



the  
perfect  
wife

a jessie hunt psychological suspense--book I

BLAKE PIERCE

A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller

Блейк Пирс

**The Perfect Wife**

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

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## **Пирс Б.**

The Perfect Wife / Б. Пирс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», 2018 — (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller)

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Criminal profiler in training (and newlywed) Jessie Hunt, 29, discovers that dark secrets lurk in her new suburban town; when a body turns up dead, she finds herself caught in the crosshairs of her newfound friends, her husband's secrets, her serial killer caseload—and the secrets of her own dark past. In **THE PERFECT WIFE** (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller—Book One), Criminal profiler-in-training Jessie Hunt is sure she's finally put the darkness of her childhood behind her. She and her husband, Kyle, just moved from a cramped downtown Los Angeles apartment into a Westport Beach mansion. Kyle's promotion has them swimming in money. And Jessie is on the verge of getting her Master's degree in forensic psychology, the last step in her dream of becoming a criminal profiler. But soon after their arrival, Jessie begins to notice a series of strange developments. The neighbors—and their au pairs—all seem to be hiding secrets. The mysterious yacht club Kyle is desperate to join is rife with cheating spouses, and with troubling rules of its own. And the notorious serial killer being held at the psychiatric hospital where Jessie is completing her degree seems to know more about her life than is normal—or safe. As her world starts to unravel, Jessie begins to question everything around her—including her own sanity. Has she truly uncovered a disturbing conspiracy buried within a sunny, wealthy Southern California beach town? Does the mass murderer she's studying really somehow know the origin of her private nightmares? Or has her tortured past finally come back to claim her? A fast-paced psychological suspense thriller with unforgettable characters and heart-pounding suspense, **THE PERFECT WIFE** is book #1 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

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# **Blake Pierce**

## **The Perfect Wife. A Jessie Hunt**

### **Psychological Suspense Thriller—Book One**

**Blake Pierce**

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes thirteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising nine books (and counting); 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 two books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising two books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising two books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising two 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](http://www.blakepierceauthor.com) to learn more and stay in touch.

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## CHAPTER ONE

Jessie Hunt, exhausted and sweaty, dropped the last of the packing boxes on the dining room carpet. She could already feel her muscles starting to cramp up and knew she was going to be in serious pain tomorrow.

But as she looked over at Kyle, she couldn't help but smile. They were officially moved in. The wide grin on his face told her he was thinking the same thing. His shirt was drenched but she didn't care as he came over and wrapped her in a bear hug.

"We live here now," he whispered in her ear, before gently kissing her neck. "I think we're entitled to a celebratory drink, don't you?"

"Definitely," she agreed.

"Champagne? Beer?"

"Maybe a beer," Jessie suggested, "and a Gatorade chaser. I feel like my whole body might seize up at any second."

"I'll be right back," Kyle said and headed for the kitchen.

Jessie moved from the dining room to the den and plopped down on the couch, feeling her perspiration-soaked shirt press against the sheet covering the furniture. It was late August and even in the coastal Orange County community of Westport Beach, the weather was hot and sticky. The temperature was easily in the low nineties.

Of course, that was nothing compared to what it was like back in downtown Los Angeles, where they'd lived until this morning. Surrounded by the asphalt and concrete and shiny skyscrapers, Jessie would often walk out of their condo into the late summer heat to face temperatures above one hundred. In comparison, this felt like a respite.

She reminded herself that this was exactly the sort of perk that would justify moving away from the familiar life she'd grown to love in the city. She'd be trading in the excitement of the busy LA streets for cool ocean breezes. Instead of hip, new restaurants, they'd visit seaside cafes. Instead of taking the metro or an Uber to a gallery opening, they'd check out a yacht race in the harbor. And of course, there was all the extra money. It would take some getting used to. But she'd promised her husband she would embrace their new life and she intended to keep her word.

Kyle walked into the room, holding beers and Gatorades. He had peeled off his wet shirt. Jessie pretended to be oblivious to her husband's impressive abs and chest. How he managed to maintain that physique while working those crazy hours at the firm was beyond her. But she wasn't complaining.

He came over, handed her the drinks, and sat down beside her.

"Did you know there was a wine fridge in the pantry?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, laughing incredulously. "Didn't you notice that when we looked at the house the last two times?"

"I just assumed it was another cabinet so I never actually opened it until just now. Pretty cool, huh?"

"Yes, pretty cool, pretty boy," she agreed, marveling at how his short blond locks stayed perfectly coiffed, no matter how disheveled the rest of him got.

"You're the pretty one," he said, brushing Jessie's shoulder-length light brown hair out of her green eyes and staring at her with his own penetrating blue ones. "It's a good thing I got you out of LA. I was tired of all those fedora-wearing hipsters hitting on you."

"The fedoras weren't a great call, I have to say. I could barely see any of their faces to decide if they were my type."

"That's because you're an Amazon woman," he said, pretending not to get jealous at her gentle teasing. "Any guy under six feet tall has to crane his neck to look up at a tall drink of water like you."

“Not you, though,” Jessie murmured softly, suddenly forgetting her aches and pains as she pulled him close toward her. “I’m always looking up at you, hot stuff.”

Her lips were just brushing against his when the doorbell rang.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she groaned.

“Why don’t you answer it?” Kyle suggested. “I’ll find a fresh shirt to throw on.”

Jessie walked to the front door, beer in hand. It was her little rebellion against being interrupted mid-seduction. When she opened the door, she was greeted by a perky redhead who looked to be about her age.

She was cute, with a little button nose, gleaming white teeth, and a sundress that was just tight enough to prove she never missed a Pilates class. In her hands was a tray of what looked to be homemade brownies. Jessie couldn’t help but notice the massive wedding ring on her finger. It gleamed in the late afternoon sun.

Almost without thinking, Jessie found herself profiling the woman: early thirties; got married young; two, maybe three children; stay-at-home-mom but had lots of help; nosy but not in a malicious way.

“Hi,” the woman said in a chipper voice. “I’m Kimberly Miner from across the street. I just wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood. I hope I’m not disturbing you.”

“Hi, Kimberly,” Jessie replied in her friendliest, new neighbor voice. “I’m Jessie Hunt. We actually just finished moving our last box in a couple of minutes ago so this is great timing. And this is so sweet of you, literally! Brownies?”

“Yep,” Kimberly said, handing over the tray. Jessie saw her pointedly pretend not to eye the beer in her hand. “They’re kind of my specialty.”

“Well, come on in and have one,” Jessie offered, even though it was the last thing she wanted right now. “I’m sorry the place is such a mess, as are Kyle and I. We’ve been sweating all day. He’s actually looking for a new shirt right now. Can I offer you something to drink? Water? Gatorade. A beer?”

“No thanks. I don’t want to impose. You probably don’t even know which box has your glasses yet. I remember the move-in process. It took us months. Where are you coming from?”

