longer they went without a strong lead, the harder it was to make progress. Momentum was crucial to keeping suspects on edge and department superiors supportive.

Maintenance had nailed pieces of plywood to the broken parts of his front door but it still looked like it might topple over with a strong wind. Blatt opened it carefully and without an argument. The young guy looked more alert than the last time they’d visited. When he invited them in, Jessie noticed that he was walking with a pronounced limp, a result of the shin-slammng incident yesterday.

“I’m kind of surprised to see you again,” he said, taking a seat on the couch. “I thought you’d have arrested someone by now.”

“Well,” Karen said, “it’s a lot harder to solve the case when witnesses lie to us like you did.”

He immediately sat up straighter.

“What are you talking about?” he demanded.

“You neglected to share a detail or two about your time in that hotel suite, Jerry,” Karen pressed as she sat in the chair opposite him. “Care to come clean now?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he insisted, though Jessie could tell from his wide eyes and quickened breathing that he knew exactly what Karen was getting at. She was having none of it.

“Jerry, there’s no point in denying it,” she said simply. “We have witnesses and physical evidence. Now you can continue to drag this out and make it more painful for everyone or you can be honest. I don’t want to haul you into the station for this conversation but I will if I have to.”

He looked first at her and then at Jessie, who stared back at him coldly. She wanted to reinforce the sense that Blatt had no real options other than to tell them the truth. When she saw him gulp and his forehead uncrinkle, she knew he'd come to the same conclusion.

“It wasn't for money,” he said intensely. “I got paid my normal rate and they gave me a pretty standard tip. The other stuff was just...a moment.”

“What does that mean?” Jessie asked, now sitting as well.

He paused for a second, seeming to struggle with how to explain it.

“Everything was going like a typical session,” he finally replied. “I danced a little for everyone but most of my focus was on Cloudy since it was her birthday. Like I said, the blonde was grabbier than I liked, but she was so sloppy drunk that I was able to mostly steer clear of her. Cloudy kept apologizing for her friend's behavior and something about her tone of voice and her expression—they just made me feel a little for her.”

“How so?” Jessie pressed.

He paused again, trying to determine how best to answer.

“She seemed a little sad, like even at her own party, she couldn't let loose. So I took her in the other room and sort of played up how dancing for her didn't feel like work. I told her how sexy she was. And I wasn't lying. For an older woman, she was very attractive. I kind of pressed myself against her and let her know that if she wanted more than just a dance, I was game. She seemed like she could really use a good time.”

Jessie and Karen exchanged glances. This was the first detailed, coherent description they'd gotten of the night and neither wanted to interrupt it.

“How did she react?” Karen asked quietly.

He shrugged.

“Once she knew I wouldn't balk, she was receptive, surprisingly aggressive even. She grabbed a condom from her

purse and pulled me into the bathroom. I don't know how detailed you want me to get. But she kind of took charge. I didn't have to do any more coaxing at that point."

"And what happened after?" Jessie wanted to know.

"That was it," he said. "We cleaned ourselves up and I went back into the living room. She stayed in the bedroom."

"Did she say anything?" Karen asked.

"Nothing memorable. She said it was fun but she seemed kind of melancholy and distant, like her mind was on other things. I didn't ask what and she didn't volunteer anything."

Jessie knew that Karen was about to leap into the opening he'd left.

"Are you sure she wasn't sad because the encounter wasn't as consensual as you suggest?" she asked pointedly. "Maybe you used more force than she liked. Maybe she was too shaken up to say anything. Maybe you realized the trouble you were in if she talked and came back later to make sure she didn't."

He looked genuinely offended at the suggestion.

"Are you serious?" he demanded. "I never did anything aggressive. Once I let her know I was available, she was the forceful one. At no point was she resistant to anything going on. I would never do that."

"Are you confident the physical evidence will support that?" Jessie asked, slightly less accusatorily than Karen had.

"Yes. I assume that you have people who can test for that sort of thing, who can tell if she was raped. If they haven't already checked, have them do it. You won't find anything. I never made her do anything."

"But none of the other women can vouch for that," Karen reminded him.

"They couldn't vouch for much of anything," he shot back. "When I got back out there, the blonde was passed out or close to it."

"You're not certain?" Jessie asked.

“She was muttering to herself but I don’t know if that was in her sleep or if she was still conscious. I wasn’t paying close attention. And the other two weren’t much better. The redhead was sitting on the floor, staring at the TV while shoving French fries in her mouth. The brunette could at least stand up. But when she paid me the balance owed, she gave me an extra hundred on top of the tip. She was so out of it that I could have kept it and she’d never have known. But I gave it back. I’m not a thief. And I’m not a killer either.”

“You said Claudia was still in the bedroom when you left?” Jessie reviewed, ignoring his declaration of innocence.

“Yes. I wanted to say one last goodbye but she never came out and I thought it would be weird to go back in there after what had happened. So I told the brunette to wish her happy birthday again and I left. Then I left the hotel and came back here. Other than the extra time in the bathroom, it was typical night of work. I swear.”

Though she was forming a strong opinion about Jerry Blatt’s culpability, Jessie was happy to let Karen decide how to proceed.

“As we speak, our people are checking to see if the sex was forcible, Jerry. And we are detailing your whereabouts using cameras, GPS, and more. So if you’re lying, it will come out. With that in mind, is there anything else you want to share?”

He screwed up his lips, as if he was debating something with himself.

“Nothing to share,” he finally said. “But I do have something to ask. I know you have to do your job. But as much as possible, I’d really appreciate it if you could keep my name out of this. I could lose my job for the private time I spent with her. And if this blows up, I worry that I could lose my scholarship. I doubt the university would want the publicity.”

Karen seemed unmoved.

“If you’re lying to us, you’ll have much bigger problems than lost jobs or scholarships. My advice to you: keep your nose clean and don’t leave town.”

He nodded. They left his apartment. Neither of them spoke until they were back in the car.

“What do you think?” Karen asked as they strapped on their seatbelts.

Jessie sighed.

“I think we better hope that Jamil works his tech magic,” she said. “Because at the rate we’re going, we won’t have a single credible suspect by the end of the day.”

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Karen looked as deflated as Jessie felt.

On the way back to the station, they had come to a disheartening conclusion. Jerry Blatt almost certainly wasn't Claudia's killer. Jessie made sure that they were on the same page.

"We know, based on what her friends said, that Claudia was alive when he left the room. And we already have footage of him leaving the hotel at the time he said and GPS data of him getting home soon after," she noted. "So unless he snuck back in later that night, leaving his phone at home and picking the exact right time to enter the hotel, when the security had shut off, he's not our guy."

"I tend to agree," Karen said, "though if I was going to play devil's advocate, I'd argue that we can't necessarily count on anything her friends said, considering their condition at the time."

"Fair point," Jessie said, knowing that Karen was just doing her job by trying to poke holes. "But let's be real. It doesn't help any of those women to give Blatt an alibi. By saying Claudia was alive when he left the suite, they basically cleared him and make themselves more likely suspects. They could have used being drunk as an excuse to throw him under the bus, claiming they couldn't remember the timeline, but they didn't. That helps him but not them, which makes me think it was so obvious a point that none of them even thought to contest it."

Karen seemed to have lost the fire to make the counter-case.

"You know, I'm starting to doubt everything we think we know about that night," she said, obviously frustrated. "I know we've essentially eliminated Kimberly as a suspect but the other two seem more suspicious to me. What if Lauren faked passing out as a ruse to make the others think she was

incapacitated, and then waited until they went to sleep to kill Claudia? What if Veronica intentionally gave Jerry Blatt that extra money, knowing he'd mention it to prove his honesty and inadvertently confirm that she was too out of it to even pay someone properly, much less successfully commit a murder? Plus, we still haven't eliminated her husband, Joe. And who knows how many people were accessing that floor when the security program was down. There are too many potential killers to keep track of, some of whom were completely smashed. How are we supposed to get into their heads when they're not in their right minds?"

Something about that last line clicked in Jessie's brain. She closed her eyes, letting it come to her rather than trying to force it. The fragments of fact and circumstance floated in her head like jigsaw puzzle pieces moving through the air, looking for places to properly connect. She muttered to herself.

"Everybody loved her."

"What was that?" Karen asked, leaning in intently.

"Everyone loved her," Jessie repeated. "But someone wanted her dead."

"Okay," Karen said, not sure where this was going.

"She had to be tricked into doing a girls' night of partying, but then she went wild," Jessie continued.

"That doesn't seem all that out of the ordinary," Karen reminded her.

"She was in a happy marriage but didn't need much prodding to sleep with a stripper."

"What are you getting at, Jessie?" Karen prodded.

"We're spending so much time trying to get in the heads of the potential killers and it's getting us nowhere. Unless this was a total 'spur of the moment' crime of passion, someone killed Claudia for a specific reason and I can't help but wonder if that reason doesn't connect to how she was behaving that night."

"What do you mean?" Karen asked.

Jessie could feel some of the puzzle pieces starting to click into place, even if she couldn't see what the picture was yet.

“Okay,” she began, hoping her mouth could keep up with her brain. “According to Jerry Blatt, Claudia wasn't quite in her right mind that night either, and not just because she was drunk. He'd said she was the aggressor, even though she was supposedly happily married, never complaining about her relationship. He said she'd seemed sad, even on a wild birthday outing, both before and after their encounter. Maybe it was just guilt at having cheated. But I feel like there's more to it than that.”

“Like what?” Karen asked.

“Maybe the reason Claudia didn't gossip or spill about her own life wasn't because it was such a fairy tale. Maybe she just didn't want any of her secrets getting out. And maybe, despite being so tight-lipped, one did, and that's what had her worried.”

“Interesting theory,” Karen conceded. “Any evidence to support it?”

Jessie turned to her and smiled.

“Not yet,” she said. “But I have a hunch where we might find some. Let's make a pit stop at the Hollywood Center Hotel.”

“Now?”

“Now.”

*

Jessie could tell Karen was annoyed. She felt bad about it. But until she had something other than her gut to go on, she wasn't ready to share anything else.

They were waiting at the hotel's parking valet station while the valet manager rifled through his back tickets. Just then,

Kimberly called, returning Jessie's text from only minutes earlier.

"Thanks for getting back to me so fast," she said.

"Sure," Kimberly replied. "You made it sound like an emergency."

"Sorry about that. It's not an emergency but it is pressing. Remind me—how did you all get from Westport Beach to Hollywood on Friday night?"

"Veronica drove. She picked up Lauren, then me before stopping to get Claudia."

"And Veronica drove her own car, no one else's?" Jessie confirmed.

"Yes, a Mercedes SUV. Why?"

"I can't get into it," Jessie said. "But thank you."

"Does that help?" Kimberly asked hopefully.

"I don't know yet, maybe. Take care, Kimberly."

There was a pause before the other woman responded, with unexpected sincerity.

"You too, Jessie."

The valet manager walked over just as she was hanging up.

"So, I did find one ticket that matched the license plate number you gave me," he said, handing it over to her.

"I'm going to need to keep this," she informed him, dropping it into a plastic evidence baggie.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, surprisingly untroubled. Jessie wondered if he'd been through this kind of thing before.

"I recognize that license number from the file," Karen said. "It's for Claudia's Audi."

"Yes it is," Jessie agreed as they returned to the car.

"But Kimberly Miner just told you they all came here in Veronica's vehicle. If Claudia drove her own car, Miner has to

know we can verify that with the others. Why would she lie about that?"

"I don't think she's lying," Jessie said. "But to prove it definitively, we have to go back to the station and see Jamil."

"I feel like you're taunting me here, Jessie Hunt," Karen said, somewhere between irked and amused. "You're like the cat that ate the canary. Do you have any plans to share this hunch with me?"

"I do," Jessie assured her as they pulled out into traffic, "but not just yet. Before I say anything, I want to make sure I really am the cat that ate the canary and not the cat that ate... something that makes cats sick and throw up."

"Wow, that analogy really fell apart," Karen noted. "You're not a cat person, are you?"

"Nope, and apparently I'm not much of an analogy person either."

"I guess it's a good thing you're a killer-catching person."

"Don't jinx it," Jessie replied.

This thing wasn't solved yet.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Now Jamil was mad too.

They were in the research department, waiting for him to pull up the hotel footage from around 1:33 a.m., the timestamp on the valet ticket.

“Why don’t you tell me what you’re looking for?” he said. “It might help me find it faster.”

Jessie shook her head.

“I don’t want to go down this rabbit hole with you guys until I’m more confident there’s something in it.”

“Infuriating, right?” Karen asked, looking at Jamil. “I’ve been dealing with this for the last half hour. Little Miss Knows the Answer is holding out on us.”

“If I’m right, you’ll know too in just a minute,” Jessie promised.

Jamil pulled up the video footage in question from 1:15 to 1:45 and played it at double speed. When it got to 1:30, he slowed it to regular speed and all three of them leaned in closer to the monitor. Jessie felt her heartbeat quicken in anticipation.

At 1:32, the Audi pulled up. A few seconds later, a valet jogged over, opened the door, and handed the ticket to a familiar-looking person. Jessie smiled to herself, waiting for her colleagues to make the connection. Even with the grainy footage and the high overhead angle, it was clear that the man with the dark hair was tall. As he walked toward the hotel, he moved fluidly, as one might expect from an athletic-looking forty-something man like Joe Wender.

Karen gave a slight gasp. Jamil didn’t realize the significance and looked at her questioningly.

“It’s Claudia husband,” she said before turning to Jessie. “What made you think to check for the ticket?”

“Like I said before, it was just a hunch. I didn’t want to make any accusations, even to you, before having something to back it up.”

“What was the hunch based on?” Jamil asked in that way he had that made it seem like he was a human sponge hoping to soak up every bit of investigative knowledge he could all at once.

Jessie allowed herself a smile at his youthful enthusiasm. She was only six years older than him but she felt decades more worn out.

“I just started thinking that if Claudia didn’t consider her life or her marriage to be the fairy tale everyone else thought it was, maybe her husband didn’t either. If she was so quick to cheat, maybe it wasn’t the first time. I wondered if Joe knew that, or at least suspected it. If so, then watching her head off to a ‘gals only’ bacchanal might have eaten at him enough to find out what was really happening. Their kids were at his sister’s so he didn’t have anything other than self-control to keep him in check. And it looks like that wasn’t operating at full strength. So I thought I’d see if either of their cars made an appearance at the hotel.”

“Seems pretty foolish to go to the valet rather than just park on the street,” Jamil noted. “Not a great way to hide his tracks.”

“Agreed,” Jessie said, “which is one of the reasons I don’t want to leap too far ahead on this. Another is that he has absolutely no alibi for the time in question, which seems equally foolish if he was planning a murder.”

Karen turned to Jamil.

“Were you able to verify his location data?” she asked.

He nodded as he pulled it up on another screen.

“Yep,” he said. “His car was at their home address all night after he dropped the kids off, which makes sense now. His phone was home all night too.”

“Driving to Hollywood in your wife’s car without your phone in the middle of the night?” Karen said. “Now *that’s*

suspicious.”

“It could have just been an oversight,” Jessie said, trying to stay objective even though she was the one who’d sent them down this road. “It was late. He was probably upset. Maybe he just forgot it.”

Karen shook her head.

“Or it could have been to hide where he was and what he planned to do. And even if it was an oversight, it doesn’t explain why he was headed there in the first place.”

“Well, let’s find out,” Jessie said. “Jamil, can you pull up all the available security footage once he enters the hotel?”

The young tech wizard’s fingers flew across the keyboard as he pulled up a series of screens for them to view.

“We’ve got the hotel lobby, the working elevators and the twentieth-floor hallway,” he said letting them play in that order.

At 1:35, Wender walked across the lobby floor and out of sight. They all turned their attention to the elevator cameras, but he didn’t appear on any of them.

“Did the footage cut out at some point?” Karen asked. “He should have gotten in one by now.”

“Nope,” Jamil assured her. “It did cut out a little later, around two a.m., but they were all working fine during this stretch.”

“Then where is he?” Karen asked, frustrated.

They were all quiet for a little longer, hoping for an unexpected break. But none came. Jamil sped the footage up a bit. Jessie could feel the hope leaking out of her chest as two minutes onscreen stretched into five and then ten.

Finally, at 1:51, he reappeared, crossing back across the lobby toward the valet station outside. As he walked, Jessie noticed him wipe at his face with the back of his hand. The exterior camera showed him waiting for the car for less than two minutes before it returned. Seconds later he pulled out into the night.

“That was disappointing,” Jamil said, voicing how they all felt.

Jessie didn't speak. Though she'd hoped to see Joe Wender wiping blood off his hands as he came back down in an elevator, she'd learned that answers rarely came that easily. But it wasn't a total setback. They knew he'd been at the hotel in the window of Claudia's death. That was huge. Then a thought occurred to her, one she was embarrassed hadn't popped into her head earlier.

“Are there cameras in the stairwells?”

Jamil did another round of keyboard finger flying.

“No,” he said after a few seconds. “Apparently they'll be part of the upgrade next year. But right now, the stairs are blind spots.”

“How long do you think it would take a motivated guy in good shape to hoof it up to the twentieth floor?” Jessie wondered.

“You're asking the wrong person,” Jamil admitted. “I'd collapse before getting halfway there.”

“We'll set aside how pathetic that is for the time being,” Karen said. “I'm guessing that a former athlete like Wender might fare a little better.”

“Probably,” Jessie mused. “But even so, to take the stairs up to the suite level, somehow get in the room and kill his wife, all without waking anyone, then return downstairs and be outside again that fast? We're talking sixteen minutes total. It seems like a stretch. And any decent lawyer would say the same thing. This looks bad, but we need more if we're going to arrest the grieving husband of a murder victim.”

“When he was leaving, he didn't seem like he was in the throes of grief to me,” Karen replied.

“Actually, Jamil,” Jessie said, “can you play him leaving the hotel lobby again and maybe try to zoom in on him a little. I want to see if he looks stressed.”

“I’ll try,” Jamil said. “But these cameras are pretty crappy. The closer we get, the grainier it’s going to look.”

He was right. There was no way to accurately discern Wender’s expression, using the zoom or not. But she did notice something else.

“When he wipes his face with the back of his hand, does it look like he’s wiping away a tear?”

Jamil played it again; and then another time after that.

“He is wiping right below his eye,” Karen acknowledged. “But I can’t honestly say more than that.”

Let’s play this out,” Jessie said, talking to herself as much as the others. “He’s inside the hotel for sixteen minutes. Assume for a second he was crying. One would imagine he’d recently had an experience that made him emotional.”

“I think murdering his wife might fit the description,” Karen offered. “Don’t you?”

“I think it’s time we found out,” Jessie said.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Ryan heard the doorbell ring from the bedroom.

Knowing that his day nurse, Patty, would answer it, he continued his meditation session. He thought he was getting better at it. In the last week, his practice had extended to twenty minutes before he started getting restless. And when he was done, he could often sense a real feeling of calm that extended for hours afterward.

A soft knock on the bedroom door startled him briefly. He looked up from where he sat on the floor to find Patty's cherubic face peeking in with an apologetic expression.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt," she said.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, his chest tightening slightly despite fifteen minutes of concentrated breathing.

"Yes, it's nothing like that," she assured him. "You just have a visitor and it seemed rude to keep him waiting."

"Who is it?"

"He's an older gentleman," she replied, "said his name is Roy Decker."

Ryan felt an unexpected surge of anxiety.

"Can you help me up please, Patty? I don't want to keep him waiting too long."

"Someone important?" she asked as she came over and helped him to his feet.

"He's the police captain at my station. He also supervises the unit I ran before the attack."

"Oh, that's very nice of him to stop by. He hasn't done that before, has he?"

"No, he hasn't," Ryan said as he slid into his slippers and tucked in his shirt.

“You sound worried,” she noted.

Ryan shook his head unconvincingly.

“No,” he lied as he started for the door, “just surprised.”

As he moved into the hall, he reminded himself that maintaining the deep breathing routine might be a wise idea. Decker had never come to his home before for any reason and he doubted today’s visit was for a casual chat. There were only two possible reasons that his captain would show up here on a lazy winter Sunday. One of them was unthinkable: something had happened to Jessie.

When he stepped into the living room, he found Decker standing in the foyer, dressed in his standard attire. He had on a dress shirt with a tie and rumpled slacks. His only concessions to the more relaxed environment were a slight loosening of the tie and a casual windbreaker more appropriate to a ballpark than a professional meeting.

Decker hadn’t seen him yet. Based on his untroubled, distracted expression, Ryan immediately knew his worst fear was unfounded. If Jessie was injured or dead, he’d be taut and focused.

Reassured briefly, Ryan’s thoughts quickly turned to the other likely reason for the man’s presence. A more casual setting might be the perfect place for the captain to break some bad news; like that Ryan was being permanently relieved of his duties with the LAPD.

As he stepped into the foyer, he wiped his face of any obvious concern. He didn’t want his boss to sense his dread.

“This is a bit of a surprise, Captain,” Ryan said as conversationally as he could. “How’s it going?”

“Oh, you know,” Decker said noncommittally, not actually answering the question. “How are you?”

“I’ll be doing better once we sit down. Your call: couch or kitchen table?”

“How about the table?” Decker suggested.

Ryan nodded, his mind racing as he slowly made his way over. If this was really a casual check-in, the couch was preferable. But the table provided a slightly more formal setting for sharing bad news.

He tried to steel himself for what was coming, though he wasn't sure how he'd react. All these months he'd been grinding to get back to a point where he could resume active duty. If that goal was taken from him, he wasn't sure what he would do. Plead his case? Break down? Stoically accept it? As he settled into the chair opposite Decker, he genuinely had no idea. One thing was certain: he wasn't going to cave preemptively. The captain would have to get the ball rolling.

"You guys have done a nice job with the place," Decker said once he'd settled in. "It's much homier than Garland kept it."

Ryan had temporarily forgotten that Roy Decker and Garland Moses hadn't just been colleagues but friends. It stood to reason that the captain had been in this very room on multiple occasions, most likely far less awkward than this one.

"You guys watch football here or something?" he asked, only letting a little snark slip though.

"Actually, yes," Decker said. "It wasn't a regular thing but I can think of several times when we sat right over there in the living room, pretending to care who won a game we mostly watched to take our minds off the world around us."

"It does tend to bleed through, doesn't it?" Ryan noted.

"Almost always," Decker agreed. "Ms. Hunt is experiencing a bit of that right now, I'd imagine."

It seemed like an invitation so Ryan accepted it.

"How's the case going?" he asked.

"The truth is, she and Detective Bray have been so busy that I haven't had a chance to get an update yet today. I know they've got a suspect coming into the station as we speak. I hope to learn more when I return."

“You know,” Ryan told him, “at some point before this is done, she’s going to crush you for tricking her into taking this case.”

“You’re probably right. But if we catch this killer it’ll be worth the hit.”

“We’ll see if you feel that way after she’s strafed you. It’s not a pleasant experience.”

Decker nodded in silent agreement. Then, before he could stop, and in direct violation of what he’d promised himself, Ryan caved preemptively.

“But enough about surviving the Jessie Hunt experience,” he said. “I think you’ve stalled enough. Maybe it’s time you tell me why you’re really here.”

Decker smiled, apparently relieved that his former top investigator hadn’t lost all his skills of perception.

“You’re right,” he said. “This isn’t just a social call. I’ve been pondering something for a while but I wanted to hold off on it until I thought the time was right. And based on what I’ve been hearing about your rehab, that time seems to be now.”

Ryan’s whole body tensed up but he said nothing. Decker seemed unsure how to proceed. After a moment’s hesitation, he just barreled ahead.

“I need your help.”

Confused, Ryan finally spoke.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“It means we’re in dire straits, Hernandez. We currently only have three full-time detectives in Homicide Special Section. One’s pretty green. We’re borrowing from Vice when things get hairy. With Garland’s death and Hunt leaving, the unit has no dedicated profilers. We’re pulling from other stations on an ad-hoc basis. Right now, Hunt’s working for us as a consultant, paired with a detective from Hollywood Station. I’m plugging holes left and right. And now I’m hearing some folks at HQ want to shut down HSS completely.

If we're not regularly generating headlines about solving high-profile cases, it's hard to justify a dedicated unit with unlimited access to department resources and personnel. We're in trouble."

Though he no longer feared that Decker was about to put him out to pasture, he wasn't sure what he was after.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said, "but why are you telling me this? You know I'm working to come back as fast as I can. But I have no idea when, or even if I'll be field ready again."

"I get that," Decker replied, leaning in with his typical intensity. "But I think you could still prove invaluable. I want you to consult on cases for the department, much like your girlfriend does. I want to take advantage of your expertise to provide insight and analysis in ongoing cases, offer alternative areas of inquiry. You know better than most that when detectives are in the field hunting down leads, they sometimes lose the forest for the trees. I want you to see the forest and help guide your colleagues through it."

Ryan was flattered but immediately saw a problem.

"Don't you think they'd resent having me looking over their shoulder, constantly second-guessing their choices? I know I would."

Decker smiled again. This time he even had a twinkle in his eye.

"Hernandez—Ryan, no one in this department is going to second-guess your instincts. You're among the most decorated, well-regarded cops in the entire LAPD. Does a rookie player question LeBron James? Even veterans don't do that. Your reputation is your armor."

"I appreciate you saying that, sir. And this may hold the folks at HQ off briefly, but I don't think it's a long-term solution to your problem."

Ryan noticed that the man's body language had suddenly changed. His entire demeanor was more guarded.

"Neither do I," Decker conceded. "That's why there's more."

Ryan sensed that they'd finally come to the true reason for the visit.

"Please, I'm all ears," he replied.

"That stuff is important," Decker said quietly, though there was no one else in the room, "but it's mostly just a front to get you in the door. What I really need from you are leads."

"Leads?"

"Yes," Decker said, now actually whispering. "I need you to be on the lookout for potential HSS cases. Until now, we've usually had them fall into our lap. Or at worst, we've taken them over from other stations when they had a high-profile component. But we need to start generating cases to justify the unit's existence."

"I'm not sure what you mean, sir."

Decker leaned in closer.

"I want you to actively—but secretly—hunt for cases that meet the HSS criteria, ones with high profiles or intense media scrutiny, often involving multiple victims and serial killers. That might mean watching tabloid TV for celebrities that meet suspicious, untimely ends. It might mean combing through cold case files that suggest below the radar serial killers are still out there, putting the public at risk."

"Some of this sounds like wild goose chase stuff, sir," Ryan said skeptically.

"Some of it may be," Decker admitted. "But some of it will hit. And I'm going to be straight with you, Hernandez. We need wins. I believe Homicide Special Section is an invaluable tool for the department. Our record of cutting through the bureaucracy to regularly stop terrible people from doing terrible things is unmatched since the inception of HSS. But unfortunately, to keep doing that good work, we have to provide positive press for the bigwigs at HQ on a regular basis. It's the buzzy, headline-grabbing cases that let us pursue the cases with less fanfare, with victims who don't show up on TV screens. The big names give us the political capital to protect the no-names. And in the end, isn't that our duty as

cops, Hernandez, to get justice for everyone, not just those who can afford it?”

“It is,” Ryan said.

“Then are you in?” Decker asked.

Ryan couldn't believe it. He'd started this conversation thinking he was about to be let go. And now he was being asked to take point on saving the unit he'd helped build. The prospect was terrifying. He didn't know if he was physically or psychologically up for it. Beyond that, he wasn't sure that Decker's methods were entirely kosher. He was used to operating in black and white and this was very gray. Despite all that, he couldn't deny that the offer was flattering, even exhilarating. The words came out without him even thinking about them.

“I am.”

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

“He’s pissed,” the Orange County sheriff’s deputy told them.

Jessie wasn’t surprised to hear it. They’d had the OC sheriff’s office pick up Joe Wender from his home, with his kids there, and bring him in. He was currently waiting in an interrogation room.

“We softened the blow by allowing him to call his sister to come over and watch the kids,” he continued. “But once she arrived, we marched him out, warning him we’d cuff him if he created a scene. He didn’t, at least not until we were in the car.”

“What happened?” Karen asked.

“He punched the door a few times on the way up here,” the deputy told them. “But he eventually realized he was only doing damage to himself. Still, he’s still pretty hot. Keep that in mind when you question him.”

That was exactly what Jessie had hoped to hear. The angrier Wender was, the more likely he was to let something slip.

“You Mirandized him?” Karen asked the deputy.

“Yes,” he answered. “But as you requested, we didn’t interrogate him at all on the way up here. And I think you were right—that may be why he never asked for a lawyer. In fact, he asked more questions on the way up than we did.”

“How many did you answer?” Karen asked.

“Other than telling him he was under arrest for the murder for his wife, none.”

“Great,” Jessie said. “Thanks for your help. I think we’re going to get in there before he cools off too much.”

After parting ways with the deputy they headed back to interrogation room three, where Wender was being held.

“Should we update Decker before we go at him?” Karen asked.

Jessie shook her head.

“I reached out earlier and was told that he’s running a personal errand and wasn’t to be disturbed. We’ll have to read him in afterward.”

Before entering the interrogation room, they stopped into the viewing room and checked on Wender through the one-way mirror. He was seated in a bolted down metal chair, with one hand cuffed to the leg of a bolted down metal table. He shifted restlessly in the chair, breathing in heavy frustration. It was obvious that he wanted to be up and moving about. Jessie could sense the anger bubbling just under the surface. It was a good time to go in.

“Hello, Mr. Wender,” Karen said sharply as they entered the room. “Thanks for coming in today.”

“It’s not like I had a choice,” Wender spat angrily at her.

Jessie admired how the detective was poking at him before even sitting down. If they were going to get this guy to break, it would require keeping him off balance. This was a solid start.

“Some new information has come to our attention,” Karen continued, pretending not to have heard him, “and we thought it advisable to review it with you to see if you could help clarify a few things.”

He seemed to be struggling to keep calm.

“I just talked to you people this morning. I told you everything I know and this is my reward? I had to tell my children that their mother was gone forever and less than an hour later, police show up at my door and say I’m under arrest for killing her.”

“Did they tell you that in front of your children?” Karen asked, knowing the answer.

“No,” he admitted. “But that’s about the only decent thing they did. They gave me a half hour to get my sister over to the

house. So I had to simultaneously deal with being told I'm a murder suspect *and* try to convince two little kids that they're not being abandoned by the only parent they have left. So I don't give a rat's ass what help you need clarifying things, Detective."

Jessie sat down across from him and looked him directly in the eyes.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Wender, the only way you're going to get out of this police station and back to your children is if you help us, and even then there's no guarantee. So maybe you should drop the act."

"I truly have no idea what you're talking about," he insisted.

Jessie sighed deeply as she decided which way to go. She could try to trip him up in a lie or a mistake. But the facts they already had were pretty incontrovertible. He'd been at the hotel. Now they needed to know why. And without visual evidence, they needed him to explain it. She made her choice, one she hadn't discussed with Karen beforehand and hoped the detective would be okay with. There would be no games.

"Mr. Wender, you *do* know what we're talking about. You didn't tell us everything this morning. We know you went to the Hollywood Center Hotel early Saturday morning. We have security footage confirming it. We saw you get out of your wife's car and go inside. We know you were in there for sixteen minutes."

Wender didn't respond, though his entire body slumped upon hearing her words. Jessie continued.

"So you can see why we were so disappointed that you weren't forthcoming about those facts. It looks really bad. Had you admitted it, we'd be more likely to give you the benefit of the doubt. But you were at the hotel where your wife was murdered during the time when she was murdered and you told us you were home. That's pretty damning stuff, don't you agree?"

She had purposefully kept things vague about what else they had seen on the video since there wasn't much. She hoped he would assume they knew more and preemptively fill in the blanks. It took several seconds for him to reply.

"Yes, I was there," he said, his voice heavy. "And yes, I didn't share that because I knew it would look bad. But I didn't kill her."

"We're going to need more than just your word on that, Mr. Wender," Karen said.

He looked at her with agitated eyes, opening his mouth and then closing it before trying again.

"Why would I drive my wife's car, give it to the valet, and walk in the hotel for everyone to see if I was planning to kill her? I'd have to be the dumbest murderer ever."

"I've seen dumber," Karen told him. "Maybe you were so consumed with rage that you weren't thinking clearly. Or maybe you were actually planning ahead, hoping to use that very excuse with investigators in a moment like this. You thought ahead enough to leave your phone at home so we couldn't track it."

"That was an accident," he said forcefully. "By the time I realized I'd forgotten it, I was almost to Hollywood. What would be the point of leaving my phone if I took one of our cars? You were able to track that, right?"

"But you didn't take *your* car," Karen reminded him. "You took hers."

He shook his head in frustration.

"That's only because her gas tank was full and mine was almost empty. I'd driven it to work all week and then to drop off the kids in Laguna Beach. I didn't want to stop for gas in the middle of the night."

"Because it would leave a record of the transaction?" Karen asked.

He looked at her with disdain.

“No, because it was the middle of the night. Stopping at a gas station at that hour didn’t seem super safe. Besides, I just wanted to get there.”

“Why such a rush?” Jessie wondered aloud.

“I was worried,” he said.

“About what?” Karen asked.

Wender didn’t answer so she offered one of her own.

“Maybe you were worried that she was up to something improper? Maybe you were jealous about what she’d do while out on the town with her wild friends? Maybe you were worried she’d cheat?”

“That’s ridiculous,” he said unconvincingly. “We’ve been married for over a decade. I trust my wife.”

“I don’t think that’s true, Mr. Wender,” Karen said, really starting to press now. “I think it’s far more plausible that you suspected she was up to something. I think it’s more believable that you went to that hotel to find out for sure. And when you found out that she slept with a stripper, isn’t it more credible that you made her pay the ultimate price for her betrayal?”

Jessie studied Joe Wender as he took in the detective’s words. This was their first mention of Rock Harder. At first Wender appeared offended at her litany of accusations. But as he opened his mouth to respond, he seemed to belatedly process her last sentence.

At that moment, it looked like something had broken in him. She couldn’t tell if it was genuine shock at hearing his wife had cheated or terror at realizing his crime had been uncovered. But some part of what Karen had said had messed with him in a fundamental way. His eyes welled up and, as a tear rolled down his cheek, he wiped at it with the back of his hand, using the same motion she’d seen in the video footage from the other night.