“Oh, we just lived up in DTLA,” Jessie said and seeing the confused look on Kimberly’s face, added, “Downtown Los Angeles. We had a condo in the South Park district.”

“Oh wow, city folk,” Kimberly said, giggling a little at her own joke. “What brought you to Orange County and our little community?”

“Kyle works for a wealth management firm,” Jessie explained. “They opened a satellite office down here earlier in the year and it recently expanded. It’s a big thing for them because PFG is a pretty conservative operation. Anyway, they asked him if he’d help run it. We figured it was a good time to make a change since we’re thinking about starting a family.”

“Oh, with the size of this house, I assumed you already had kids,” Kimberly said.

“Nope—just being optimistic,” Jessie answered, trying to hide the sudden embarrassment she was surprised she felt. “Do you have any children?”

“Two. Our daughter is four and our son is two. I’m actually going over to daycare to pick them up in a few.”

Kyle arrived and wrapped one arm around Jessie’s waist as he extended the other to shake Kimberly’s.

“Hello,” he said warmly.

“Hi, welcome,” she replied. “My goodness, between the two of you, your future children are going to be giants. I feel like a munchkin next to you both.”

There was a brief awkward silence as both Jessie and Kyle wondered how to respond.

“Thank you?” he finally said.

“I’m sorry. That was rude of me. I’m Kimberly, your neighbor from that house,” she said, pointing across the street.

“Nice to meet you, Kimberly. I’m Kyle Voss, Jessie’s husband.”

“Voss? I thought it was Hunt.”

“He’s Voss,” Jessie explained. “I’m Hunt, at least for now. I’ve been procrastinating on doing the paperwork to change it.”

“I see,” Kimberly said. “How long have you been married?”

“Almost two years,” Jessie said sheepishly. “I have *real* problems with procrastination. That might explain why I’m still in school.”

“Oh,” Kimberly said, clearly relieved to move away from the delicate last name topic. “What are you studying?”

“Forensic psychology.”

“Wow—that sounds exciting. How long before you’re officially a psychologist?”

“Well, I got a little delayed,” Jessie said, sharing the obligatory story from every cocktail party they’d attended for the last two years. “I started out in child psychology when we were undergrads at USC—that’s where we met. I was even doing an internship for my master’s when I realized I couldn’t handle it. Dealing with children’s emotional problems was too much for me. So I switched.”

She pointedly neglected to include some of the other details of why she’d dropped out of the internship. Hardly anyone knew about them and she certainly wasn’t going to share them with a neighbor she’d just met.

“So you find dealing with the psychology of criminals less disturbing than children?” Kimberly asked, dumbfounded.

“Weird, huh?” Jessie conceded.

“You’d be amazed,” Kyle piped in. “She has this knack for getting in the heads of bad guys. She’s going to be a great profiler eventually. Any potential Hannibal Lecters out there better look out.”

“Really,” Kimberly said, sounding properly impressed. “Have you had to deal with serial killers and stuff?”

“Not yet,” Jessie admitted. “Most of my training has been academic. And with the move, I had to change schools. So I’m going to do my practicum at UC-Irvine starting this semester. This is my last one so I’ll graduate in December.”

“Practicum?” Kimberly asked.

“It’s a little like an internship, only less involved. I’ll be assigned to a prison or a psychiatric hospital, where I’ll observe and interact with inmates and patients. It’s what I’ve been waiting for.”

“The chance to stare the evildoers in the eye and see into their souls,” Kyle added.

“That might be overstating it just a bit,” Jessie said, giving him a playful punch in the shoulder. “But eventually, yes.”

“That is very exciting,” Kimberly said, sounding genuinely intrigued. “I’m sure you’ll have some great stories to tell. Speaking of, you said you two met at school?”

“Freshman year dorm,” Kyle said.

“Oh,” Kimberly pressed. “Bonded while doing laundry, that sort of thing?”

Kyle glanced over at Jessie and before he even said a word, she knew he was going to dive into their go-to cocktail party story.

“Here’s the abridged version,” he began. “We were friends but started dating midway through the first semester after she got stood up by some jerk. He got kicked out of school, not for bailing on the date I assume. Still, she dodged a bullet in my opinion. We broke up junior year, got back together as seniors. We dated for a year after that before moving in together. We did that for a year before getting engaged. Then we tied the knot ten months after that. It’ll be two years of wedded bliss in October.”

“So you’re college sweethearts. That’s so romantic.”

“Yeah, it sounds that way,” Kyle said. “But it took a while to win her over. And the whole time I was beating the competition off with a stick. As you can imagine, pretty much every guy who saw her was immediately smitten with Ms. Jessica Hunt. And that’s just looking at her. Once you get to know her, you’re even more besotted.”

“Kyle,” Jessie said, her face turning red. “You’re embarrassing me. Save some of it for October.”

“You know,” Kimberly said with a smile, “I just remembered I need to get my kids now. And I suddenly feel like I’m interrupting a happy couple’s plan to christen their new house. So I’m going to go. But I promise to introduce you around. We have a really friendly neighborhood. Everyone knows each other. We have weekly street barbecues. Kids have sleepovers all the time. Everybody belongs to the local yacht club, even if they don’t have a boat. Once you’re settled in, you’re going to find this is a great place to live.”

“Thanks, Kimberly,” Kyle said, walking her to the door. “We look forward to meeting everyone. And thanks so much for the brownies.”

After she left, he closed the door and made a big display of locking it.

“She seemed nice,” he said. “Hopefully everyone’s like that.”

“Yeah, I liked her,” Jessie agreed. “She was a little nosy, but I guess that’s just how people are down here. I suppose I should get used to not having any anonymity anymore.”

“It is going to be an adjustment,” Kyle agreed. “But I think that long term, we’ll prefer knowing our neighbors’ names and being able to leave our doors unlocked.”

“I noticed you locked it just now though,” Jessie pointed out.

“That’s because I was thinking about what Kimberly said about christening the new house,” he said as he approached her, pulling off his second shirt in ten minutes. “And I don’t like any interruptions when I’m christening.”

\*

Jessie lay in bed later that night, looking up at the ceiling, a smile on her face.

“At this pace, we’ll have those extra bedrooms filled up in no time,” Kyle said, seemingly reading her thoughts.

“I doubt we’ll be able to keep up that pace once you start up at the office and my new semester begins.”

“I’m game to try if you are,” he said, sighing deeply. She could feel his whole body relax beside her.

“Aren’t you nervous at all?” she asked.

“About what?”

“All of this—bigger salary, new town, new house, new lifestyle, new people, new everything.”

“It’s not all new,” he reminded her. “You already know Teddy and Melanie.”

“I’ve met Teddy three times and Melanie once. I barely know him. And I can only vaguely remember her. Just because your best friend from high school lives a few blocks over doesn’t mean I’m suddenly at ease with our new life.”

She knew she was picking a fight but she couldn’t seem to stop herself. Kyle didn’t take the bait. Instead, he rolled over onto his side and ran a finger lightly along her right shoulder, next to the long, pinkish moon-shaped scar that ran five inches from her upper arm to the base of her neck.

“I know you’re apprehensive,” he said tenderly. “And you have every reason to be. Everything is new. And I know that can be scary. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate the sacrifice you’re making.”

“I know it’ll be good in the end,” she said, softening. “But it’s just a lot to handle all at once.”

“That’s why seeing Teddy and Mel tomorrow will help. We’ll reestablish that connection and then we’ll have folks in the neighborhood to reach out to as we find our bearings. Even knowing two people will make the transition easier.”

He yawned deeply and Jessie could tell he was about to crash. That big yawn usually meant he'd be fast asleep in sixty seconds or less.

"I know you're right," she said, determined to end the night on a good note. "I'm sure it will be great."

"It will," Kyle agreed lazily. "I love you."

"I love you too," Jessie said, unsure if he'd heard her before he drifted off.

She listened to his deep breaths and tried to use them to help her fall asleep. The silence was unsettling. She was used to the comforting sounds of downtown as she slipped into sleep.

She missed the honks from the cars below, the shouts of finance guys drunkenly leaving bars echoing among the high-rises, the beeping sound of trucks backing up. They'd served as her white noise for years. Now all she had to replace them was the soft whir of the air filter in the corner of the bedroom.

Every now and then she thought she heard a distant creaking sound. The house was more than thirty years old so some occasional settling was to be expected. She tried taking a series of deep relaxing breaths, both to drown out other sounds and to relax herself. But one thought kept nagging at her.

*Are you really sure it will be great here?*

She spent the next hour turning over her doubt and pushing it guiltily away before she finally gave in to her fatigue and settled into a fitful slumber.

## CHAPTER TWO

Despite the endless shouting, Jessie tried to fight off the headache nibbling at the edges of her skull. Daughton, the sweet-natured but shockingly loud three-year-old son of Edward and Melanie Carlisle, had spent the last twenty minutes playing a game called Explosion which largely consisted of him yelling “boom!”

Neither Melanie (“call me Mel”) nor Edward (“Teddy” to his friends) seemed at all bothered by the intermittent screams so Jessie and Kyle acted like it was normal too. They were sitting in the Carlisle living room, catching up before a planned walk down to the harbor for brunch. The Carlises lived only three blocks away from there.

Kyle and Teddy had been chatting outside for the last half hour while Jessie reacquainted herself with Mel in the kitchen. She only vaguely remembered her from their one previous meeting but after only a few minutes, they settled into a comfortable vibe.

“I’d ask Teddy to grill but I don’t want you guys to get sick your first week down here,” Mel said snarkily. “We’re much safer going to the waterfront to eat.”

“Not the best cook ever?” Jessie asked with a little grin.

“Let’s just put it this way. If he ever offers to cook, pretend you have an emergency to attend to. Because if you eat anything he’s made, you really will have an emergency on your hands.”

“What’s that, hon?” Teddy asked as he and Kyle came inside. He was a paunchy, doughy-looking guy with receding blond hair and pale skin that looked like it would burn after five minutes in the sun. Jessie also sensed that his personality was much the same—doughy and malleable. Some deep instinct she couldn’t describe but had learned to trust over the years told her that Teddy Carlisle was a weak man.

“Nothing, sweetie,” she said casually as she winked at Jessie. “Just giving Jessie here some essential Westport Beach survival info.”

“Right,” he said. “Make sure to warn her about the traffic over by Jamboree Road and the Pacific Coast Highway. It can be a bear.”

“That was next on my list,” Mel said innocently as she got up from the kitchen barstool.

As she went into the living room to collect Daughton’s toys from the floor, Jessie couldn’t help but notice that in her tennis skirt and polo top, her petite frame was all sinewy muscle. Her calves bulged and her wiry biceps flexed impressively as she swept up about a dozen Matchbox cars in one swift motion.

Everything about her, including her short black hair, her boundless energy, and her take-no-prisoners bark of a voice projected tough, no-nonsense New York chick, which was exactly what she’d been before moving west.

Jessie liked her immediately, though she couldn’t understand what drew her to a schlub like Teddy. It ate at her slightly. Jessie prided herself on reading people. And this hole in her informal profile of Mel was mildly unsettling.

“We ready to go?” Teddy asked. He too was dressed smartly in a loose button-up shirt and white slacks.

“Just collect your son and we’ll be all set,” Mel said sharply.

Teddy, apparently used to her tone, went off to find the “Explosion” machine without a word. A few seconds later, they heard screeching as he came back holding Daughton, who was struggling mightily, upside down by his ankles.

“Daddy, stop!” the boy screamed.

“Put him down, Edward,” Mel hissed.

“He talked back,” Teddy said as he lowered his son to the floor. “I just needed to remind him that sort of thing isn’t okay.”

“But what if he slipped free and cracked his head?” Mel demanded.

“Then he’d have learned a valuable lesson,” Teddy replied casually, apparently in no way troubled by the prospect.

Kyle chuckled appreciatively and only stopped when Jessie shot daggers at him with her eyes. He tried to turn the laugh into a cough but it was too late and he shrugged at her apologetically.

As they headed off to the harbor, down the well-maintained trail that ran parallel to the main road, Jessie looked at how she and Kyle were dressed compared to their counterparts. Even Daughton, who had his father’s pale skin but his mother’s dark hair, had on ironed shorts and a collared shirt. Kyle was in board shorts and a T-shirt and Jessie had thrown on a breezy peasant dress at the last minute.

“Are you sure we’re dressed properly to have brunch at your club?” she asked Mel apprehensively.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. You’re our guests. The dress code policies don’t apply to you. Only members get lashes for inappropriate attire. And since Daughton’s little, he’d only get a grazing from a hot poker.” Mel must have seen the look in Jessie’s eyes because she immediately put her hand on her wrist and added, “I’m kidding.”

Jessie smiled tightly at her inability to loosen up. Just then, Daughton ran past her with an impressive “boom” that made her jump.

“He’s got a lot of energy,” she said, trying to sound admiring. “I’d like to bottle it.”

“Yeah,” Mel agreed. “He’s a piece of work. But I love him. It’s weird how stuff that annoys other people is charming when it’s your kid. You’ll see what I mean when it happens to you. Assuming that’s what you want, I mean.”

“It is,” Jessie said. “We’ve talked about it for a while. There have just been some...hiccups along the way. But we’re hoping the change of scenery will help.”

“Well, I should warn you. The topic is likely to come up often among the women you’ll be meeting today. They love to talk about kids and everything kid-related. You’ll probably get asked about your plans. But don’t sweat it. That’s kind of the default, go-to conversation around here.”

“Thanks for heads-up,” Jessie said as they reached the end of the path.