“She had sex with a stripper?” he finally managed to croak. “Are you sure?”

Karen was unmoved.

“Are you really contending that you didn’t know that, sir? Do you expect anyone to believe that?”

Jessie watched him closely, still unable to discern whether his reaction was authentic grief or dread at having been found out. The man sniffed loudly, exhaled deliberately, and wiped his eyes a second time. He blinked twice slowly, as if hoping the action would somehow change his reality. When he looked back at them, his eyes were set.

As he opened his mouth to answer, Jessie moved to the edge of her chair, hoping against hope that the dam was finally about to break.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Against every instinct, Hannah waited.

She wanted to break into Jimmy Poston's house the second he pulled out of the driveway. But she used all the restraint she had to hold off for a full five minutes after his old, noisy car disappeared down the street. When she was sure he was gone, she smashed the glass window of his back door with a rock. Only after she'd put on latex gloves did she let herself in.

The door opened into Poston's kitchen, which looked like it hadn't been cleaned in weeks. There were dishes piled up in the sink. In the afternoon light slicing through the blinds, she noticed a section of the counter had a thick layer of dust. The table had a plate with dried ketchup and breadcrumbs on it.

She moved quickly to check out the rest of the house. It was small, only five rooms total, excluding the bathroom, and the whole process took less than five minutes. There was nothing obviously suspicious about the place. Of course, if Poston was hiding a kidnapped girl, Hannah doubted he'd keep her on the bed in the extra bedroom. He would have come up with contingencies.

With that in mind, she started a second, more thorough search, looking for anything that might seem even slightly out of the ordinary. It was hard to know what was and wasn't typical in the home of a convicted child rapist, so she wasn't sure where to begin.

Eventually, she decided to look for any signs of a recent struggle. But there were no knocked-over picture frames or shards of broken glass on the floor. No hanging picture frames looked askew and there were no blood drops on the floor.

She glanced at the clock. She'd been in the house for eight minutes. With no way of knowing where Poston had gone or when he'd be back, she moved with increased urgency. The next logical step seemed to be to see if there were any

concealed spaces in the house where someone might be kept hidden, maybe a false wall or floor.

Looking around, Hannah decided to focus first on rooms with adjoining interior walls. It would obviously be extremely foolish—and maybe against his rental agreement rules—for him to add to the exterior of the house in plain sight of neighbors. She went into both bedrooms, tapping at any walls that looked like they might have been repainted or had drywall additions. Along the way, she banged her feet on the floor, in the hopes of uncovering a loose floorboard or even a hollow-sounding portion. But she found nothing.

She moved back to the center of the house where she could see into every room at once, hoping that some moment of revelation would come to her. When none did, she looked at the clock again. It had been seventeen minutes since Poston drove away. She knew she was pushing it but couldn't justify going through all this effort and then leaving without anything to show for it.

She closed her eyes and tried to clear her head, imagining what she would do if she were Poston. How would she go about fulfilling her desires without getting caught and thrown in prison again? When she thought about it that way, she realized that she'd been foolish to expect the guy would hold his victim in this tiny house—the first place authorities would check—which had no good hiding spots.

If it was Hannah doing the hiding, she'd keep the girl elsewhere, maybe a storage unit paid for in cash, maybe an abandoned house elsewhere in town. If that was the case, she was looking for the wrong thing. He'd want to keep as little evidence of the alternate location as possible in his home, maybe only a key. But that wouldn't be all.

He'd also want to hold on to some connection to his victim, maybe a photo of her that he could use to fantasize about her when he couldn't be with her. Of course he'd never keep anything like that on his person or his phone. It would be too risky if he was arrested. He'd need a physical picture that could be safely hidden away, even burned if necessary. That's what she should be looking for. Hannah opened her eyes.

Armed with this new perspective, she took in the details of the house again. She turned in a slow circle like a submarine periscope surveying the ocean's surface. And then, the moment of revelation that had eluded her earlier arrived in a flash.

In the guest bedroom, on the floor at the foot of the bed, was a wooden storage ottoman. It was charming in an old-fashioned, antique-y way. But that charm was completely at odds with everything else in the house. Every other piece of furniture looked like it had been chosen at a garage sale because it was the cheapest option available. None of it matched and most of it looked like it might fall apart at any second.

But the ottoman was different. It looked expensive, with elaborate feet and what appeared to be hand-carved designs on the front and sides. Hannah walked into the bedroom to get a better look. It was even more impressive up close, with a heft and sophistication that made it stand out compared to everything else around it.

Why would Jimmy Poston invest in one piece of quality furniture when everything else in his home was crap? She could think of only one reason. He didn't get it for the quality, but for some other attribute that wasn't immediately apparent.

She lifted the top to find it was completely filled with old blankets, folded as well as Poston could. She lifted them all out, put them on the bed, and then took a step back, hoping to confirm her suspicion.

A little thrill snaked up her spine as she knelt down to find that the bottom of the ottoman extended a good two inches below the available storage space. That meant that the base of the thing was either extremely thick or that there was a false bottom.

She hurried back over and looked inside, hoping to find an easily visible button or latch. But the surface of the wood was flat and unremarkable. Trying not to think too much about the grossness of what she was about to do, Hannah got down on her stomach and moved her head close to the base, ignoring

the dirty floor and using her phone flashlight to look for any kind of release device on the underside of the ottoman. There was nothing obvious.

Hannah was just considering turning the thing over when she heard the sound of a loud, clanging engine approaching. She immediately recognized it as Poston's. A quick mental calculation told her that she likely had less than a minute before he pulled into his driveway and walked across the brown-grassed lawn to open his front door.

She knew she should dart out the back door right now, but she was so close to uncovering whatever secret Poston was hiding. Trying to push the sound of the vehicle out of her head, she got up onto her hands and knees and forced herself to think.

It didn't make sense that the hidden compartment would be so hard to open that it required turning over. It needed to be easily accessible to the person using it or what was the point? With that in mind, she reached below the ottoman and ran her hand along the underside of the front plank. It was smooth until she got to the far right corner, where her finger grazed a raisin-sized bump.

The car outside groaned as it rattled over the cracked, uneven driveway and eased to a stop. Hannah blocked it out and pressed on the bump as she gritted her teeth in anxious anticipation. There was a soft click. She looked over into the storage space and saw that the front of the wooden bottom had popped up enough for her to get her fingers underneath.

She quickly pulled up to find that the entire base was attached by collapsible hinges at the back of the ottoman. In the compartment below was a manila folder. She flipped it open to find that it was filled with pictures.

She looked at the top one and though she had prepared herself for what she might see, she still felt a surge of vomit rise in her throat, which she was barely able to choke back down. Taking a moment to regroup, she made herself shuffle through additional photos, only half-looking through watery eyes.

The images she found were beyond what she could have imagined. They included girls who looked to be as young as kindergartners and involved...devices. The car door slammed shut outside, snapping her back into the moment.

She held her phone over the open folder and took a quick photo. Then, as quickly as she could, she closed the folder, shut the false bottom, replaced the blankets, and pulled down the ottoman cover. She was just getting to her feet when she heard the key turning in the front door lock.

Realizing there was no time to get to the back door, much less the kitchen, she briefly considered trying to hide. But the only options were the bedrooms and she didn't want to get trapped in there. Besides, she didn't *want* to run. She wanted to confront this sick bastard. So she took one more step forward to the center of the living room, stood to her full height, and waited.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

“I want my lawyer,” Joe Wender said firmly.

In that moment, Jessie knew that whatever chance they’d had to get a confession was gone. She and Karen got up and left the interrogation room without another word. When they were in the hall, she turned to the detective.

“What now?” she asked.

Karen shrugged.

“I think we’re out of options, at least with him,” she replied. “I’ll call his attorney. If you have a brilliant Hunt brainstorm in the next hour, let me know.”

But Jessie didn’t have any “eureka” moment. As she sat in the Downtown Station snack room, waiting for Joe Wender’s lawyer to arrive from Orange County, the closest she came was a generalized unsettled sensation. Something just didn’t feel right.

On paper, they had enough to take Wender down. He was at the murder scene during the window of death. He had lied about his whereabouts. His obvious suspicion of his wife’s possible infidelity was a clear motive.

And yet, something was gnawing at her. Maybe it was his seemingly genuine shock at learning that Claudia had slept with a stripper. Perhaps it was her memory of how truly grief-stricken he’d seemed when they visited him at his home this morning. Maybe it was the troubling hotel timeline, which gave him only sixteen minutes to do what seemed like it would take much longer. Likely it was combination of all of it.

As Jessie turned it over in her head, the frustration mounted. Each passing second was like a throbbing wound. Rush hour traffic was delaying the attorney’s arrival, but Jessie knew that once he got here, Wender would be useless to them. She had to try again. But he’d invoked his right to a lawyer so he was off limits.

Or was he? Jessie wasn't a cop. She wasn't even an employee of the LAPD. She was an independent consultant profiling a case. She knew that if she broached the topic with Decker, he'd shut her down and say that was just a technicality. But Decker wasn't here. He was off on some personal errand.

She could talk to Karen. But that would put the detective in an awkward position. Even discussing it with her could put her job at risk if she was seen as colluding to violate a suspect's rights.

But if Jessie approached Wender on her own, without any LAPD representative in attendance, and if she didn't actually interrogate him, she thought she might avoid violating his rights. Was it worth the potential blowback?

The truth was that, despite all the circumstantial evidence against him, there was no smoking gun. In her bones, Jessie knew that unless some other piece of evidence materialized, Joe Wender wouldn't be convicted. And since she wasn't even certain that he should be, it seemed incumbent on her to use the remaining time she had with him to find out for sure.

"I'm going to stretch my legs," Jessie muttered to Karen, who had been talking on her cell phone to her husband.

The detective nodded absently and resumed her conversation. Jessie left the snack room and moved quickly. Now that she'd decided on a course of action, she couldn't waste any time. She had no idea when Wender's lawyer would arrive or when Karen would finish her call and come looking for her.

She darted into the observation room, set the cameras to "record," and entered interrogation room three, where Joe Wender was asleep. His head rested on his hands, which were folded across the metal table. He looked up groggily.

"You can go," she told the officer sitting in the corner of the room.

He nodded and left them alone, closing the door behind him. Jessie didn't speak for several seconds, instead pulling

out a notebook that was mostly empty. Wender sat up, blinking several times until he looked mildly alert.

“Is my lawyer here yet?” he asked.

“No. But it’s a long drive at this hour. Traffic is probably brutal out there right now.”

Wender ran his fingers through his hair and sighed deeply.

“You can’t ask me any questions,” he said.

“I know how Miranda rights work, Mr. Wender,” she said, pointedly not confirming his assertion.

He stared blankly at the wall for several seconds, then turned back to her.

“Can I ask *you* a question?” he wondered aloud.

“Sure.”

“Do you know how long I’m going to be here? I mean, I’d like to let my sister know if she’s babysitting for a few hours or if she needs to move the kids over to her place long-term.”

“Hard to know for certain,” she said, keeping her voice matter-of-fact. “But you’re under arrest for murder. And this is Sunday. So even in the best-case scenario, if your lawyer gets you out on bail tomorrow, you’ll be here overnight. If you’re denied bail because of the severity of the crime or because the judge thinks you’re a flight risk, then we’re talking months behind bars. Either way, your sister should probably keep the kids at her place for now.”

He was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice had lost its hardness.

“I already used my one call to reach my lawyer,” he said dejectedly. “She’s probably wondering what the hell is going on. Is there any chance you could call her and tell her what’s going on?”

Jessie shrugged uncertainly.

“That seems inappropriate,” she told him. “I’m not sure I should be in contact with her at all. Then again, I’m not

actually an employee of the police department, so I'm not certain what my limitations are."

She pretended to ponder the problem for a moment before continuing.

"I don't know if it's a technical violation but I suppose I could let you use my phone to fill her in, as long as you kept it short."

Wender nodded enthusiastically and she handed it over. Jessie sat quietly as they talked, letting the conversation go on until he had nothing more to say. He hung up and handed her back the phone.

"Thank you," he said.

She nodded and returned it to her pocket. For several seconds, neither of them spoke. Finally, she broke the silence.

"You looked shocked to hear about the stripper," she said.

His eyes widened at her directness.

"It's not a question," she said, waving her hand. "You don't need to say anything. It's just an observation. I'm sorry you had to find out that way."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Isn't that supposed to be my motive though, that I found out she slept with a stripper? Now you're saying you don't believe I knew about it."

"I think it's possible the stripper was a shock but that learning she'd cheated wasn't all that surprising. Assuming your story is true, that's why you came up all this way, right? Because you had some kind of suspicion about what she was doing. In my experience, husbands don't drive fifty miles in the middle of the night to check up on their wives unless something's bothering them."

"Are you speaking from experience?" he asked.

"Actually, my experience was slightly different," she said, deciding that opening up couldn't hurt in this situation. "I wasn't cheating but it turned out my husband was. Maybe if I

was a little more suspicious early on, it wouldn't have ended so badly.”

“How *did* it end?” he asked, intrigued despite himself.

“He killed his mistress, tried to frame me for it, and then tried to kill me when I found out. And that's just the stuff he did *before* he got out of prison.”

She watched Wender's eyes nearly pop out of his head as he realized who she was.

“Oh my god, you're *that* Jessie Hunt. You used to live in Westport. I can't believe I didn't put it together.”

She shrugged.

“Well, you've been kind of busy,” she pointed out. “My point is that I *do* know what it's like to have a spouse cheat and then end up accused of a murder associated with that cheating. Luckily, in my situation, I'd been training to solve crimes like the one I was wrapped up in. Even then, I was too close to the situation to see what was going on until it was almost too late. Unfortunately, you're not a criminal profiler.”

“Yeah, sucks for me that I'm not,” he said bitterly.

“But here's the thing, Mr. Wender,” she said, leaning in. “I am. And if you didn't do this, then you should take advantage of the fact that I'm here. Who's better equipped to solve this than the person who's been in the same boat and does this for a living?”

He stared back at her, his eyes a mix of hope and doubt. She wondered how much of that was genuine and how much was a deceptive put-on for her benefit.

“What are you saying?” he asked.

She sat up straight now, the picture of professionalism, projecting the air of the one individual who could help him out of this nightmare.

“I'm saying I can help, but only if I know the whole truth. If you didn't do this, then telling it to me shouldn't be a problem for you. Jealousy isn't a crime, Mr. Wender. Neither is suspicion. They may be a source of shame, especially if the

person that evoked those emotions is now dead. But unless you killed her, shame seems like a small price to pay in order to find the truth.”

“It’s more than just shame,” he insisted. “It’s guilt and grief and terror at what comes next.”

She nodded in understanding.

“I can’t promise you all of those things will go away if you help me,” she told him. “But if the information you’re holding onto assists in finding out who did this, that’s a place to start. You can tell your kids that you did something to help bring their mommy’s killer to justice. You can find a way to move on that involves something other than guilt. It’s not a magic solution, but it could be a new beginning.”

He sat quietly for a long time, his eyes fixed on the middle distance, his breathing slow and deliberate. Though her mouth was dry, Jessie swallowed hard, well aware that if this appeal didn’t work, nothing would.

Finally Wender looked up.

“What do I have to do?”

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Jimmy Poston was hungry.

He'd managed to restrain himself, only snacking on a few fries on the way home. But as he unlocked his front door, his mouth salivated at the thought of sitting on his couch and diving into an In-N-Out double cheeseburger and animal fries.

He stepped inside, closed the door, and dropped his keys in the bowl on the table by the door. Then he turned around. A teenage girl was standing in the middle of the room. Startled, he dropped the bags. It took a second to realize that it was same girl from earlier, the one who had tried to get him to buy candy for her school.

Half a dozen thoughts flew into his head all at once. He wondered if the candy thing was just a ruse to scout his place, so that she could rip him off when he left. But that concern quickly faded as other ones overtook it. Was she a victim from his past, one of the many the cops had never learned of, coming back for revenge? Did she know about the secret he was guarding so zealously?

And then another thought penetrated through all the others. Whatever her reason for being here, it put him at risk. If some cop doing a random check-in found an underage girl in his home, it meant immediate revocation of his parole and an automatic additional three years behind bars, even if he hadn't done anything wrong.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he growled.

"I wanted to give you a second chance to buy that candy," the girl said.

Her tone was much more challenging and cocky than he would have expected from a teenage female intruder. He didn't like it.

"You're in a serious situation, young lady," he told her, trying to keep control, even as he felt a familiar stirring in his

chest. “I could call the cops on you right now.”

She stared back at him silently, with the hint of a smile at the corners of her lips. There was something in her demeanor, a self-assured coolness, which he found equal parts unsettling and infuriating. He wanted to wipe the half-smirk off her face. His fists clenched involuntarily.

“But you’re not going to call the cops, are you, Jimmy?” she said more than asked. The half-smirk was now a full one.

“How do you know my name?” he demanded.

“How do you think, Jimmy? I got it from the same place that makes me sure you’re not calling anyone—the sex offender database. You’re on parole and I bet that having me here would mess with that pretty bad.”

Jimmy knew she was baiting him and tried not to let his anger cloud his judgment. If she was aware of his background and was here anyway, she was someone he shouldn’t underestimate. If he had to take drastic action, there was always the crowbar in the storage basket on the floor just a few feet away, hidden behind his black umbrella. But he didn’t want to resort to that if it could be avoided.