She stopped for a moment to take in the view. They were at the edge of a cliff overlooking Balboa Island and Promontory Bay. Beyond that was the Balboa Peninsula, the last chunk of land before the Pacific Ocean. The deep blue water extended as far as she could see, eventually merging with the lighter cerulean sky, dotted with a few puffy white clouds. It was breathtaking.

Closer in, she saw the busy marina, with boats moving in and out in some unspoken system that was far more organized and beautiful than the freeway. People, small as ants from up here, were wandering around the pier complex and its many shops and restaurants. It looked like there might be a farmer’s market taking place.

The trail had given way to a huge rock staircase that led down to the complex. Despite the wooden railings on either side, it was mildly daunting.

“The trail picks up again about fifty yards ahead and winds down to the harbor,” Mel said, sensing Jessie’s reticence. “We could go that way instead of the steps but it takes another twenty minutes and the view isn’t as nice.”

“No, this is fine,” Jessie assured her. “I just haven’t been keeping up with my Stairmaster routine and suddenly I’m regretting it.”

“Your legs only ouch at first,” Daughton said as he leapt in front of her and took the lead.

“Nothing like being shamed into action by a toddler,” Jessie said, trying to chuckle.

They started down the long flight of steps, Daughton first, followed by Mel, Jessie, and Kyle, with Teddy bringing up the rear. After a minute Daughton had gotten well ahead of them and Mel rushed down to catch up to him. Jessie could hear the guys talking behind her but couldn’t really catch what they were saying. And with the tricky steps, she was hesitant to turn around to find out.

About halfway down, she saw a college-age girl walking up the stairs, wearing only a bikini and flip-flops, with a beach bag flung over her shoulder. Her hair was still wet from the water and beads of sweat were trickling down her exposed, tan skin. Her curves were impressive and the swimsuit barely contained them. She looked like she might burst out at various places any second. Jessie tried not to stare as they passed and wondered if Kyle was doing the same.

“Damn fine ass on that one,” she heard Teddy say a few seconds later.

Jessie stiffened involuntarily, not just at the crudeness but because the girl would have almost certainly been close enough to hear it. She was tempted to turn around and give him a scowl when she heard Kyle’s voice.

“Right?” he added, snickering like a schoolboy.

She stopped in her tracks. As Kyle reached her, she grabbed his forearm. Teddy stopped too, a surprised look on his face.

“Go ahead, Teddy,” she said, putting a plastic smile on her face. “I just need my man for a sec.”

Teddy gave Kyle a knowing expression before moving on without comment. When she was sure he was out of earshot, she turned to her husband.

“I know he’s your friend from high school,” she whispered. “But do you think you could not act like you’re still there?”

“What?” he asked defensively.

“That girl probably heard Teddy and his leering tone. Then you go egging him on? Not cool.”

“It’s not that big a deal, Jess,” he insisted. “He was just making a little crack. Maybe she was flattered.”

“And maybe she was creeped out. Either way, I’d rather my husband not reinforce the ‘woman as sex object’ meme. Is that a reasonable request?”

“Jeez. Is this how you’re going to react every time a girl in a bathing suit walks by?”

“I don’t know, Kyle. Is that how *you’re* going to react?”

“You guys coming?” Teddy shouted up at them. The Carlises were a good fifty steps farther down the stairs.

“Coming,” Kyle yelled back before lowering his voice. “That is, if you’re still cool with it.”

He moved on before she could reply, taking the steps two at a time. Jessie forced herself to take a long, slow breath before following him, hoping she could exhale her frustration along with the air in her lungs.

*We’re not even fully moved in and he’s starting to turn into the kind of asshole I’ve tried to avoid my whole life.*

Jessie tried to remind herself that one lame comment while under the influence of a high school friend didn’t mean her husband was suddenly becoming a Philistine. But she couldn’t shake the uncomfortable feeling that this was only the beginning.

## CHAPTER THREE

Five minutes later, with Jessie still silently seething, they walked into the lobby of the Club Deseo, getting some much-needed air-conditioned relief from the already warm day. Jessie looked around, taking the place in. She couldn't help but think that the name, which according to Teddy meant "Club of Wishes," was a little grandiose, considering what was in front of her.

She'd almost missed the club's entrance, a large, unmarked, weathered oak door attached to a modest-looking structure on the quieter edge of the harbor. The lobby itself was nondescript, with a simple hostess stand currently manned by a gorgeous, industrious-looking brunette in her early twenties.

Teddy leaned over and spoke to her quietly. She nodded and indicated for the group to pass through a small hallway. It was only when another, equally beautiful young blonde woman asked her to put her purse in a basket that Jessie realized the hall also doubled as a classy metal detector.

Once through the hallway, the woman returned her bag and indicated that she should follow the others through a second wood-paneled door that seemed to blend into the wall beside it. If she'd been alone, she might have missed the door completely.

After they stepped through that second door, all the modesty of the building's lobby quickly faded away. The cavernous circular room she was staring at had two levels. The top, where she was, had tables encircling and looking down on the lower level, which was accessed by a wide staircase.

The lower level had a small central dance floor surrounded by multiple tables. The entire place looked to have been designed using repurposed wood from old sailing vessels. Planks right beside each other, which comprised the walls, had different grades and colors. The hodgepodge shouldn't have worked but somehow did, giving the space a nautical vibe that felt reverential, not shticky.

At the far end of the room was the most impressive feature. The entire ocean-facing side of the club was comprised of a massive glass window, half of which was above water, half below. Depending on where one sat, the view could be of the horizon or schools of fish swimming below the surface. It was incredible.

They were led to a large table on the lower level, where a group of about fifteen people awaited them. Teddy and Mel introduced them around but Jessie didn't even try to remember the names. She learned that there were four couples, with about seven children split among them.

Instead, she smiled and nodded politely as each of them pummeled her with more information than she could process.

"I'm in social media marketing," someone named either Roger or Richard told her. He fidgeted constantly and picked his nose when he thought no one was looking.

"We're choosing wall rugs right now," said the woman next to him, a brunette with blonde streaks in her hair who may or may not have been his wife but who definitely had eyes for the tan guy across the table.

It went on like that. Mel introduced someone. Jessie made no serious attempt to remember their name but instead tried to glean something about their true nature based on their looks, body language, and speaking style. It was a kind of game, one she employed often in uncomfortable situations.

After the introductions, two more pretty young girls swept in and collected all the kids, including Daughton, to take them to Pirate's Cove, which one of the wives told her was the name of the youth fun zone. Jessie assumed it must have been pretty great because every child left without even a hint of separation anxiety.

Once they were gone, the meal proceeded much as Mel had warned her. Two women who were either twins or looked so similar that they might as well have been, told a story about a religious summer camp that was primarily about the terrible singing voice of the praise leader.

“She sounded like she was about to give birth,” one of them said as the other cackled appreciatively. To the extent that she paid any attention, Jessie got lost as they interrupted and spoke over each interminably.

A guy with a shock of long curly hair and a bolo tie he was way too enamored with recounted the particulars of a hockey game he’d attended last spring. But there was nothing memorable about it. The entire five-minute story was comprised of who scored goals when. Jessie kept waiting for a twist, like when an octopus was thrown on the ice or a fan jumped the wall. But there was no twist.

“Anyway, it was an awesome game,” he finally concluded, which she knew was her cue to smile appreciatively.

“Best. Story. Ever,” Mel said dryly under her breath, giving Jessie her only happy moment so far and something close to a second wind.

Much of the conversation was consumed with discussion of various upcoming club events, including the Halloween Bash, the Bringing the Boats in Party (whatever that was) and the Holiday Ball.

“What’s the Bringing in...” she started to ask before being cut off by the woman two seats down shrieking when a waiter accidentally knocked a glass of water over, getting a few drops on her.

“Bitch,” she muttered way too loud after the server had left. Soon thereafter, all the men got up, kissed their wives, and said goodbye. Kyle gave Jessie a perplexed look but followed suit.

“I guess I’ll see you later?” he asked more than said.

She nodded politely, though she was equally confused. It felt like they were in that scene from *Titanic*, when all the menfolk left after dinner to discuss business and politics over brandy in the smoking room.

Jessie watched as the guys wandered among the tables until they reached an ornate wooden door in the corner of the room with a muscular, humorless man standing in front of it. He looked like a bouncer at a nightclub, only he wore a tuxedo. As the guys from their table approached, he stepped aside to let them pass. He seemed to give Kyle a skeptical glance until Teddy murmured something to him. The bouncer nodded and smiled at Kyle.

The rest of the brunch went by in a whirlwind. As Mel had promised, the conversation centered around children and children-to-be, as at least two of the women in the group were clearly pregnant.

“I’m just gearing up to bitch-slap the next barista who gives me a dirty look when I’m breastfeeding,” one named either Katlyn or Kaitlyn said. “I was way too accommodating after Warner was born.”

“Threaten to sue,” Brunette with Blonde Streaks said. “I did that and got a hundred-dollar gift certificate as an apology. The best part was that no one had done anything wrong. I just complained about an ‘environment of discomfort.’”

Jessie was the only non-mother at the table but tried to join in the discussion, asking polite questions about the local elementary school (“a dump”) versus the private one they all seemed to send their kids to.

As Jessie listened to the disagreements about the top daycare and preschool options and the general consensus about the best supermarket, she felt her mind wander. She pinched herself under the table a few times as opinions were voiced on good churches, the best local gym, and where to find a great dress for the Holiday Ball.

But eventually, she gave up trying to keep track of who was saying what, or even offering bland affirmations, and settled into the role of passive observer, as if she were watching the social behavior of some unusual species in the wild.

*Is this the life I’ve committed to? Lunches with ladies that focus on which gym has the best spinning class? Is this the world Kyle has been jonesing to become a part of? If so, just kill me now.*

At some point, she realized Mel was tapping her on the shoulder to let her know brunch was over and that she needed to collect Daughton. Apparently Teddy and Kyle would be meeting them in the lobby.

Jessie nodded, said gracious goodbyes to the women whose names she couldn't remember, and blankly followed Mel to Pirate's Cove. She felt disoriented and exhausted and wanted nothing more than to go home, take a bath, have a glass of wine, and go to sleep. She glanced at her watch and was stunned to discover that it wasn't even 1 p.m.

\*

She didn't get to decompress until hours later. After the walk back to the Carlisle house and the obligatory hangout there for a while, they finally headed back home. But not before a pit stop to Costco for essentials. Jessie imagined the disapproving faces of her brunch companions.

Later that night as she washed her face while Kyle brushed his teeth, they had recovered enough to debrief the day a bit.

"What happened in the secret room you went off to?" she asked. "Did they make you strip to your undies and give you ten lashes?"

"I was actually a little worried about what was behind that door," Kyle admitted as they moved into the bedroom. "But it turned out to be essentially a really well-appointed sports bar. They had games on the TVs, a waiter walking around taking drink orders, and a few guys changing into or out of golf attire."

"So no smoking room with brandy?" she asked, wondering if he'd get the reference.

"Not that I saw, although I did notice Leonardo DiCaprio wandering aimlessly through the dressing room."

"Nice job, husband," Jessie said appreciatively as she got into bed. "You've still got it."

"Thank you, wife," he replied, sliding under the covers next to her. "Actually, I heard there was a cigar room in there somewhere but I didn't go looking for it. I think it's hidden away in some corner that's exempt from the club's 'no smoking' rules. But I bet I could have gotten a brandy if I'd asked."

"Meet anyone interesting?" she asked skeptically as she turned off the bedroom light.

"Surprisingly, yes," he said. "They were all pretty cool. And since two of them were looking for potential investments, that made them interesting to me. I think that club could be a real resource for business leads. You?"

"Everyone was very nice," Jessie said hesitantly, hoping the darkness of the room hid her furrowed brow. "Very friendly with all kinds of offers of help with anything I need."

"Why do I hear a 'but' in there?"

"No. It's just that not once in the time I was with them alone did one of those women talk about anything other than kids, school, or family. No mention of their jobs or current events. It just felt very provincial."

"Maybe they just wanted to avoid controversial topics at a brunch with someone new?" Kyle suggested.

"Jobs are controversial these days?"

"I don't know, Jessie. Are you sure you're not reading too much into an innocent gathering?"

"I'm not suggesting they're Stepford Wives or anything," she insisted. "But other than Mel, they were relentlessly narcissistic. I'm not sure that any of them ever give more than a passing thought to the world outside their windows. I'm just saying that after a while, it started to feel a little... claustrophobic."

Kyle sat up in bed.

"That phrasing sounds familiar," he said, concern in his voice. "Don't get pissed at me. But the last time you talked about feeling claustrophobic was when—"

“I remember the last time,” she interrupted, annoyed. “This isn’t the same.”

“Okay,” he replied delicately. “But you’ll understand if I ask if you’re comfortable with your meds these days. Is the dosage still working? Do you think maybe you should schedule an appointment with Dr. Lemmon?”

“I’m fine, Kyle,” she said, getting out of bed. “Not everything is about that. Can’t I express some reservations without you jumping to conclusions?”

“Of course,” he said. “I’m sorry. Please come back to bed.”

“I mean, seriously. You weren’t there. While you were off chilling with the boys, I had a plastic smile on my face while these women talked about shaking down coffee shops. That’s not a medication issue. It’s a ‘these chicks are awful’ issue.”

“I’m sorry, Jess,” he repeated. “I shouldn’t have assumed it was the meds.”

Jessie looked at him, torn between wanting to forgive him and wanting to rip him a little more. She decided not to do either.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” she said. “I just need to decompress. In case you’re asleep when I get back, I’ll say goodnight now.”

“Okay,” he said reluctantly. “Goodnight. I love you.”

“Goodnight,” she said, giving him a kiss despite her lack of enthusiasm at that moment. “I love you too.”