“Maybe you should tell me why you’re really here,” he said. “It’s obviously not to sell candy.”

“I want to know where she is,” the girl said flatly.

“Where who is?” he asked carefully.

“I think you know.”

“No, I don’t,” he replied, hoping he sounded convincing.

“Mindy Stokes, the girl who walked past here every day for months—what did you do with her?”

Jimmy suddenly felt a wave of relief. Now that the girl had revealed her hand, he knew how to proceed.

“I assume you’ve searched my house and didn’t find her or else the police would already be here.”

“No, I haven’t searched it,” she said. “I actually just came in here in a second ago. But I assumed you wouldn’t be so

stupid as to keep her here. So where is she?”

“You know, little miss, you really should know your facts before you make accusations. Don’t you watch the news?”

For the first time, he saw hesitation in her eyes, and maybe a little bit of fear. He liked it. The sight made him salivate more than any burger could.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Clearly you didn’t hear. They found that girl a half hour ago, forty miles east of here in La Verne. The guy who took her is in custody and she’s at the hospital.”

He enjoyed watching the girl’s mouth drop open. The stirring he felt was no longer just in his chest. Casually, he moved to his right, resting his hand on the wall just above the storage basket where the crowbar waited.

“So you know what that means,” he said, lingering on each word. “First of all, the police who questioned me about that case will probably steer well clear of me for a while. They don’t want me suing them for harassment. And with that girl now safe, I’m no longer a suspect. I’m just a regular guy trying to piece together a life who stumbled upon an intruder in his home. And no one could blame a man for protecting his home.”

He smiled at her as he allowed that recognizable rush to course through his system, the one he’d spent so many months trying to bottle up, the one he got when he could almost taste the anticipation of what was to come.

After years of fighting this battle with himself, he knew when it was lost. The need was too strong now for him to turn back. It was out of his hands. But very soon, she would be in them.

*

Hannah knew she was in trouble. Jimmy Poston’s entire demeanor had changed since he revealed the news about

Mindy Stokes. He had a look she recognized from nature documentaries, when a lion stalks a gazelle on an African savannah. His eyes were fixed on her and his body was taut, ready to pounce.

Somehow, she had allowed herself to get trapped in the home of a convicted sexual predator, without anyone aware of her location. She had Mace and a retractable baton, but both were currently in the small backpack she wore, an oversight that loomed especially large at the moment.

She watched him sidle over to his right and rest his hand just above a basket on the floor with an umbrella in it. She had the sneaking suspicion that wasn't the only item in there. His lips parted and he gave her a wide, contorted smile. It reminded her of Heath Ledger's Joker in *The Dark Knight*.

She could feel that he was only moments from doing something. And that realization caused an unexpected reaction in her. Yes, there was fear, lurking deep in the pit of her stomach. But a different sensation was clawing its way to prominence—exhilaration.

This was what she'd come here for. This was why she'd investigated the missing girl's case in the first place, why she'd broken into Kat's office—for this moment. This was the high she'd told herself she had to live without but now knew she couldn't. The tingling in her fingertips, the beating of her heart against her chest wall, the sudden dryness in her mouth were all signs that she was still alive, still capable of feeling something other than boredom and mild disregard.

The cacophony of jumbled emotions was thrilling. But Hannah reminded herself that she wouldn't be feeling them for long if she was killed. This was a dangerous situation and getting out of it would require more than just a willingness to take it on. It required quick thinking. It required a plan.

Unfortunately, she didn't have one. So, without a clear idea of how to react, she fell back on a technique she'd used in other life and death situations. She tried to stall.

"You're not a bad-looking guy, Jimmy," she lied, doing her best to keep the nerves out of her voice. "Why force young

girls to do things I bet you could get adult women to agree to?”

He looked briefly taken aback, as if he wondered if she might be propositioning him. But it was momentary. After the flicker of hesitation, he seemed somehow even angrier, clearly feeling that she was taunting him.

Luckily all she needed was that moment to gather herself. By the time his hesitation had turned to grim determination, she had moved into the defensive posture that Jessie had taught her. Then she waited, ready to counter whatever move he made next.

“You’re a little bitch, you know that?” he snarled.

“So I’ve been told,” she replied, her attention fixed on his eyes, which involuntarily darted to whatever was behind that umbrella in the basket.

“I’m going to beat the bitch out of you,” he said, his voice dripping with malice.

“I’ve been told that before too,” she said, aware that each barb was filling him with the very fury that might cloud his judgment enough for her to escape.

As she waited for his response, she studied him. At five foot nine, she was about the same height as Jimmy Poston. But he was no longer the doughy guy from the photo in the sex offender registry. Maybe he’d taken up weightlifting behind bars.

Whatever it was, she guessed that his listed weight of 170 pounds was more muscle than fat now. That gave him a good forty pounds on her. He had likely made the same assessment about their sizes and found her wanting. That was fine with her. She liked being underestimated.

His right hand was now hovering above the basket, twitching slightly. It would happen any second. Hannah exhaled deeply.

“The first thing I’m gonna do is bash out the teeth in that smart mouth of yours,” he growled.

She knew he was on the verge and that almost anything she did now would push him over the edge. So she kept it simple and smiled, showing all those teeth in her smart mouth. That did it.

Seeing her toothy grin made him snap. His hands flew toward the basket, one shoving the umbrella to the side as the other reached for something black and metal. Hannah took a quick step forward and kicked, knocking him into the wall as he pulled out what she now saw was a crowbar.

The force of her kick made him lose his balance and he would have fallen to the floor if not for the wall. As he scrambled to recover, she kicked him again, this time in the kneecap. He yelped as it bent back awkwardly. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to make him fall and he lunged forward, swinging the bar over his head.

Hannah dashed backward, barely avoiding the weapon as it whizzed in front of her, making the nearby air ripple. Poston was slightly off-balance from the force of charging forward and Hannah took advantage, sidestepping him and shoving him in the back, sending him farther in the direction his momentum was already taking him.

She knew she only had a moment before he recovered and used it to grab the knob of the front door and fling it open. But she could sense him leaping back toward her and knew she didn't have enough time to dart out of the house before he'd be able to land a blow with the crowbar.

So instead of moving away, she bent into a crouch as she spun around to face him, and launched herself back toward him. She felt the force of the bar smash into her upper back just as her shoulder connected with his stomach. Ignoring the shock of pain that exploded between her shoulder blades, she churned her legs like a football lineman, sending Poston backward.

He stumbled and collapsed as she toppled forward onto him, making sure to use all the power she could muster to pound her shoulder into his abdomen. As his body slammed

into the floor and hers into him, she heard a loud, gasping exhalation escape his lips.

She skidded past him and crashed into the bookshelf against the back wall of the living room. The crown of her head smashed into the lowest shelf with a hard crack that made her wince involuntarily.

Looking over at Poston, she saw that he was lying on his back, gasping. She'd clearly knocked the wind out of him. Ignoring the ringing in her ears, she forced herself to get to her feet. Poston was rolling onto his side, trying to push up off the floor.

Her attacker was still somewhat incapacitated. She was upright. The door was open. It was time to go. She staggered toward the door, pretending that her entire back wasn't pulsating with pain and that her head didn't feel like a gumball machine that had been shattered, sending pieces flying across the floor.

Poston reached up sluggishly to grab at her leg. Something about the act made her pain give way to rage and she flung her foot out, kicking him in the face. He flopped to the floor again. When she got to the doorway, she saw his keys in the basket, grabbed them, and flung them out into the front yard, where they disappeared in the brown grass. She needed the head start.

Stumbling out of the house, she scuttled across the yard as best she could, heading in the direction of the convenience store in the strip mall around the corner and one block down. She glanced back once and saw Poston clinging to his doorway, watching her go. He was still holding the crowbar but made no attempt to chase her. She thought he might yell out but he remained silent.

She turned back around and focused her attention on the sidewalk in front of her. Her vision was cloudy and her shoulder blades were screaming but she kept moving, watching one foot move in front of the other, seemingly independent of any instruction from her.

She briefly considered dialing 911 on her cell but decided to wait until she got to the convenience store, where she could

use their phone. She needed the call to be anonymous.

Somehow, in the middle of it all, she processed an unexpected fact: she was smiling.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

After Joe Wender waived his Miranda rights, Jessie called Karen into the interrogation room.

“Don’t be too aggressive,” she whispered to the detective just outside the door. “For the purposes of this discussion, we believe he’s innocent. All our questions should follow from that.”

“Is that what you believe?” Karen asked, surprised.

“I just don’t know. If he did this, then he’s incredibly clever and planned it well in advance. But it’s possible he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Either way, getting him to talk more can only help us.”

“Then you should take the lead,” Karen said. “I’m not sure I can keep the skepticism out of my voice.”

Jessie tended to agree but didn’t say so, only nodding. Once they entered the room, she casually waved in the direction of one of the cameras. It was a pre-determined sign to Jamil that he should listen in and check up on Wender’s claims in real time if possible.

“So,” she started once they were all at the table together, “what made you think Claudia might be cheating?”

For a moment, it looked like Wender was going to back out of his agreement to talk. But after clenching his eyes shut for a few seconds, he opened them again and began.

“It wasn’t any one thing,” he said. “Part of it was just this general sense of distance between us. She seemed distracted lately. I noticed that some of her mommy meetings were being held at odd times. She had me pick up the kids more often than she used to because she was ‘running errands.’ Then, about a month ago, Cloudy took the kids to stay at her folks’ for about a week. I couldn’t go because of work. She usually handles the bills but there were a few that came due that week so I had to

pay them online. As I was looking at a credit card statement, I noticed some weird, unexplained charges.”

“Like what?” Jessie asked.

“Like a drink or three at a hotel bar in the middle of the afternoon. I found seven separate instances of that in one month, all at different hotels in Orange County but none in Westport Beach. It was almost like she didn’t want anyone she knew to see her there. She made a few purchases that stuck out too, like a pair of men’s gloves and a silver billfold.”

“Maybe they were intended as Christmas gifts for you?” Karen suggested.

“I guess it’s possible but they were both bought in October. Claudia and I are notorious for scrambling to buy gifts at the last minute. In fact, we were trying to brainstorm ideas for the kids just last week. I’ve never known her to plan months ahead.”

“Anything else?” Jessie asked.

“Nothing definitive,” he admitted. “Just things that started to seem suspicious once I began paying attention. If she got home after me, she’d say she felt grimy from the day and run into the shower before I had a chance to greet her. It was like she was trying to wash off any scent I might notice. I know that sounds crazy but that’s where my head started going.”

“And then came the big girls’ night?” Jessie prodded.

“Yeah,” he said. “In my head, I knew it was ridiculous to suspect anything, especially that night. I mean, her friends picked her up. Was that all part of some elaborate ruse they were all in on to give her cover so she could steal off with her lover for the night? I was embarrassed to even think it.”

“And yet,” Karen noted softly, “you drove up here anyway.”

He lowered his head and nodded.

“I did,” he muttered, barely intelligible. “I wasn’t totally forthcoming with you before. When I said I picked up a steak and some beer that night, it was actually a six-pack. I intended

to just hang out on the couch, but as the evening wore on I drank more. By the time I finished the last beer, I'd let my imagination get the better of me. I pictured Cloudy in some Hollywood love nest. So I got in her car and headed north. I shouldn't have been driving at all. That's the real reason I took her car. I worried that if I took mine and stopped for gas, someone might notice how smashed I was."

Jessie didn't comment on the fact that even in his supposedly inebriated state, he apparently had the forethought to avoid potentially incriminating cameras or witnesses.

"What then?" she asked simply.

"I got to the hotel. My plan was to confront her, call her down to the lobby and have it out. But I'd forgotten my phone and I couldn't remember her number so I couldn't call her cell. I didn't know her room number, just that they'd gotten a suite on the top floor. There was no point in asking the desk clerk because I knew the room wasn't booked under Claudia's name and it would look creepy for a middle-aged drunk guy to ask if there was a room booked under the name of one of three separate women."

Jessie caught Karen glancing over at her and knew what the detective was thinking. Wender's reason for not approaching the clerk was credible. But he could also not have wanted to draw attention to himself by speaking to an employee who might remember him later. Neither of them pointed that out.

"So what did you do?" Karen asked.

"I decided to go up there," he said sheepishly.

"But you didn't take the elevator?" she asked, trying to keep from sounding too accusatory.

"No. One of them had a sign in front that said it was out of service for cleaning. The other was up on some high floor. I didn't want to wait for it to come down so I decided to take the stairs."

"It seemed preferable to climb twenty flights of stairs rather than wait an extra minute for the elevator?" Karen

asked.

Jessie gave her a look reminding her that they were supposed to be treating the guy with kid gloves. But Wender seemed oblivious to her tone.

“I was drunk and jealous and impatient,” he answered, apparently unaware that none of those things made him a less likely suspect. “So I started jogging up, taking two stairs at a time. But at about the twelfth floor, I hit a wall. My legs started cramping up and I couldn’t catch my breath.”

He stopped talking momentarily, seemingly reliving that moment in his head. Jessie was about to prompt him to continue when he picked up again.

“I sat down on the stairs for a minute to get my second wind. I remember planning what I would do when I got up there. I figured I’d knock on every door until someone I recognized opened up. And then I had this moment of clarity. Something about picturing that, imagining bewildered people opening their doors in the middle of the night to some wild-eyed stranger demanding to see his wife, seemed ridiculous. It made me feel pathetic.”

Jessie decided now was as good a time as any to go for broke. Everything Joe Wender had told them up until this point could credibly support his innocence or implicate him. If she was going to ever definitively determine if he’d killed his wife or not, she needed to throw him off guard. She needed to make him vulnerable enough for the façade to crack so the truth could slip through.

“Is that when you started crying?” she asked without either sympathy or severity.

He looked up at her, shocked.

“How did you know that?” he demanded.

“We saw you on the lobby camera feed.”

He recovered enough to answer.

“Yes,” he admitted. “It just all hit me at once. I had driven up from another county because I thought my wife might be

cheating. I was sitting in a hotel stairwell, huffing and puffing, too overcome by leg cramps to go up or down. I was about to pound on random doors in the middle of the night so that I could make wild accusations. I saw myself clearly for a moment and I just kind of fell apart.”

He looked to be on the verge of tearing up again now. But he managed to stifle it and continue.

“I asked myself if I even wanted to know the truth. If I was right, I’d have to deal with my whole life blowing up. So I just started crying. I saw how wretched I’d become and how much of a mess of a person I was to be in this situation.”

“And yet, there you were,” Jessie reminded him softly, hoping to delicately pry more out of him.

“Not for long,” he countered. “When the cramps faded, I went back downstairs and headed home. I was ashamed of my behavior. I vowed to turn over a new leaf and stop taking Claudia for granted. I needed to try harder to get the romance back in our lives. I knew some of her friends had affairs and I told myself that I’d let that get in my head, that I’d allowed jealousy to let my imagination get carried away. Then I got the call.”

“About her death?” Karen confirmed.

“Right. I was still trying to wrap my head around it when you two showed up. All of a sudden I had the double whammy of shame at what I’d done and knowing how it would look to you. So I lied about where I was and just hoped you’d catch her killer before my drive up here came to light. I know it was stupid but I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

He lowered his head. Jessie looked over at Karen, whose eyebrows were raised in skepticism. It was hard to blame her. While everything Wender said made sense if one was inclined to believe him, much of it was also damning if they started from the assumption that he was guilty. Nothing he’d said had definitively changed that dynamic. Either he was innocent or he was too smart to break.

“Did you see anyone suspicious when you left?” Jessie asked, deciding to finish up with the obligatory question they couldn’t get to earlier. “Anyone you recognized?”

He shook his head.

“I wasn’t really paying attention at that point. I was in my head.”

“It’s quite convenient that no one can corroborate anything you say,” Karen noted, unable to help herself.

He looked up at her with a flash of anger.

“It’s only convenient if you think I’m guilty. But as I’m innocent, I consider it very inconvenient.”

Jessie saw it both ways. There was no one to confirm his story. But the security video was working while he was there and there was no footage of him in or near the suite. Nor was there any DNA or fingerprint evidence of him on the door or in the room.

“Look,” he said, snapping her out of her reverie. “I’ll do whatever I have to do in order to prove it wasn’t me. I’ll provide blood samples. I’ll take a lie detector test. I may be an idiot but I’m not a killer.”

Jessie didn’t respond, letting Karen take him up on the offer while she retreated to her thoughts. They couldn’t officially eliminate him. But unless something dramatic changed soon, Jessie knew that even after getting him to speak at length without his lawyer, they didn’t have enough. Even if he had killed his wife, they couldn’t prove it.

It wasn’t official yet, but in her bones she sensed they’d just lost their best suspect. Worse, she had no idea what to do next.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

No amount of coffee helped.

Jessie sat in the snack room, waiting for the call from Jamil to let her know he was ready to share what he'd found. But she wasn't holding much hope. Looking over at Karen, she saw that the detective felt equally down.

There were multiple credible suspects staring them in the face, but none of them had moved beyond credible to something concrete enough to act on. Jessie couldn't remember the last time she felt this low in the last few months.