She left the bedroom and wandered the house, waiting for her frustration to dissipate as she moved from room to room. She tried to put his dismissiveness out of her head but it kept sneaking back in, riling her up despite her best efforts.

She was just calming down enough to head back to bed when she heard the same distant creaking noise from the other night. Only tonight it wasn’t so distant. She followed the sound until she found what she thought was the source—the attic.

She had come to a stop in the upstairs hallway right below the attic access door. After a moment’s hesitation, she grabbed the string to the door and yanked it down. The creaking definitely sounded more pronounced.

She clambered up the access ladder as quietly as she could, trying not to think about how this sort of decision always ended badly in horror movies. When she got up the stairs, she pulled out her phone and used the flashlight feature to search the space. But apart from a few aged, empty cardboard boxes, the space was empty. And the creaking had stopped.

Jessie carefully climbed back down, replaced the ladder, and, too amped to sleep, resumed her restless wandering. Eventually, she found herself in the bedroom they anticipated using for the baby, when and if one ever joined them.

It was empty now but Jessie could picture where the crib would go. She imagined it against the far wall, with a mobile dangling above it. She rested her back against the wall and slid down so that she was sitting with her knees in front of her face. She wrapped her arms around them and hugged tight, trying to reassure herself that life in this new strange place would be better than it seemed so far.

*Am I reading this all wrong?*

She couldn’t help but wonder if maybe her meds did need to be tweaked. She wasn’t sure if she was being too hard on Kyle or if she was judging the Club Deseo women too harshly. Was the fact that Kyle was adjusting so easily to this place and she wasn’t a reflection of his adaptability, her brittleness, or both? He already seemed at home, as if he’d lived here for years. She wondered if she’d ever reach that point.

She wasn’t sure if she was just nervous because her last semester of classes started up tomorrow and she’d have to dive back into the world of studying rapists, child predators, and murderers. And she wasn’t sure if that creak she kept hearing was real or in her head. At this moment, she wasn’t sure of much of anything. And it scared her.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Jessie was short of breath and her heart was palpitating. She was late for class. This was her first time on the campus of the University of California at Irvine and finding her classroom had been daunting. After running the last quarter mile across campus in the sweltering mid-morning heat, she barreled through the door. Her forehead was beading with sweat and her top felt slightly damp.

Professor Warren Hosta, a tall, thin, fifty-something man with narrow, suspicious eyes and a lone, sad tuft of grayish-black hair on top of his head, had clearly been mid-sentence when she burst in at 10:04 a.m. She'd heard rumors about his impatience and generally churlish demeanor and he didn't disappoint. He stopped and waited for her to find her seat, staring at her the whole time.

"May I resume?" he asked sarcastically.

*Great start, Jessie. Way to make a first impression.*

"Sorry, Professor," she said. "The campus is new to me. I got a little turned around."

"I hope your skills at deduction are stronger than your sense of direction," he replied superciliously before returning to his lecture. "As I was saying, for most of you, this will be your final course before securing your master's degree in Forensic Psychology. It will not be a walk in the park."

Jessie unzipped her backpack as quietly as possible to pull out a pen and notebook but the sound of the zipper passing along every tooth seemed to resonate in the room. The professor glanced at her out of the corner of his eye but didn't stop speaking.

"I will pass out the syllabus momentarily," he said. "But in general, this is what is expected of you. In addition to the standard course work and associated exams, those of you who have yet to complete one will submit and defend your thesis. In addition, everyone—completed thesis or not—will have a practicum. Some of you will be assigned to a correctional facility, either the California Institute for Men in Chino or the California Institute for Women in Corona, both of which house a number of violent offenders. Others will visit the high-risk unit at DSH-Metropolitan, which is a state hospital in Norwalk. They treat patients commonly referred to as 'criminally insane,' although local community concerns prevent them from accepting patients with a history of murder, sex crimes, or escape."

An unspoken current of electricity passed through the room as the students all glanced around at each other. This was what they'd been waiting for. The rest of the lecture was fairly straightforward, with a description of their course work and details on writing their theses.

Luckily, Jessie had completed and defended hers while at USC, so she didn't pay much attention to that discussion. Instead, her mind returned to the odd brunch at the yacht club and how, despite everyone's warmth and generosity, she'd felt unsettled by it.

It was only when talk returned to the practicums that she really focused back in. Students were asking logistical and academic questions. Jessie had one of her own but decided to wait until after class. She didn't want to share it with the group.

Most of her classmates clearly wanted to work at one of the prisons. The mention of a community ban on violent offenders at the Norwalk hospital seemed to limit its popularity.

Eventually Professor Hosta signaled the end of class and folks started to file out of the room. Jessie took her time returning her notebook to her backpack while a few students asked Hosta questions. It was only when they were all gone and the professor himself was starting to walk out that she approached him.

"Sorry again for the late arrival, Professor Hosta," she said, trying not to sound too obsequious. Over the course of just one class, she'd gotten the strong sense that Hosta despised spineless groveling. He seemed to prefer inquisitiveness, even if it bordered on rudeness, to deference.

"You don't sound very apologetic, Ms...." he noted with a raised eyebrow.

“Hunt, Jessie Hunt. And I’m not really,” she admitted, deciding in that moment that she’d have more success with this guy if she was straightforward. “I just figured I needed to be polite in order get an answer to my real question.”

“Which is...?” he asked, his eyebrows raised in intrigued surprise.

She had his attention.

“I noticed you said that DSH-Metro doesn’t accept patients with a history of violence.”

“That’s correct,” he said. “It’s their policy. I was basically quoting from their website.”

“But Professor, we both know that’s not entirely accurate. The Norwalk hospital does have a small section cordoned off to treat patients who have committed some horrifically violent crimes, including serial murder, rape, and assorted transgressions against children.”

He stared at her impassively for a long moment before responding.

“According to the Department of State Hospitals, DSH-Atascadero up in San Luis Obispo handles those cases,” he replied stone-faced. “Metro deals with nonviolent offenders. So I’m not sure what you’re referencing.”

“Of course you are,” Jessie said more confidently than she’d expected. “It’s called the Non-Rehabilitative Division, or NRD for short. But that’s just the boring term they use for public consumption. Internally and within criminal justice circles, NRD is known as the ‘high-risk’ unit at DSH-Metro, which I happened to notice is the term you used to describe it in class.”

Hosta didn’t respond. Instead, he studied her inscrutably for several seconds before finally allowing his face to break into a slight grin. It was the first time she’d seen anything close to a smile from him.

“Walk with me,” he said, motioning for her to exit the room. “You win the special prize, Ms. Hunt. It’s been three semesters since a student last picked up on my little bit of verbal trickery there. Everyone is so turned off by the community standards bit that no one wonders what the reference to ‘high-risk’ is all about. But it’s clear that you were familiar with NRD long before entering class today. What do you know about it?”

“Well,” she began carefully, “I did the first several semesters of my study at USC and NRD is kind of an open secret there, what with them being so close.”