She tried to rouse herself. The afternoon was fading fast and she realized she should call Ryan and Hannah to check on them and update them on her status for the evening. But the thought was too depressing. She knew they'd both be curious about her progress and she didn't want to revisit her failures at the moment.

Just then, Captain Decker walked by, headed to his office. Suddenly her disappointment was replaced by indignation. She hadn't yet had a chance to call out the man for manipulating her into this case. Now seemed like a perfect time.

She hopped up and hurried after him. He moved briskly, unaware that she was behind him. Only when she followed him into his office and closed the door did he register her presence.

"Hunt, I didn't see you there," he said, mildly startled as he sat down behind his desk. "What have you got for me?"

"Nothing much," she said, less respectfully than usual. "Maybe you should have tricked someone else into taking this case."

His face fell as he saw where this was headed.

"You sound upset," he said, admitting nothing.

“Wouldn’t you be?” she shot back. “First you told me you just needed my input on this case. Then, when you had me interested, you implied that Detective Bray had specifically asked for my help. But you were the one who told her I should sign on to the case.”

“I was just trying to give you a little nudge, Hunt,” he replied.

“I get that,” she said, refusing to let him off the hook. “But this whole consultant thing only works if I can have confidence that you’re being honest with me. Now I’ll always have doubts about your motives when you call me.”

Decker looked like he might be about to offer an olive branch, but then seemed to reconsider.

“Are you sure you’re not just lashing out at me because the case isn’t going as well as you hoped and you need a scapegoat?”

Jessie was surprised at his unwillingness to admit his mistake. It wasn’t like him. She wondered why the man was being so obstinate.

“Captain, both things can be true at the same time. I can be frustrated that we don’t have a solid suspect *and* feel that you betrayed my trust. They’re not mutually exclusive. I’ve had enough deception in my life. I didn’t think I’d get it from you.”

That seemed to hit home. His face softened slightly.

“You’re right,” he finally said. “I should have been up front with you from the start. I’ve been under a lot of pressure to close cases lately and I guess I let my desire to do that cloud my judgment. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” she replied. Now that he’d apologized, most of her frustration with him faded away, leaving her upset only at failing to find Claudia Wender’s killer. Still, she couldn’t help making one final dig. “Any other secrets you want to share?”

He hesitated and she couldn’t tell if he was serious or joking.

“Not that I can think of right now,” he said.

“Then I better get back to work. This case isn’t going to solve itself.”

He looked like he might be about to say something more but thought better of it and let her go.

On the way out, she noticed a missed text from Karen: *Where are you? Jamil’s got some stuff for us to look at.* She quickly replied: *Doing a little family housekeeping. Will be there soon.*

Then she headed for the station courtyard, where she could actually follow through on what she’d told Karen she was doing by calling home. As the phone rang, she watched the sun fade from the sky in the west. It wasn’t yet five, but in another ten minutes it would be completely dark out.

“Hey,” Ryan said, picking up after the fourth ring.

“Everything okay?” she asked. “It took a while for you to answer.”

“I’m fine. I was in the living room but left my phone in the kitchen so it took a while to get it. I don’t know if you’re aware, but I was stabbed in the chest a while back so I move a little slower these days.”

“I think I heard something about that,” she said, playing along. He sounded like he was in a good mood and she didn’t want to mess with it. “How’s it going there?”

“Not bad,” he said. “The Rams just won so I thought I’d reward myself with some pizza.”

“Because of all your hard work?” she teased.

“That’s right,” he said. “Cheering and groaning really takes it out of you. How many should I order? Will you be home for dinner?”

“It depends,” she told him. “If I don’t come up with a promising lead soon, there won’t be much reason for me to stay here much longer tonight. But pizza? I’m kind of surprised Hannah didn’t want to make something for us.”

“She said she was wiped out from her afternoon so I didn’t press.”

“What was she doing that tired her out so much?” Jessie asked.

“She said she went window shopping on Melrose and that she had a headache and her feet were killing her. She did actually look like she was hobbling a little. She’s in her room now. Should I go get her?”

“No, that’s okay,” Jessie said. “I don’t want to bother her if she’s tired on a Sunday afternoon. Let her take it easy. Order a couple of pizzas and just save me a few pieces, okay?”

“Sure,” he said with way more enthusiasm than she thought pizza deserved.

“What’s up?” she asked. “You sound different than usual.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize it was that obvious,” he said. “I may have some news. Nothing bad, I swear. But I’d rather discuss it with you in person when you get home.”

“Ooh,” she said playfully. “Mystery, drama. At least I’ve got something to look forward to tonight.”

“Really not going well, huh?”

Though he couldn’t see her, she shook her head anyway.

“I’m at a dead end and I don’t have any way out.”

There was silence on the other end of the line and for a moment, she thought they’d been disconnected. But then he replied.

“No you’re not,” he told her.

“What?”

“You’re not at a dead end,” he said. “Jessie, I don’t know the particulars of where you are in this case and I’m not asking you to tell me. But what I *do* know is that if you do what you do best, you’ll solve this thing.”

“And what do I do best?” she wondered, genuinely perplexed.

“You scratch the itch.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“In every tough case I worked with you, when we hit a wall, you’d always go back to that one thing that was gnawing at you, the piece that didn’t fit, the loose string, the question without a good answer. More often than not, pursuing that question led us down the road to the answers we were after. So do that. Ask yourself what part of this case doesn’t make sense and then follow the road. See where it takes you.”

Jessie smiled.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you too,” he replied. “But I also love pizza. So I have to go now.”

After he hung up, she sat alone in the courtyard, thinking. She wasn’t sure how long she was there, but when her phone buzzed with another text from Karen, she didn’t even respond.

Instead she got up and headed to research to meet them. It took all her self-control not to run.

CHAPTER THIRTY

“Claudia was living a lie.”

Jessie started talking the second she entered the research department, before Karen or Jamil even had a chance to turn around to face her.

“What?” Karen said.

Jessie pulled up a chair opposite them and sat down.

“We keep trying to solve this case by asking who would upend Claudia Wender’s seemingly perfect life. But what we should be doing is focusing on the inconsistencies in her life. That’s where a motive to kill her will come from. I don’t think this is about someone being jealous that Claudia was living the fairy tale. I think someone was pissed that Claudia was living a lie.”

Over the course of her comments Jamil and Karen had both gone from confused to transfixed. Since neither spoke, she figured she had the green light to continue.

“What’s been bothering me is how Claudia’s perfect life seemed to be a facade. Even before we learned her husband’s suspicions of infidelity, we knew something was off. She had this great marriage but slept with a stripper without needing much of a push. And Jerry Blatt told us she seemed sad before he slept with her, so we know she wasn’t troubled by guilt over their encounter. Something else was bothering her.”

“I’m guessing you have a theory?” Karen said.

Jessie nodded.

“I suspect we all have a similar one. Even before he learned about the stripper, Joe Wender had suspicions that his wife might be cheating. The more I think about it, the more I suspect he had good reason. And if she was cheating and felt guilty about it, maybe she was thinking about coming clean. If her lover wasn’t okay with that idea, that’s a motive for

murder. If we can determine if she really *was* having an affair, we might have a new suspect.”

“I might be able to help with that,” Jamil said. “That’s what I wanted to tell you. I’ve been going through the family receipts, credit card statements, and so on. Wender was right. Claudia did have drinks at hotel bars in Orange County pretty regularly, though she never actually officially stayed at any of them. And she wasn’t just doing this for the last couple of months. I have records going back to the spring. Sometimes she’d go as many as eight times in a month, but never in a Westport Beach hotel, only in surrounding towns. I just got a batch of surveillance footage from a couple of the hotels for the dates in question. I was about to go through it.”

“I think that’s a fantastic idea,” Jessie said enthusiastically, standing up because of the excitement. “We need to go back to basics on this. The one thing we know for certain is that Claudia was killed in that hotel suite. Let’s assume for now that it wasn’t done by her husband or one of her friends. We need to find out who else might have wanted to harm her.”

“Okay,” Karen said. “So Jamil’s going to look through the footage from the Orange County hotels. What should we do?”

“I think we should go back over all the data from the Hollywood Center Hotel to see if we can uncover any unexpected activity in the hotel or the suite around the time of Claudia’s death.”

Jamil raised his hand.

“I already logged the times of all the keycard swipes in the hotel after the last moment we know she was alive, when Jerry Blatt left the hotel suite. They just need to be cross-referenced with guest and employee names. You could do that.”

Karen pointed at Jamil with her thumb.

“You should keep this guy around,” she joked to Jessie. “He’s not a total waste of space.”

“Don’t say that,” Jessie warned. “We don’t want him getting a big head.”

“Too late,” Karen cracked.

Jamil gave them both a sheepish grin. Jessie only let the moment linger briefly before snapping them back to business.

“We should also look at the surveillance video again, at least when it was working. We know Claudia was killed after one-oh-seven a.m. When did security shut down again, Jamil?”

“At two-oh-one a.m.,” Jamil said. “The whole system went offline. When it finally rebooted, it was two twenty-two. Then it happened again at four thirty-seven and reset at four fifty-two.”

“So, we’ll start at one-oh-seven and work our way through the night toward morning,” Jessie said, turning to Karen. “Do you want to watch video or check keycard timestamps?”

“What a choice,” Karen said. “It’s like asking if I’d rather watch paint dry or grass grow. I guess I’ll watch the video. At least that way, I might see some interesting-looking people.”

Jessie had been thinking the same thing but said nothing as she grabbed the printout of keycard access data and moved to a desk with good lighting. She was going to need it.

*

An hour later, after poring over endless numbers and reluctantly letting Ryan know she wouldn’t be home for dinner, Jessie found something she considered odd.

“Check this out,” she said. “There were almost three dozen keycard swipes from different members of the birthday girls’ night crew from the time they arrived at the hotel until Jerry Blatt left.”

“That’s not surprising,” Karen said, “considering how often they were going in and out.”

“Agreed. That’s not the strange part. Look at this.”

She pointed to the row she’d highlighted. Karen studied it for a second.

“So after the stripper left them,” the detective noted, “there was nothing else until a keycard swipe in an elevator in the lobby at two-oh-three a.m. There was a second swipe entering the suite at two-oh-six a.m.”

“Right,” Jessie said. “I get why no one flagged either swipe earlier. Both came from Lauren Kiplinger’s keycard. Since she was one of the women staying there, it didn’t seem strange that she would be entering her own room. But the officers doing the initial review didn’t know what we know.”

Karen saw where Jessie was going with this and excitedly responded.

“Which is that Lauren was supposedly passed out when Blatt left the suite.”

“Exactly,” Jessie said.

“Maybe she was faking it,” Karen volunteered.

“Or it could be more innocuous,” Jamil countered, looking up from his monitors. “She might not have been completely out, just temporarily zonked. Maybe she went to get ice and everyone was so drunk that no one noticed.”

“Either of those makes sense, except for one thing,” Jessie said. “The first keycard swipe was in the lobby elevator at two-oh-three. But I don’t remember Lauren ever leaving the room after Blatt left. Karen, did you see her exit the suite after that in any of the footage you went through?”

“No,” Karen said. “I didn’t see their door open once from the time Blatt left until the video feed cut out at two-oh-one.”

Jamil piped in.

“Could she have left the suite right after the cameras cut out, taken the elevator down to the lobby, then swiped her card to go back up and reenter the suite?”

Jessie thought about it. She didn’t want to dismiss the idea but she was skeptical.

“Those elevators moved pretty slowly. I’m not sure it’s even technically possible in the time allotted. Even so, why would she leave and come right back up?”

Karen had an idea.

“Maybe she freaked out after killing her friend, left in a panic, then realized that bailing would prove her guilt, so she hurried back.”

“That’s not crazy,” Jessie admitted, though it didn’t feel quite right to her.

Something she’d seen amid all the data in the last hour was tapping at the back of her brain, trying to get her attention, telling her she was missing a piece of the puzzle. She just couldn’t place it.

She looked at the sheet of paper again, trying to make the connection. The last time Lauren was seen leaving the suite was at 11:47 p.m. to steal a bottle of ketchup from the first floor café. She returned at 11:55, swiping her card as she reentered. The next time the card was used was in the lobby elevator at 2:03 in the morning.

Actually, that wasn’t true. The next time it was *swiped* was at 2:03. But another activity was registered in the system at 1:59 a.m.: Lauren Kiplinger’s keycard was activated. Jessie had ignored that data point earlier, assuming it was just some sort of standard operational activity, maybe resetting all keycards for the next day. But what if it wasn’t?

“Karen,” she said, looking up. “Can you check the video feed of the hotel’s check-in desk at one fifty-nine?”

Without asking why, Karen scrolled to the timestamp. Someone wearing a hooded sweatshirt was at the desk, talking to the desk clerk. Because the hood was up and the guest’s back was to the camera, the face wasn’t visible. But after a brief discussion, the clerk clearly handed the guest a keycard.

The two of them chatted for a minute more before the guest turned and headed toward the elevators. Jessie leaned into the monitor with anticipation, but before the doors opened to allow a lower angle view of the face under the hood, the hotel security system crashed, and along with it, the cameras.

Everyone exchanged frustrated looks. Karen broke the silence.

“I’m thinking maybe I should call the hotel and talk to that desk clerk,” she said.

“Do it,” Jessie said excitedly.

Karen dialed the number and put the phone on speaker. The operator answered and connected her to the front desk. Jessie and Jamil leaned in as they waited for the call to be transferred. The clerk’s name was Maisie and she sounded nervous.

“It’s okay,” Karen assured her over the speakerphone after giving her an initial explanation of what they needed. “You’re not in trouble. Just tell me why the guest requested a new key.”

“She told me she lost her key when she was out at a club earlier in the evening and forgot that it was gone when she went to get ice,” Maisie said. “She didn’t want to bang on the door at two in the morning and wake up the others in the room.”

“Did you have any doubts about her story?” Karen asked, trying not to sound accusatory.

“Not really. I was on shift earlier the evening, both when she and her friends left the hotel and when they came back. She was pretty ripped the whole time. On the way through the lobby when they got back, she tripped and fell. I was worried she broke something. So hearing she had lost her key wasn’t really a surprise.”

“Ask if she’s sure it was the same woman,” Jessie whispered.

Karen did. Maisie sounded mildly offended at the question.

“I mean, I wouldn’t bet my life on it, but yes, I’m pretty sure,” she answered, getting more animated as she went on. “She was wearing a hoodie and sunglasses but like I said, I saw her earlier that night and she looked like the same person. Truthfully, she still seemed drunk to me. But everything checked out. She gave me her name. She knew which suite it was. I asked if she wanted me to just call up to have someone let her in and she said that Ronnie would be pissed if she lost her beauty sleep. I remember that I was confused when she

said a man's name because they made a big deal of it being a girls' night. But she said Ronnie was short for Veronica, who had booked the room. Compared to some of the stuff I've dealt with here, it didn't seem that weird to me. So I didn't ask her for ID."

By the time she was done, Maisie's nervousness had completely given way to indignation. Jessie indicated to Karen that she had no more questions.

"Okay, Maisie," Karen said. "We'll be sending someone down to get a formal statement from you about these details. Otherwise I think that's it for now. Thanks for your help."

When she hung up, she turned to Jessie with her eyes blazing. Jamil saw it too.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I think we're down to just three options," Karen said. "Either Maisie's lying and is somehow involved in this, which I tend to doubt, or Lauren Kiplinger is our killer and has been giving an Oscar-worthy performance as an alcoholic party animal to throw us off, which I find almost as unlikely."

"You said three options," Jamil reminded her.

Karen looked over at Jessie, who provided the other one.

"Or we just got a brand new suspect," she told him.

"Who?" he asked.

"I have no idea."

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

It didn't take long to explain why.

"I don't know if the woman in that hoodie is our actual killer or if she just helped facilitate it," Jessie admitted. "But she's definitely involved."

"How can you be sure?" Jamil asked.

Jessie could hear the desire to get it in his tone and wondered how much longer he'd be satisfied doing research before he finally admitted to himself that he wanted to be a detective.

"Because she was lying," Karen said. "From the video you provided us earlier, we saw that Lauren Kiplinger went down to a first-floor café to steal a bottle of ketchup and use her key to get back in the room just before midnight. But 'hoodie' Lauren said she lost her key at the club."

"Isn't possible that she did lose her key and borrowed someone else's to get the ketchup?" Jamil asked before his eyes lit up and he answered his own question. "But the hotel assigns dedicated keys to each guest and the keycard log says she used her own key, not someone else's."

"Exactly," Jessie said. "But there's more. She claimed that she left to get ice and didn't have a key to get back in. She said that to Maisie the desk clerk at one fifty-nine a.m., a couple of minutes before the security system crashed, which means she would have gone on the ice run just prior to that. But we have working video of the twentieth-floor hallway from the time when she would have theoretically left the room and there's no sign of her walking to the ice machine alcove or walking back to the suite. That's two lies in one conversation."

"Then why aren't you sure she killed Claudia Wender?" Jamil asked.

"We don't see her do it, for one thing," Karen replied. "Clearly she's part of this but she might have handed the

keycard off to someone else, like Claudia's potential lover, assuming she *was* cheating. It's possible he paid a lookalike to get him the key."

"Couldn't this woman have been who Claudia was cheating with?" Jamil asked.