“Ms. Hunt, you are dissembling. It is *not* an open secret. Even within law enforcement and the psychiatric community, it is a tightly guarded one. I’d hazard that fewer than two hundred people in the region are aware of its existence. Less than half of them know the full nature of the facility. And yet, somehow, you do. Please explain yourself. And this time, let’s drop the careful coyness.”

Now it was Jessie’s turn to decide whether to be forthcoming.

*You’ve come this far. May as well take that final leap.*

“I did my thesis on it,” she said. “It almost got me kicked out of the program.”

Hosta stopped walking and looked briefly stunned before regaining his composure.

“So that was you?” he asked, sounding impressed as he started back down the hall. “That thesis is legendary among those who have read it. If I recall, the title was along the lines of ‘The Impact of Non-Rehabilitative Long-Term Incarceration on the Criminally Insane.’ But no one could figure out who the real author was. After all, there is no official record of ‘Jane Don’t.’”

“I have to admit I was pretty proud of that name. But using a fake one at all wasn’t my decision,” Jessie admitted.

“What do you mean?” Hosta asked, clearly intrigued.

Jessie wondered if she was skirting the edge of what she was allowed to discuss. But then she remembered the reason she was assigned to work with Hosta in the first place and decided there was no reason to be coy.

“My faculty adviser submitted the thesis to the dean,” she explained. “He promptly brought in several law enforcement and medical folks I’m not allowed to mention other than by the charming

term 'The Panel.' I was questioned for nine straight hours before they determined that I was sincerely writing an academic paper and not secretly some reporter or worse."

"That sounds exciting," Hosta said. He seemed to mean it.

"It sounds it. But at the time, terrifying was a more appropriate word. Eventually they decided not to arrest me. After all, they had the off-book, secret psychiatric lockup, not me. The school agreed that I hadn't done anything technically wrong and agreed not to dump me, although everything about the thesis was declared classified. The department determined that my interrogation by authorities could serve as my thesis defense. And I signed several documents promising not to discuss the matter with anyone, including my husband, or face potential prosecution, although for what charge they never said."

"Then how is it, Ms. Hunt, that we are having this conversation?"

"I received a...let's call it a special dispensation. I was permitted to continue to pursue my degree and set a specific condition. But in order to complete it, my new faculty adviser would have to be made at least superficially aware of what I'd written. The powers that be looked at the faculty at every university in Orange County and determined that you alone met their requirements. The school has a master's program in Criminal Psychology, which you direct. You have a relationship with NRD and have done field work there. You even have it as a practicum option set up there in rare instances where a student expresses interest and shows promise. You're my only option for fifty miles in any direction."

"I suppose I should be flattered. And what if I decline to be your faculty adviser?" he asked.

"You should have received a visit from someone representing The Panel to address all this—how it would be in your best interest, etc. I'm surprised you haven't. They're usually pretty thorough."

Hosta thought for a second.

"I have received several emails and a voice message recently from someone named Dr. Ranier," he said. "But the name wasn't familiar so I ignored them."

"I recommend you return the message, Professor," Jessie suggested. "It's possible that it's a pseudonym, maybe for someone you already know."

"I'll do that. In any case, I gather that I won't have to jump through all the usual bureaucratic hoops to get you authorized to do your practicum at NRD?"

"Doing it there was the specific condition I mentioned earlier. It's the reason I agreed without much fuss to their non-disclosure agreement," Jessie told him, unable to keep the excitement out of her voice. "I've been waiting almost two years for this."

"Two years?" Hosta said, surprised. "If you completed your thesis that long ago, shouldn't you have your degree by now?"

"That's a long story I'll have to share some other time. But for now, can I assume I have your authorization to do my practicum at DSH-Metro, specifically in NRD?"

"Assuming your story checks out, yes," he said as they reached his office door. He unlocked it but didn't invite her in. "But I have to pose the question I raise with any student who requests to do their field work there—are you sure you want to do this?"

"How can you ask me that, given everything I've told you?"

"Because it's one thing to read about the people being held at that facility," he answered. "It's quite another to interact with them. It gets real very fast. I gather from the redactions in your thesis that you know about some of the inmates being housed there?"

"A few; I know that the serial rapist from Bakersfield, Delmond Stokes, is being held there. And the multiple child murderer who was captured last year by that retired lady cop is there as well. And I'm pretty sure Bolton Crutchfield is being held there too."

Hosta stared at her, as if deciding whether or not to say what he was thinking. Finally he seemed to make a decision.

"That's who you want to observe, isn't it?"

“I have to admit, I’m curious,” Jessie said. “I’ve heard all kinds of stories about him. I’m not sure how many of them are true.”

“One story I can assure you is true is that he brutally murdered nineteen people over half a dozen years. Whatever else is truth or legend, that is a fact. Don’t ever lose sight of it.”

“Have you met him?” Jessie asked.

“I have. I interviewed him on two occasions.”

“And what was that like?”

“Ms. Hunt, that’s a long story I’ll have to share some other time,” he said, turning her own words back on her. “For now, I will reach out to this Dr. Ranier and check your bona fides. Assuming that goes without incident, I’ll contact you to set up your practicum. I know you’ll want to start soon.”

“I’d go tomorrow if I could.”

“Yes, well, it might take a bit longer than that. In the meantime, try not to bounce off the walls. Good day, Ms. Hunt.”

And with that he shut the door to his office, leaving Jessie in the hall. She turned to leave. Looking around the unfamiliar hallway, she realized she’d been so immersed in the conversation that she hadn’t paid attention to anything else. She had no idea where she was.

She stood there for a moment, imagining herself sitting face to face with Bolton Crutchfield. The thought both excited and terrified her. She had wanted—no, needed—to talk to him for a while now. The possibility that it might soon happen made her tingle with anticipation. She needed answers to questions no one even knew she had. And he was the only one who could provide them. But she wasn’t sure if he would. And even if he was willing, what might he demand in return?

## CHAPTER FIVE

Jessie was so keyed up that she called Kyle on the way home from school, even though she knew he was always crazed during the day and almost never answered. This time was no different but she couldn't help leaving a message anyway.

"Hey, babe," she said after the beep. "Just wanted to let you know my first day of class went extremely well. The professor's a character but I think I can work with him. And I'm hoping to start my practicum soon, maybe this week if everything pans out. I'm actually a little giddy. I hope your day is going well too. I thought I'd make a special dinner for us tonight, especially now that we actually found the boxes with all the pots and pans. Give me your ETA for tonight and I'll prep something nice. We can open one of those bottles of wine we've been saving and maybe get started on expanding our little family unit. Okay, talk soon. I love you."

She made a stop at Bristol Farms on the way home and splurged on a few branzino fish, which she planned to stuff and cook whole. She found some nice-looking broccolini and grabbed that too. As she was headed to the checkout she saw some fingerling potatoes and snagged them as well.