"Absolutely," Jessie said. "That's why we don't want to jump to any conclusions. And that's why it would be helpful to look at the video footage from those Orange County hotel bars."

"I actually have that," he said.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

He shrugged.

"You were so excited about the whole keycard thing, I didn't want to interrupt you," he told her.

"Well, I'm ready now," she said. "What have you got?"

He swiveled in his chair and pulled up several screen boxes on one of his monitors.

"So this isn't comprehensive—I only have footage from two hotels so far—but it may be enough. I found three clips of Claudia Wender at the bar at the Grand Reserve Hotel in Costa Mesa and two more at the bar at Beach Tower Hotel in Huntington Beach."

He hit play on the first box and they all watched a woman who was clearly Wender sitting at the bar, sipping something from a tall, frosted glass. After a few seconds, she waved at someone off-camera, closed out her bar tab, and walked out of frame.

"Do we have footage from other parts of the hotel?" Karen asked.

"No," Jamil told her. "We only asked for video from the bars at these places. But I don't think we need more."

"Why is that?" Jessie asked. She could tell he was enjoying being the person with the answers now and was happy to let him have his moment.

“Because of this,” he said, playing the footage from the second box.

In it, Claudia was again drinking alone, but this time she was joined after a minute by a well-built blond man in a suit, who looked to be about the same age as her. Jamil froze that image and played the footage from the third, fourth, and fifth boxes. In each, the same man joined her for a drink.

“Tell me you know who that guy is,” Jessie pleaded.

“I was about to do a search that might tell us. When I saw this footage, I asked the bars for their transaction records from those dates in that window of time. Unfortunately, some are so old that they have to do their own database searches and that might take a day or two.”

Jessie’s heart started to sink until she saw the half-grin on Jamil’s face.

“But...” she said expectantly.

“But this last clip I showed you is more recent, from only two weeks ago, and the bar still has hard copies of those receipts,” he said, fast-forwarding the clip to a moment about five minutes after the man arrived.

As they all watched, the guy offered his credit card to the bartender. As it was returned, Jamil stopped the clip.

“The timestamp is for two eighteen p.m. I e-mailed the bar manager and asked her for copies of any credit card receipts from two fifteen to two twenty.”

“And what did you get?” Karen asked, less patiently than Jessie. She didn’t need the drama, just the answer.

“She e-mailed me back just before your whole desk clerk thing went down,” he said, pulling up his inbox with the e-mail in question at the top. “I haven’t had a chance to open it yet. Should I do that now?”

Both women gave him their best “it’s time to get serious” look and he immediately clicked on the e-mail. It included screenshots of the bar receipts from that block of time. There

were only two. One was for Claudia Wender. The other was for someone named Leif Stoller.

Without being asked, Jamil immediately started typing.

“What are you doing?” Jessie asked.

“I hoped we’d get a name and asked both hotels if I could get temporary access to their past reservation records. They agreed. I’m pulling up Stoller’s name now.”

He wasn’t even done explaining before a list of reservations appeared on the screen. Jessie didn’t have to scrutinize them too closely to see that they regularly matched the dates when Claudia visited the bars in those hotels.

“I’m checking her call and text records,” Karen said, grabbing a folder with hard copies of her cell phone information.

While she did that, Jessie punched Stoller’s name into the DMV database.

“Leif’s house is five minutes from Claudia’s,” she said, “just one neighborhood over.”

Jamil waved his hand excitedly to get their attention.

“Every single Claudia Wender hotel bar receipt matches a hotel check-in by Leif Stoller, usually either just a few minutes before or after she closed out her tab.”

“There’s more,” Karen said excitedly. “There’s no reason we would have noticed this before, because it didn’t seem to have any connection to what happened on Friday night, but some of Claudia’s calls and texts have a pattern.”

“What is it?” Jessie asked.

“She was in regular contact with someone listed in her contact list as ‘Mary.’ There are very few calls but a lot of texts. None of them are salacious or even personal, but they’re almost all the same. Stuff like *meeting confirmed, 2:15 at Grand Reserve Hotel* and *verification needed for 1:30 appointment at Beach Tower Hotel*. There are dozens along the same lines, all professional sounding. Others say simply *on*

site or in attendance. You won't be surprised to learn that those texts match times she was at the hotel bars."

"Did Claudia Wender have a job that required lots of meetings?" Jamil asked.

"No," Jessie said. "But she was on school committees and fundraising boards. She was busy enough that it probably wouldn't have piqued the suspicion of an oblivious husband, which Joe Wender seemed to be for a long time. Karen, are you able to definitively determine if Leif Stoller is the 'Mary' that she was texting all the time?"

Karen shook her head.

"No. The cell number for 'Mary' is for a burner phone. In fact, the number changed three times over the last nine months, suggesting 'Mary' replaced phones regularly. The current number is no longer active. I guess 'Mary' got spooked after Claudia's murder and dumped it."

Another thought occurred to Jessie.

"And the nature of the texts didn't change in recent weeks? No more personal language? Nothing threatening?"

Karen scanned the documents again.

"Nope," she said. "The last text from Claudia was from nine days ago at two thirty-three in the afternoon. All it says is *Ready for review*. There's a reply from 'Mary' saying *Parking. Five minutes*. That's it."

Jessie sighed quietly to herself but Jamil noticed.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Just that there's no indication that the affair stopped recently," she answered. "It doesn't seem like either one of them broke it off, which means one less motive for Stoller to want to hurt her."

"Not necessarily," he countered. "If she mentioned this girls' night thing to him, maybe he figured he'd surprise her and show up to seduce her in Hollywood for a change of pace. If he did that and she reacted badly—if she was worried her friends would find out—he might have lashed out. Or maybe

he was going to surprise her, saw the stripper leaving, and got jealous. If he was following them all night and saw her friends, it would be easy for him to find a nearby prostitute who looked like Lauren Kiplinger. He could hire her to get a keycard from the front desk so he could sneak up to the suite.”

“That’s a lot of maybes,” Karen told him.

“Are you saying it’s not possible?” he asked.

“No, I’m not,” Karen replied.

“No one’s going to dismiss your theory, Jamil,” Jessie assured him. “Remember, Detective Bray and I met on a case where one film actress dressed up like a serial killer from a movie series to kill another actress. We’re open to pretty much anything. But I may have an idea that will help us get some clarity on all of this.”

“What’s that?” Jamil asked.

“We’re going to go talk to the guy.”

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

By the time they pulled up near Stoller's house, it was just past 8 p.m.

Jessie sat in the passenger seat as Karen rolled down her window to speak to the deputy in the unmarked OC Sheriff's vehicle. He'd been assigned to the house after they asked for someone to do a drive by and sit on the place.

"Detective Karen Bray, Hollywood Station," she said. "This is Jessie Hunt. How's it going in there?"

"I'm Deputy Harlan Carroll," he said amiably before launching in. "They got back from what I assume was dinner about an hour ago. I saw the mom carrying a couple of doggy bags inside. Stoller hasn't gone anywhere since they arrived."

"I didn't realize he was married with kids," Karen said. "This guy gets classier every second. So what's the situation now?"

"Best as I can tell, they've been putting the kids to bed. I saw a few upstairs lights go off about twenty minutes ago. There's been some movement downstairs since but I can't tell who it is."

"Thanks," Karen said. "You mind sticking around a little longer as backup? We might need a little assistance if this gets hairy."

"Sure," he said, seemingly excited by the prospect. "Should I come in with you?"

"No," Jessie said. "We don't want to put him any more on edge than he already is. Just keep an eye out and have a line open to your station in case things go south."

Carroll nodded.

"How old are the kids?" Karen asked, posing a question that Jessie was embarrassed to admit she hadn't thought of. Of course, it made sense that the working mom of a young son

would want to consider the well-being of the kids in the home. But Jessie chided herself that one shouldn't have to be a parent to remember such things.

"I'm not great with ages but I'm guessing the boy was five or six," Deputy Carroll said. "The little girl was probably closer to three."

"Okay, thanks," Karen said as she made a U-turn and returned to the Stoller home.

She parked across the street to attract less attention from anyone in the house who might be looking outside. Once out of the car, both women checked their weapons. Jessie was tempted to zip up her jacket to protect against the sharp coastal wind. But that would make accessing her gun harder so she left it open and suffered.

They jogged up the path to the front door. At first glance, the house was as impressive as all the others they'd visited. But upon closer inspection, even in the dark, Jessie noticed that it had seen better days. The paint was worn and chipped, a couple of shingles were missing, and the porch light lantern was cracked, leaving an unsightly gap.

The sound of what Jessie thought was a sitcom laugh track was audible on the television. They looked at each other silently, checking that their partner was ready to go. Karen's eyes were steely.

Jessie hadn't been in this intense a situation in months and felt a hint of nervousness. But it was nothing she hadn't dealt with before. As was her custom, she took the feeling, set it aside in an imaginary compartment deep in her gut, and took a long deep breath. Then she nodded at Karen, who knocked politely but firmly on the door.

It took nearly a minute for anyone to respond. As they waited, they traded uneasy looks. Was Stoller making a run for it? Getting a weapon? If he suspected that his connection to Claudia had been discovered, anything was possible. Karen was just about to knock again when they heard the sound of a bolt unlocking. The door opened to reveal the man Jessie knew to be Leif Stoller.

He was dressed more casually than in the surveillance footage, as one might expect on a Sunday evening. He had on faded blue jeans and a navy sweatshirt with the capital letter “A” emblazoned in red across the chest with a wildcat just below it, suggesting he was either an alum or fan of the University of Arizona.

Stoller was a shade over six feet tall, with a thick chest and just a hint of a belly. He was still recognizable as the same man from the hotel footage, but the intervening time hadn’t been kind to him.

His immaculately combed blond hair was now tousled and greasy-looking. He had several days’ worth of stubble and there were dark bags under his red-tinged eyes. Jessie could smell the alcohol on his breath.

“Can I help you?” he asked, feigning neighborliness.

“Mr. Stoller,” Karen said courteously, “I’m Detective Karen Bray with the LAPD. This is Jessie Hunt. She’s a consultant for the department. We have a few questions for you.”

His whole face crumpled at her words.

“Oh god, I knew this was coming,” he groaned. “It’s about Claudia, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Karen said, unable to hide her surprise at his reaction.

“I figured you’d want to talk to me eventually but I kept putting it out of my head. But that was just stupid—avoiding the inevitable.”

“May we come in?” Jessie asked.

Stoller glanced back at the stairwell behind him.

“Actually, do you think we could talk outside? My wife is putting our son, Rory, back to bed. He had a nightmare. He’s friends with Claudia’s son and he knows she died. He’s been having trouble dealing with it. I don’t want him to hear us talking.”

“Are you sure that’s the only reason, Mr. Stoller?” Jessie pressed.

He looked back at her with guilty eyes.

“Obviously, assuming that you’re here for the reason I suspect, I’d rather my wife not hear us talking either.”

“That’s fine,” she replied, hiding her confusion. The last thing she’d expected from someone who’d spent months cultivating an affair with the aid of a burner phone and code phrases, and who may have conceived an elaborate plan to murder his lover and pin the blame on her drunk friend, was a confession.

He stepped outside and closed the door softly behind him.

“You don’t want to grab a coat?” Jessie asked. “It’s pretty cold out.”

“I’m okay,” he said. “The liquor warmed me up.”

Stunned at how forthcoming he was being, Jessie looked over at Karen questioningly, wondering if the detective was thinking the same thing she was: if he was this cooperative, they might be on the verge of an admission of guilt. If so, maybe he should be read his rights first to avoid legal hurdles down the line. Karen shook her head, as if to indicate she understood but wasn’t sure of the best move either. But before she got a chance to decide, Stoller beat her to it.

“I haven’t slept in over twenty-four hours,” he told them. “I’m not a religious person, but part of me thinks God is punishing me.”

Both women hesitated before Jessie finally made the leap.

“For what exactly?”

“For the affair, of course,” he whispered. “We both knew it was wrong. I don’t know who felt more guilty about it—me or her. But we just couldn’t stop. This last week and a half was the longest we’d gone without being together since it started. I was starting to go stir crazy, waiting for her to reach out.”

“Why didn’t you contact her?” Jessie said, deciding to let him lead them wherever his conscience directed him.

“No way,” he said emphatically. “Cloudy was adamant about that. Only she could initiate a rendezvous. I violated that once and she threatened to end it. She said her husband saw the text and asked who Mary was. She wanted to make sure she’d only get a response from me when she was alone. So I never did it again. After that, everything was great for months. We had our most recent get-together. I waited for her to reach out. But then days turned into a week and all of a sudden it was yesterday afternoon and I saw the story on the news and my brain just exploded.”

“You didn’t try to see her on Friday night?” Jessie asked.

“No,” he said, surprised at the question. “Why would I do that? I wasn’t even here.”

“Where were you?” Karen asked.

“San Diego. The Wildcats had a road basketball game against San Diego State and I took Rory. We spent the night down there.”

Jessie felt as if a water balloon had popped just above her head, first startling her and then drenching her in disappointment. She’d already been unsettled by how willing Leif Stoller was to spill his guts. If his alibi bore out (and it wouldn’t be hard to verify) all their meticulous recreations of text conversations and hotel room check-ins would be for naught.

“Can anyone besides your son confirm that you were there?” Karen asked, her voice filled with same frustration Jessie was feeling.

Before he could answer, his phone buzzed. He checked the message, then looked up in panic.

“It’s my wife,” he said. “She wants to know where I am. How am I going to explain you being here?”

“Mr. Stoller, I think you need to face reality,” Jessie told him, suddenly weary of trying to maintain any semblance of deference. “We came here investigating your involvement in Claudia Wender’s death. If the worst thing that comes out of

this is that you have to admit an affair to your wife, you're coming out ahead."

"You thought I killed her? I could never. I loved—" he began before stopping himself and shaking his head adamantly. "I can't tell my wife. She'd be devastated."

"Well, unfortunately, that's the breaks," Karen said, clearly losing patience. "You can decide how you want to tell her, but we have some more questions for you and I'm tired of doing it out here in the cold. So we can either continue this inside or down at the station."

Stoller barely waited a beat before answering.

"The station is good. Let me just grab my coat. I'll text her back once we're gone."

He turned back to the house and opened the door, then stopped cold.

"Hi, honey," he said awkwardly to someone just out of view in the shadowed foyer.

"Who's at the door?" a female voice asked, pulling it open.

Jessie's mouth dropped open.

Staring back at her was Lauren Kiplinger.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Jessie was wrong.

Only when the woman stepped out of the shadows into the glare of the porch light did she realize this wasn't actually Lauren Kiplinger. But the resemblance was so startling that she could have been her sister, if not quite her twin.

"Hello," the woman said, extending her hand graciously to Karen. "I'm Breanne Stoller. What can I do for you?"

Jessie's brain exploded with a half dozen thoughts at the same time. The name Breanne rang a bell immediately. Breanne was one of the two friends who had begged off the girls' night outing at the last minute.

Assuming this was the same Breanne, and Jessie had no reason to doubt that it was, she would have known the hotel, even the name of the suite, where the group was staying. She would have known all the attendees, and that the reservation was under Veronica's—or "Ronnie's"—name.

Even if she didn't know that the other women referred to her and Lauren as the Barbie Bimbos, Breanne couldn't have missed how alike they looked. Their blonde hair was about the same length, even styled similarly. They were around the same height. They both had deep tans and large, likely enhanced breasts. They each had toned physiques, which Breanne was currently displaying via yoga pants and an off-the-shoulder, *Flashdance*-style sweatshirt.

The shape of their eyes was different, but behind sunglasses, no one would notice. And with a hoodie casting her face in shadow, distinguishing between them would be challenging for anyone who didn't know them well.

Add to all of that, her husband and son—who was friends with Claudia's son—were out of town the night of the murder. Jessie wondered if her daughter had been shipped somewhere else as well.

As all of those facts converged at once, she glanced over at Karen, who was clearly thinking many of the same things. But the detective recovered quickly and shook Breanne's hand.

"Hello, Mrs. Stoller. I'm Karen Bray, a detective with the LAPD and this is—"

"Jessie Hunt," Breanne interrupted. "I recognize a local legend when I see one."

Jessie offered a tight smile.

"We're sorry to bother you in a Sunday evening," she said, not commenting on her celebrity status, "but we're looking into Claudia Wender's death. There are a few loose ends we need to tie up and we hoped you could help with that."

"Of course, come in," Breanne said, her expression changing from friendly to practiced concern. "It's so awful what happened. Did you need to talk to both of us or just Leif?"

"Oh, we already spoke with your husband," Jessie said, making the impromptu decision to keep what they knew about his affair secret. "He told us about your son's difficulties processing what happened to his friend's mom. But we were hoping you could confirm a few details that Claudia's other friends mentioned."

Breanne looked surprised that her husband was getting a pass but quickly moved on.

"Whatever I can do to help," she offered, leading them down the main hall into the kitchen. Jessie followed her. She noticed that Karen had made sure to let Leif go ahead of her so she could trail the whole group. Jessie understood why. The detective was letting her take the lead in this chat/interrogation, but she was still on high alert.

"We understand that you had to back out of Claudia's birthday night out at the last minute," Jessie said once they came to a stop at the breakfast room table.

"I didn't know that," Leif said, genuinely stunned. "You were invited to that?"

“Of course I was,” Breanne replied with the slightest hint of an edge. “Claudia and I were dear friends. I had every intention of going.”

“But you felt sick?” Karen prompted.

“Yes,” Breanne replied, seeming to shiver at the memory of it. “I had sushi as an afternoon snack because we were going to be eating late that night. But something didn’t agree with me. By the time Ronnie called to confirm, I was in terrible shape. Trust me, you don’t want the details.”

“That sounds awful,” Jessie said sympathetically. “And with your husband out of town, there was no one to take care of you?”

“It was actually a blessing in disguise,” Breanne answered. “Both my men were gone. And I had dropped my daughter, Lily, off at my mother’s earlier in the afternoon to spend the night there since I’d be at the hotel. So there was no one to hear me nearly cough up a lung. It’s bad enough to feel like that, but to know everyone in the house can hear it? That would have just made it worse.”

“But you’re okay now?” Jessie confirmed.

“Yes. I just curled up in the fetal position that night, when I wasn’t making hurried trips to the bathroom. But by yesterday morning, it had mostly left my system. When I picked up Lily, I was a little weak but functional. I feel almost normal today.”

“And when did you hear about Claudia’s death?”

Breanne squinted as if trying to remember.

“I think it was early afternoon yesterday. One of the girls—Lauren if I recall—texted me. It was so horrible. Right afterward, I turned on the TV and checked the web but there was nothing. I almost didn’t believe it. And then the stories started flooding in.”

“That’s how Rory found out,” Leif added. “We were driving back from San Diego and I was listening to the news on the radio. The anchor just blurted it out without any warning. Rory looked over at me, confused. Then he started crying. We pulled over to the side of the road but it didn’t help.

I couldn't console him. He didn't stop for the rest of the drive back."

As if in response to that last comment, an ear-splitting cry filled the room. Jessie jumped. Karen winced.

"Sorry," Leif said, "that's the baby monitor."

"Is that Rory?" Karen asked.

"It's actually Lily," Breanne told them, starting to step away. "I should go check on her."

"Actually," Jessie said quickly, "maybe your husband could do that. We only have a few more questions and we'll be on our way. Then you can go up and help out."

Breanne looked hesitant.

"She's really used to me being the one who soothes her at night," she insisted.

"And you'll be right up," Jessie assured her. "We'll be quick and then we'll get out of your hair."

"It's okay, Bree," Leif said. "I've got it. Finish up here. If she's still struggling when you're done, you can take over."

Breanne still looked reluctant but finally nodded in acquiescence. Leif darted up the stairs, leaving the three women alone. For several seconds no one spoke. Karen looked at Jessie with a "this is your gig" expression, though her right hand did rest on her hip, not far from her gun. Jessie raised her eyebrows as if to say "here goes," and turned to Breanne, focusing all her attention on the woman standing at her kitchen counter with a forced, plastic smile on her face. When Jessie spoke, her tone was quiet but firm.

"I think it's time for a heart to heart, Breanne."

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

For a second, Jessie saw panic in the woman's eyes.

But it was only for an instant, and was quickly replaced by something more like carefully studied curiosity.

"What do you mean?" she asked. Her voice was steady, but Jessie noticed that her hands were pressing down so hard on the kitchen counter that her fingertips were turning white.

Jessie debated how best to approach her. She knew in her bones that Breanne was Claudia's murderer. She was confident they could prove it. But a confession would be nice, as would be avoiding a scene. She decided to be direct and honest, mostly at least.

"We know it was you, Breanne," she said, almost apologetically. "We know about the affair. And we know you killed Cloudy."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Breanne replied indignantly, even as her fingers got whiter.

"I get it," Jessie said gently. "You said you recognized me. So you know my story. You know my husband cheated on me. But he slept with an escort, not a friend I saw all the time. I think that might be even worse. Either way, I know the hurt and rage you must have felt when you discovered it."

Breanne shook her head vigorously but said nothing. Jessie pressed ahead.

"I know the feeling. And so I know why you ended up at the Hollywood Center Hotel in sunglasses and a hooded sweatshirt, getting a keycard from the desk clerk."

Breanne's eyes widened. She looked like she wanted to respond but just wasn't able. Jessie continued.

"We have the statement from Maisie, the desk clerk on duty," she told her, neglecting to mention that the statement

didn't implicate Breanne. "We have surveillance video from the hotel. We know you tried to pass yourself off as Lauren."

"Wait," Breanne said, suddenly trying to find her voice. "You're saying I did this? What makes you think it wasn't actually Lauren? She was the one who was actually there."

"You have no alibi," Karen told her, joining in for the first time. "Is there anyone who can vouch for your whereabouts that night?"

"I was puking my guts out," Breanne said, her voice rising slightly. "I didn't know I'd need an alibi. Besides, an officer came by yesterday and took a statement from me. He seemed satisfied."

Jessie intended to have a word with that officer when this was all done. It sounded like he needed a refresher in basic interrogation techniques. But that was a matter for another time. Right now, she decided to shut down all Breanne's scrambling attempts to worm her way out of it. If she could be made to see that she was in a no-win situation, maybe they could coax her into a confession.

"Sweetie," she said, as if confiding in an old friend, "we haven't even started to do the background work yet. If you drove your car to the hotel, we can track that. If you took a rideshare, we'll find out. We can track your phone too. You live in a gated community with a guard shack that has cameras. They'll reveal that you left, and when. I saw cameras on multiple homes near here. We'll be checking all of those. And then there are the surveillance cameras all around the hotel, as well as in the elevators and in the hallway outside the suite."

"But Lauren—" Breanne started to say.

"Lauren was passed out when you did this," Jessie said, cutting her off. "When you were talking to the desk clerk and riding up in the elevator, she was dead to the world. We have eyewitnesses to it. And you know it too, because you would have had to walk right past her."

Breanne opened her mouth as if to speak, then closed it. Jessie looked over at Karen. This was the time. If Breanne was going to confess, it was going to happen now. And they needed to get their legal ducks in a row before she did. Karen nodded in silent agreement. Jessie turned back to their suspect.

“So here’s what’s going to happen, Breanne,” she said with what she hoped was comforting warmth. “We want your side of the story. God knows you deserve to say your piece, after what Leif did to you, after the indignities you suffered at the hands of your husband and the woman who was supposedly your friend, a woman who smiled in your face while betraying your trust. But before you can set the record straight, Detective Bray needs to get the formalities out of the way.”

Karen stepped forward, and in a voice filled with remorse and understanding, read Breanne Stoller her rights. As she did, Jessie took out her phone, activated the voice memo function, and placed it on the counter where everyone could see it. Then she returned her attention to Breanne, who, blank-faced and open-mouthed, listened to the detective’s words.

“With these rights in mind,” Karen concluded, “do you wish to speak to us now?”

Breanne looked back and forth between them in the silent kitchen. Leif’s soothing whispers could be heard over the baby monitor. Lily’s cries had turned into coos with occasional whimpers. Jessie couldn’t tell if they’d convinced Breanne and made one last attempt.

“You deserve to tell your version of what happened,” she pleaded. “We want to help but right now, all we have are other people’s stories. And those make you into a monster.”

“I’m not a monster,” Breanne said suddenly and for a second it seemed she’d stop there. But she didn’t. “I’m just a person who was pushed too far, you know?”

Jessie nodded sympathetically.

“So, since you’re willing to talk to us,” she said with emphasis, “tell us who pushed you too far.”

That was all the nudge Breanne needed.

“Can you imagine what it’s like to spend every day taking care of two little kids, one a toddler who wakes up three or four times a night, make all their meals, and take them to endless parks and playdates, while your friends hand off those tasks to their nannies?”

“You can’t do that too?” Karen asked.

“No, not since a year ago, when I found that Leif lost a bunch of his biggest clients because he was more interested in hanging out at casinos than at work. We got overextended, piling up credit card debt. So I let our nanny go, and our gardener too. We stopped making home repairs. I dropped my gym membership and worked out at home, because I still had to try to stay in shape to hold my husband’s interest.”

“But he didn’t make the same sacrifices,” Jessie said, delicately prodding her for more, while carefully hiding her disdain at this woman’s perception of the rough life.

“No. He did start going to Gamblers Anonymous meetings all the time, which is fine. It left me with even more of the burden but I was okay with it because at least it was a step in the right direction. But then I found the bill.”

“What bill?” Karen asked.

“He had taken out another credit card, one I didn’t know about. And there were dozens of hotel charges on it. I wanted to confront him but I knew he wouldn’t be honest. So one day I followed him to work. I sat in my car in the parking lot all morning until he left at lunchtime. He drove to the Highpoint Hotel in Laguna Beach. I saw him meet a woman in the bar. Her back was to me so I didn’t recognize her. But then they got up and he went to the check-in while she waited in the lobby. When she finally turned around, I saw that it was Claudia. I just couldn’t believe it.”

She trailed off, as if reliving the painful moment of realization all over again.

“What happened next?” Jessie gently prompted.

“They took the elevator to the sixteenth floor,” she continued. “I got the next elevator and went up too. But by the

time I got there, the hall was empty. So I spent the next twenty minutes sneaking from room to room, pressing my ear against each door. I went to nine rooms before I found the right one. I knew it was them because I recognized Leif's voice. He was... was making sounds that I knew well."

"What did you do?" Karen asked.

"I left," Breanne said simply. "I had to pick up Lily from daycare, which we'd cut back to half days because of the cost. Then I had to get Rory from school. Finding out that my husband was cheating with my friend didn't suddenly mean my kids didn't need afternoon snacks. I continued with my day, and every one after that."

"You didn't say anything?" Jessie wanted to know.

Breanne shook her head. She seemed to be shaking slightly.

"I wanted to. I was going to that night. But then I thought, what am going to do after that—threaten to leave him? Even with all the debt, he was our only source of income. We were college sweethearts and I didn't finish school. He proposed during my junior year and I dropped out that summer to plan the wedding. I've never had a real job in my life. I don't have any marketable skills. I have two little kids. My whole world is tied up in this community, where having the right clothes and landscaper and tutor defines your worth. I wasn't ready to abandon all that. So I convinced myself that it was a passing thing; that he'd get it out of his system and move on."

"But he didn't," Jessie said.

"Not even close. I should have known better. After all, I first found out about them in late summer and some of the hotel bills went back to the spring. That wasn't just a little fling. It got harder and harder to pretend. I felt worthless around him and like an idiot around her. She was so good at acting like everything was normal. Our boys hung out all the time. Joey Jr. spent the night here for Rory's birthday just a month ago. And then there was the last straw, the thing I should I have realized much earlier but was too blind to see."

“What was that?” Karen asked.

“He said he couldn’t meet for Rory’s parent-teacher conference because he was feeling the old urge to gamble and had to go to a meeting. So I went on my own. But when I got home I started thinking about all the other times he said he’d been at meetings. I checked and realized that a bunch of them matched up to the dates and times of his hotel trysts. He was using Gamblers Anonymous as a front for his affair, knowing that I wouldn’t press him on being gone so much because it was a sensitive issue. I was so dumb that it never even occurred to me that he would use his old addiction to cover for a new one. And now, meeting her was apparently more important than his own child.”

“When did you learn this?” Jessie wanted to know.

“The teacher conference was last Thursday.”

“The day before you were supposed to go to Hollywood for Claudia’s big blowout,” Karen noted.

Breanne nodded.

“I went home, put it all together, and everything just fell into place from there. Leif and Rory would be out of town. Lily would be at my mom’s. I could say I was sick to avoid going to the birthday. Then I would be free to do what I needed to do without anyone catching on.”

“That’s when you got the idea to kill Claudia?” Jessie reiterated.

“No. I’d thought of killing her dozens of times. That was when I decided to go through with it.”

“What?” asked a deep, hoarse voice from behind them.

They all looked around to find Leif Stoller standing in the doorway with his mouth open.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

The room was silent.

Jessie noticed Karen casually undo the cover of her gun holster as a precautionary measure, and tried to think of something to say to tamp down the situation. But before she could utter a word, Breanne replied.

“I was just telling these nice ladies how I killed your whore.”

Her words were full of curdled malice. For the first time, Jessie could imagine this person smashing that clock into Claudia’s skull.

“You what?” he repeated, still not seeming to process the nature of the situation.

Breanne smiled.

“While you were sharing a hotel room with your son,” she said with spite, “I was in another hotel room, bashing in the head of your mistress.”

“How could you—?” he began but she cut him off.

“It was easy, Leif. There was this heavy clock on the mantel. Everyone was passed out. I tiptoed past them all into the bedroom where the skank was sleeping. I stood over her for a moment. I wasn’t sure if I could do it. But then she rolled over and I had no choice. So I brought it down on her. And just before I crushed her skull, I thought I saw a flicker of recognition in her eyes. Maybe it was my imagination, but I think she knew what was happening and why.”

“Breanne,” he said but couldn’t seem to think of anything else to add.

“The best part,” she continued, “other than the crunching sound her bones made, was the next afternoon. You came home talking about her death being on the news and you

hugged me. You squeezed me so tight, not having any idea that it was me who snuffed the life out of your precious Cloudy.”

Leif seemed to be transitioning from a state of shock to something more like anger. Jessie watched his breathing get faster and shallower as his face turned red and his jaw clenched. Karen must have seen it too because she eased her weapon out of the holster.

“You need to calm down, Mr. Stoller,” the detective said in a measured tone.

Stoller looked at her and there was rage in his eyes. Then he turned back to Breanne. Jessie feared he might lunge at her. But instead, his expression changed from anger to horror. Jessie turned to see what had caused the reaction.

Breanne Stoller was still behind the kitchen counter but had moved a few steps over. Now she was standing beside a knife block. She was holding a long carving knife to her own throat. Her eyes were wild.

“What the hell—?” Stoller started to say.

“Leif,” Jessie interrupted in a steady, firm voice, her eyes never leaving Breanne. “You need to leave the kitchen right now. Walk out without saying another word.”

She waited silently, hoping he’d comply.

“He’s gone,” Karen said quietly after a few seconds.

Jessie nodded, still focused on the woman with the blade pressed again her carotid artery.

“Breanne,” she said gently, “that’s not the answer. I know it seems like there’s no way back from this but there is.”

Breanne didn’t say anything as her shaking hand quivered against her skin. A small droplet of blood suddenly appeared just below the blade and started to drip down her neck. Jessie continued talking, worried that any pause might allow the woman an opportunity to act rashly.

“Think about it,” she said. “You were honest with us just now. That will work in your favor down the line. Detective

Bray and I will attest to your cooperation. But you need to step back for a second and think what happens next if you do this.”

“I know what will happen,” Breanne muttered through gritted teeth. “This will all end and he’ll be to blame for it.”

“Are you sure that’s how it will play out?” Jessie asked, recalling Karen’s question to Deputy Carroll earlier about the age of the children. “Think of Rory and Lily. What would this do to them? Rory’s already traumatized. How will he be affected when police cars with sirens and flashing lights pull up outside and your house is overrun with cops and a coroner with a body bag? How will Lily process it?”

She saw Breanne pondering the question and pressed on quickly.

“Do you trust Leif to comfort them in that moment and all the moments afterward? Because you won’t be here to do it. You—their most powerful source of love and comfort—will forever after be the source of their pain. Is that how you want them to remember you? Is that what you want their future lives to be—an endless parade of therapists trying to help them understand why their mother abandoned them to the care of a man she didn’t trust?”

Jessie leaned in, putting her own hands on the kitchen counter as she spoke quietly.

“You said you know about me, Breanne. I’m willing to bet you know all about my past, and not just the recent stuff. You have to know that I was abandoned too, left to die by a father who killed my mother and made me watch. How do think the years since then have been for my mental health, trying to wrap my head around that madness? Is that what you want for Rory and Lily?”

“That’s not how they’ll remember me,” Breanne insisted. “I didn’t kill their father. They won’t see this. They’ll always think of me as their mom.”

“Are you sure?” Jessie asked immediately, not wanting to let that last comment linger. “Who’s going to fight for your memory? If you’re gone, Leif gets the kids. He raises them

with the version of reality that he creates. He raises them with whatever new woman he marries and tells the kids to call 'mommy.' Do you think you'll fare well in that version?"

"My mom can take custody," she answered, though not convincingly.

"Why?" Jessie said, allowing a little more toughness to bleed into her words. "There's no reason a court would do that. Why would they view Leif as unfit? Who's going to tell them that he is if you're not around to share the gambling addiction and the financial ruin and skipping out on parent-teacher conferences to sleep with his mistress, your friend? You're the only person who can fill in that picture, Breanne."

"Why would they listen to a murderer?" she demanded.

Jessie had anticipated this question.

"Because even after you're convicted, even in prison, you're still their mother. What you say still matters. What you know about Leif will still be important to a judge trying to decide what's best for your kids' future. But if you aren't around to make the case, that gets a lot harder. You mom is suddenly just the mother of the crazy woman who killed herself, not a credible alternative to a man who might leave his kids home alone so he can go play blackjack. You have to be their voice, even if you're in an orange jumpsuit."

Breanne didn't reply. It was clear she was playing it out in her head, picturing the scenario described. But she still held the knife, so Jessie kept going.

"I'm not going to lie to you," she said. "There's no way clear of this. You are going to prison. But you still have options. A jury might give you a lighter sentence because of what you endured. You could potentially get out in time to see your children while they're still kids. You can play a role in their lives. You can have a say in who they live with. You can find a way to atone for this with Claudia's children, who don't deserve to suffer any more than yours do. But none of that is possible unless you put down the knife."

She stopped talking. There was nothing else she could think to say to improve the situation. Karen must have agreed because she remained silent too.

Breanne Stoller didn't speak either, but instead just stared at Jessie, her eyes fixed on her as she clutched the knife. And then, after what felt like an eternity, she pulled it away from her neck and placed it on the kitchen counter.

"That's a smart decision," Jessie said soothingly. "Now just slide it towards me."

Breanne gave the knife handle a push, sending it sliding several feet across the counter, where it was now closer to Jessie than to her.

"Good," Jessie said reassuringly as Karen moved toward the woman. "Now, Detective Bray needs to handcuff you for our safety and for yours. But we're going to work through all this, okay?"

Breanne nodded, extending her arms for Karen to snap them on her wrists. She looked almost relieved. But then, without explanation, her expression changed. She was just opening her mouth when Jessie heard a sound behind her. She spun around to find Leif Stoller charging past her toward Breanne with a hammer clutched in his hand. Karen, whose head was turned away, focused on the cuffs, couldn't see him.

There wasn't time for Jessie to pull out her gun and fire. Besides, Karen and Breanne would be at risk if she did. Instead, she hoisted herself onto the kitchen counter, hoping to intercept him before he reached them. As she did, she yelled "Karen" but her voice was drowned out by Breanne's piercing scream.

Karen looked over, immediately processed the situation, and started to reach for her gun. Jessie could tell she wouldn't get it out in time. Now standing on the counter, she took one long stride and leapt at the man, who was only a few feet away from his wife, with a hammer above his head.

He was just starting to swing it down toward Breanne's head when Jessie landed on his back, sending him careening

into the refrigerator. He collided hard against it before slamming to the floor with her on top of him.

She heard him grunt heavily as his body cushioned the fall for her. Rolling off his back, she looked for the hammer and saw that it had skittered across the floor into a corner. Looking up, she found Karen pointing her gun at the now-prone assailant.

“You okay?” she asked Jessie, never taking her eyes off Stoller.

Jessie took a moment to determine if she actually was.

“I think so,” she said.

“Good. Then maybe you can take charge of Mrs. Stoller while I formally arrest her husband.”

Jessie slowly got to her feet and stood beside Breanne while Karen ordered Leif to get to his knees. He wordlessly did as he was ordered, though it looked like a struggle. Jessie turned to Breanne.

“I need your mother’s phone number,” Jessie told her. “We don’t want your kids going in the system so she’ll need to take temporary custody.”

“Huh?” the woman said, clearly stunned.

“You’re both going to prison, Breanne. So it looks like you’re going to get your wish after all.”

Something about that seemed to register in the woman’s brain. Ever so slowly, her mouth curled into a satisfied, twisted smile.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

Ryan was waiting up for her.

It was almost ten when she got home so Jessie was surprised to find him sitting at the breakfast table with a smile on his face.

“I heated up some pizza for you, and poured some wine too,” he said, nodding at the plate and glass beside him. “I thought you could tell me about your day between bites.”

She tossed her purse on the counter and plopped down in the chair.

“Bless you,” she said, leaning in to give him a kiss, which he warmly returned. “But I thought *you* had some news.”

“It can wait,” he assured her. “Fill me in.”

She didn’t require much more prodding, giving him the broad strokes of the case between bites of thick crust, cheese, and mushrooms. Both the food and wine were gone before she finished so she poured herself a second glass of red.

“So both Breanne and Leif Stoller are in custody now,” she concluded. “Her recorded confession is a nice cherry on top but she’d be toast even without it. Jamil has been going back through surveillance footage and her GPS data. Now that we know who to look for, much of it should fall into place. I think it’ll be ironclad by tomorrow.”

“You think she would have had any shot at getting that scumbag away from the kids if he hadn’t attacked her?” he asked.

“I don’t know, Ryan,” she said, taking another sip. “If being a disinterested, mediocre parent was enough to take away a kid, well, you get the idea. But since he’s now an attempted murderer too, I guess it’s moot. The saddest part is that now two families are completely destroyed. And I doubt those little boys, who were friends, will ever see each other again.”

“Yeah,” Ryan agreed quietly before livening up. “Well, despite all that, I’m proud of you. Months away from the action and you come back and solve the case in less than two days. Not bad at all.”

“I had a lot of help,” Jessie insisted. “Without Karen and Jamil, I’m not sure it goes the same way. Not everyone is as sharp as those two. A little Hernandez help would have come in handy on this one.”

He was just opening his mouth to respond when her phone rang. It was Kimberly Miner.

“Do you mind if I get this?” Jessie asked.

He shook his head so she did.

“Is everything okay, Kimberly?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Kimberly replied. “Sorry for calling so late.”

“That’s all right,” Jessie said, unable to quite place the odd tone in the other woman’s voice. “What’s up?”

“I just...” she started to say before pausing for so long that Jessie thought the call might have dropped. “I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Jessie asked. All things considered, Kimberly Miner had come out of this whole thing pretty clean.

“For the way things went down between us when we were neighbors. You were trying to help me and I lashed out at you. I even gaslighted you when you told me about Morgan’s cheating. I shouldn’t have taken it out on you. And I should have done more for you when you miscarried.”

Jessie felt like she’d been punched in the gut. She hadn’t expected such directness.

“You helped a lot that night,” she managed to croak.

“I mean afterwards. I always felt bad about how we left things.”

“It’s okay,” Jessie assured her, desperately hoping to move on, “really.”

Neither of them spoke for a few seconds.

“Anyway,” Kimberly said, forcing a chipperness into her tone, “I also wanted to thank you.”

“Why?”

“You’ve inspired me,” she said. “Morgan doesn’t know this yet but I’m seeing a divorce lawyer this week. I put up with his infidelities for years. Then I had a few of my own to punish him. There are so many scars in our marriage, it’s not really salvageable. And I don’t want to salvage it.”

“Are you sure?” Jessie asked. “Wounds can heal. I have the scars to prove it.”

She didn’t feel comfortable being the inspiration for Kimberly’s life choices, especially when she was constantly second-guessing her own.

“Yeah,” Kimberly said confidently. “I’m going to kick him out. He likes the bachelor life so much? He can live in a bachelor’s apartment for a while. And I’m going back to school. I’m going to start next semester.”

“That’s great news,” Jessie said, hoping it was. “I’m sure you’ll do great.”

“Thanks. Listen, I’m going to let you go now. I’m sure you’re exhausted. I just needed to get that stuff off my chest, you know?”

“I do,” Jessie told her. “Good luck, Kimberly.”

After hanging up, she returned her attention to Ryan.

“So where were we?” she asked, pointedly not lingering on the prior conversation.

He seemed to sense that she wanted to move on and obliged.

“You were saying how I might have come in handy on this case.”

“Oh yeah,” she remembered, “Hernandez help.”

“It was actually kind of funny that you said that,” he murmured shyly.

“Is this the part where you share your news?” she asked, unable to hide her interest.

“This *is* the part,” he said, “though I’m a little nervous to tell you.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure you’ll think it’s a good idea,” he said. “Hell, I’m not a hundred percent sure that *I* think it’s a good idea.”

“Enough stalling—spill!”

“Okay, okay,” he said, holding up in his hands in surrender. “Captain Decker came by earlier this afternoon and made a proposal. He’s concerned that HSS is in danger of being eliminated because of staff and credibility losses. He wants me to consult for the unit as an investigator, kind of like you’ve been doing as a profiler.”

“He wants you out there pursuing cases?” Jessie asked incredulously, feeling her temperature rise at the idea of the captain putting Ryan at risk.

“No,” he said quickly. “He was very clear about that—no field work. He wants me to find cases that will generate positive buzz for the unit, involving big names, serial killers, that kind of thing. He wants me to aggressively seek them out rather than just wait for them to come to us. He wants me to review cases that might have breakthrough potential but were overlooked for whatever reason.”

Jessie chose her words carefully.

“It almost sounds like he wants you to generate these cases out of thin air. Are you sure you want to be put in that situation?”

“I don’t think that’s it,” Ryan insisted. “It’s more like he wants me on high alert, ready to look for any case with potential, vet it for worthiness, and snap it up if it meets the HSS criteria. And to answer your question, I *do* want to be put

in that situation. This feels like a way back in. And I could really use that right now.”

He looked at her with trepidation and Jessie realized that he was hoping she'd give him something he rarely seemed to need from anyone: approval. In that moment, it became clear just how desperate he was to get back the part of himself that had been lying dormant for months. He was a detective. He solved crimes. He caught murderers. That had been taken away from him. This was a chance to start to reclaim that part of his identity. Who was she to object to that?

“I think it's a great idea,” she told him. “It does seem like they're in dire straits over there and I can't think of anyone better equipped to get them back on track.”

He smiled with relief.

“Don't worry,” he said, his tone light again. “It'll only be a few hours a day to start and I'll make sure it doesn't interfere with my rehab. I know I still have a long road ahead.”

She smiled and gave him another kiss. Seeing how happy he was now revealed to her how much he'd been struggling before and how hard he must have been trying to hide it.

“We'll make the drive together,” she whispered.

*

Hannah turned off the police scanner app on her phone.

It was clear there wouldn't be any more information tonight. That was okay. She'd already heard enough to breathe easier.

The cops had followed up on an “anonymous” tip and raided the home of James Poston, a convicted sex offender. Using detailed directions provided by the tipster, they found a hidden compartment in a bedroom ottoman, which was filled with child pornography. One officer mentioned that as Poston was being taken into custody, he claimed that a young woman

had assaulted him during a home invasion. But under the circumstances, no one was taking his allegations seriously.

She'd also read online that Mindy Stokes was doing well and had been released from the hospital without injuries. Apparently the girl had fallen for a nineteen-year-old she'd met at the movies and been seeing him secretly for months. None of her friends even knew about him.

They'd decided to run away together to get married in Vegas. But his car broke down on the way. They didn't have the money to fix it so they'd been holed up at a friend's place in La Verne, where they were tracked down by a private detective named Katherine Gentry. The man was under arrest.

Hannah stood up to stretch and nearly screamed in pain. Her back was throbbing from the crowbar blow and the back of her head ached where it had slammed into Jimmy Poston's bookshelf. She could hear voices in the kitchen and decided that she would have to brave an unwanted encounter if she was going to get any pain relief.

When she left her room, she found Jessie and Ryan seated at the breakfast table, talking quietly. There was also kissing.

"Teenager coming through," she announced, hoping to short-circuit the PDA.

"Hey, how's it going?" Jessie asked, looking over at her with tired but happy eyes.

"Okay," Hannah said as she made her way to the medicine cabinet. "Solve the case?"

"We did," Jessie said. "The whole thing was pretty depressing so I won't bore you with the minutiae. How was shopping on Melrose?"

"I was mostly just looking around," Hannah said, trying to sound casual about her made-up outing. "I didn't find anything worth the money. The most exciting thing was almost getting paralyzed."

"Wait, what?" Jessie asked, her relaxed demeanor suddenly stiffening.

“I’m exaggerating,” Hannah said. “I was in this one store when a woman came in with her dog, who was a little rambunctious. I backed up to get out of his way and stumbled over a basket. When I fell back, I slammed into a metal shelf and banged my upper back and head pretty hard. It’s still hurting so I was going to get some ibuprofen.”

“Jeez,” Jessie said, standing up. “That sounds brutal. Do you mind if I take a look?”

“I guess,” Hannah said, popping a couple of pills, “But be gentle. It’s tender.”

She held still as Jessie pulled back the collar of her top.

“It’s really bruised,” she said. “It looks like the shelf took a swing at you. Maybe we should get it checked out.”

“Maybe,” Hannah said. “If I don’t feel better tomorrow, we could have someone look at it after school.”

“You said you hit your head too,” Ryan reminded her. “How is that?”

“I definitely have a bump,” Hannah said, touching the spot carefully. “But I don’t I have a concussion or anything. It’s not like I’ve been vomiting or dizzy.”

“The symptoms aren’t always that pronounced,” Jessie said. “If you still have a headache tomorrow, we should definitely see the doctor. For now I’ll get an icepack.”

As Jessie fished through the freezer for one, Hannah watched her silently. She knew that a normal person would feel bad for all the deception, for seeking sympathy for injuries resulting from her own reckless actions. But she didn’t feel bad. She wondered if simply knowing that she *should* was a sign of emotional progress.

For half a second, she considered telling her sister the truth. After all, nearly getting attacked by a child rapist was a serious thing. Deliberately putting herself in his path was a whole other level of bananas.

Maybe Jessie could help her find some way to understand why she felt the need to generate these intense moments of

feeling. Maybe being honest and vulnerable would bring them closer together.

Then again, it was far more likely to make her already hyper-vigilant sister go off the deep end. Learning that Hannah had been intentionally courting danger for an adrenaline rush might result in her being sent to a military academy or some home for troubled teens. It meant they might be separated. And that was unacceptable.

There was another option. Kat Gentry already knew some of what Hannah had done, including actually observing her confront a drug dealer just for kicks. And she'd reluctantly agreed to keep it quiet if Hannah promised not to do anything like it again. That meant she was responsible, part of the cover-up.

It also meant she was the one person Hannah could confide in without fear of consequence. If Kat balked at the demand for secrecy and decided to tell Jessie what was going on, she'd have to admit that she'd known about this kind of behavior for months and said nothing. It could put her entire friendship with Jessie at risk. Hannah could use Kat's vulnerability on the matter to share her secret and be sure it stayed secret. She could use Kat's good intentions against her.

It was the only way she felt safe reaching out for help. Sure, it was a crappy thing to do, especially to a good person. Some might even call it immoral. But Hannah had already crossed that line so often that it was just a blur to her now.

Jessie found the cold pack in the freezer, wrapped it in a towel, and delicately pressed it against her head. Without thinking about it, Hannah reached out and wrapped her arms around her big sister, giving her a hug that surprised them both.

Neither let go for a while. Hannah closed her eyes, clinging tight to the only family she had left. She knew in that moment that she'd do whatever it took to keep it. No one would get in the way of that. No one.

EPILOGUE

Ryan Hernandez's eyes were getting blurry.

It had been a while since he'd concentrated so hard on anything other than his physical recovery and he was out of practice.

He set the file aside and allowed himself a brief break. He stood up carefully and stretched, trying to loosen up his stiff back. Looking at the clock, he saw that he'd been in this small office at Central Station for three hours without moving. Right around now, Jessie would be concluding a lecture at UCLA and Hannah would be on her lunch period at school.

The workspace was actually a converted broom closet and had been Garland Moses's office before his death. This was where Captain Decker had set him up, on the second floor away from everyone else, so that he could avoid distractions and have a little privacy.

That was hard at first. The second he'd arrived at the station in the cop-chauffeured car that Decker had provided because he couldn't yet drive himself, everyone had swarmed him to say hi and wish him well. But eventually they all returned to work and he was able to start to dig into some case files. So far, he hadn't found much that shouted "Homicide Special Section."

There were a few weird cases involving celebrities, but no homicides, nothing that would enhance HSS's stature within the department. And there were a few intriguing open murder cases in other divisions, but they were all pretty far along. Taking over any of them would not only look like a blatant, desperate power grab, it might actually be counterproductive to solving them.

He sat back down, grabbed the next file, and skimmed the details. It was another unsolved murder, just two nights ago, of a young, single woman. This one had apparently been cut up,

but unfortunately, in Los Angeles that was hardly anything out of the ordinary.

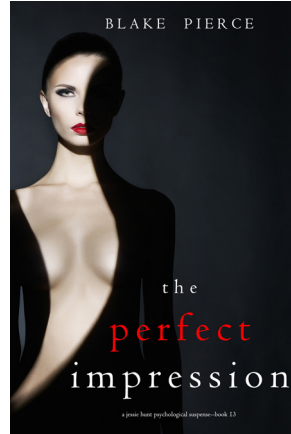
He was about to move on when he noticed a one-page addendum stapled to the coroner's report. It mentioned that after further review, the woman's skin had *not* been removed with a paring knife, as had been initially thought, but rather with an X-Acto knife.

That *was* unusual, even for L.A. He punched up the supplementary report in the department database and opened the photo file. It didn't take long to see that the coroner's report had seriously downplayed the depravity of the killing. The girl wasn't just cut up. It looked like whole sections of her skin had been removed while others were left untouched, almost as if the murderer was using her body to create some kind of design or pattern.

Ryan leaned in to study the images on the monitor more closely, trying to discern exactly what had been done to Jenavieve Holt and why. At some point he came to a conclusion. The carvings weren't just a design. They seemed intended as some kind of puzzle.

Now this was a case worth his time.

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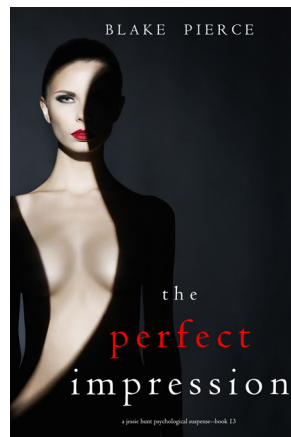
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