She was tempted to find something decadent for dessert but knew Kyle had been working out aggressively and wouldn't have any of it. Besides, they had some Italian ice in the freezer that would work just fine. By the time she checked out, she had the whole menu mapped out in her head.

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Jessie stared at the untouched plates of food on the dining room table, then checked her phone for the third time in the last five minutes. It was 7:13 and still nothing from Kyle.

He had texted her soon after she left the voicemail, saying the dinner plan sounded great and he anticipated being home by 6:30 that night. But almost forty-five minutes had passed and he still wasn't here. Worse, he hadn't reached out to her at all.

She had set everything up so that dinner would be hot and on the table waiting for him at 6:45, just in case he ran a little late. But he hadn't shown up. She'd texted him twice and left a voicemail in the intervening time. And still, she'd heard nothing from Kyle since that first text. Now the fish lay on the table, mostly cold, staring back at her with unsympathetic eyes.

Finally, at 7:21, he called. From the noise in the background, she knew even before he spoke that he was at a bar.

"Hey, Jess," he shouted to be heard over the music. "Sorry for the late call. How are you doing?"

"I was worried about you," she said, trying to keep the frustration out of her voice.

"Oh, sorry," he said, sounding only mildly remorseful. "I didn't mean to worry you. Something came up last minute. Teddy called around six and said he had some more potential clients for me. He asked if I could meet him and these guys at a bar called Sharkie's in the marina. I figured I can't really pass up these kinds of opportunities when I'm the new guy in the office, you know?"

"You couldn't have called to let me know?"

"My bad," he yelled. "Everything was so rushed that it slipped through the cracks. I was only able to sneak away to call you now."

"I made a big dinner, Kyle. We were going to celebrate tonight, remember? I opened a hundred-dollar bottle of wine. It was supposed to be a romantic evening."

"I know," he said. "But I can't bail on this. I think I can lock down both of Teddy's friends as clients. And we can still try a little baby-making when I get home."

Jessie sighed deeply so that she could keep her voice calm when she responded.

“It’ll be late when you get back,” she said. “I’ll be tired and you’ll be half-drunk. It’s not how I envisioned this going.”

“Listen, Jessie. I’m sorry that I didn’t call. But do you want me to just bail on an opportunity like this? I’m not just doing shots here. I’m conducting business and trying to make a few new friends while I’m at it. Are you going to hold that against me?”

“I guess I’m learning what your priorities are,” she replied.

“Jessica, you are always my top priority,” Kyle insisted. “I’m just trying to balance everything. I guess I screwed up. I promise I’ll be home by nine, all right? Does that fit into your schedule?”

He had sounded sincere until that last line, which dripped with sarcasm and resentment. The emotional wall Jessie had erected between them was slowly crumbling until she heard those words.

“Do whatever you want,” she replied brusquely before hanging up.

She stood up and caught a glimpse of herself in the dining room mirror. She was wearing a blue satin evening gown with a plunging neckline and a long slit down the right side that started at her upper thigh. Her hair was up in a casual bun that she had hoped to undo as part of a post-dinner seduction. The heels she wore pushed her from her normal five feet ten inches to well over six feet tall.

Suddenly it all felt so ridiculous. She was playing some sad game of dress-up. But when it came down to it she was just another pathetic housewife waiting for her man to come home and give her life meaning.

She grabbed the plates and walked to the kitchen, where she dumped both meals into the trash, whole fish and all. She changed out of the dress and switched to sweats. After that, she came back down to the dining room, grabbed the open bottle of Shiraz, poured a glass full to the brim, and took a gulp as she made her way into the living room.

She plopped down on the couch, turned on the TV, and settled in for what appeared to be a marathon of *Life Below Zero*, a reality series about people who voluntarily lived in remote sections of Alaska. She justified it by telling herself this would help her appreciate that there were people who had it far worse than she did in her fancy house in Southern California with her expensive wine and her seventy-inch flat-screen television.

Somewhere around the third episode and a half empty bottle she drifted off.

\*

She was awakened by Kyle gently shaking her shoulder. Looking up through blurry eyes, she could tell that he was half-loaded.

“What time is it?” she mumbled.

“A little after eleven.”

“What happened to being home by nine?” she asked.

“I got held up,” he said sheepishly. “Listen, babe. I know I should have called earlier. That wasn’t cool. I really am sorry.”

“Okay,” she said. Her mouth was fuzzy and her head hurt.

He ran a finger along her arm.

“I’d like to make it up to you,” he offered suggestively.

“Not tonight, Kyle,” she said, shrugging his hand away as she got up. “I’m not in the mood. Not even a little bit. Maybe next time you can try not to make me feel like sloppy seconds. I’m going to bed.”

She walked up the stairs and, despite the urge to glance back to see his reaction, kept going without another word. Kyle said nothing. She crawled into bed without even turning off the light. Despite the headache and the cottonmouth, she was asleep in less than a minute.

\*

Jessie felt a prickly branch scratch her face as she ran through the dark woods. It was winter and she knew that even barefoot, her footsteps, clomping on the fallen, dried leaves covering the snow were loud; that he would likely hear them. But she had no choice. Her only hope was to keep moving and hope he couldn't find her.

But she didn't know the woods well and he did. She was running blindly, completely lost and looking for any familiar landmark. Her little legs were too short. She knew he was catching up. She could hear his heavy footsteps and his even heavier breathing. There was no place to hide.

## CHAPTER SIX

Jessie sat bolt upright in bed, waking just in time to hear her own scream. It took a moment to orient herself and realize she was in her own bed in Westport Beach, wearing the clothes she'd drunkenly fallen asleep in last night.

Her whole body was covered in sweat and her breathing was shallow. She thought she could actually hear the blood rushing through her veins. She reached her hand up to her left cheek. The scar from the branch was still there. It had faded and could be mostly hidden with makeup, unlike the longer one along her right collarbone. But she could still feel where it protruded from the rest of her skin. She could almost feel the sharp sting even now.

She glanced over to her left and saw that the bed was empty. She could tell Kyle had slept there because of the indentation on his pillow and the jumble of sheets. But he was nowhere to be found. She listened for the sound of the shower but the house was silent. Glancing at her bedside clock, she saw that it was 7:45 a.m. He would have already left for work by now.

She eased out of the bed, trying to ignore her throbbing head as she shuffled to the bathroom. After a fifteen-minute shower, half of it spent just sitting on the chilly tile, she felt ready to face getting dressed and going downstairs. In the kitchen, she saw a note propped up on the breakfast table. It read "Sorry again about last night. Would love a rain check when you're willing. I love you."

Jessie set it aside and made herself some coffee and oatmeal, the only thing she felt capable of keeping down right now. She managed to finish half a bowl, tossed the rest in the trash, and made her way to the front sitting room, where a dozen unopened boxes waited for her.

She settled into the love seat with a pair of scissors, rested her coffee on the end table, and pulled a box toward her. As she absentmindedly went through the boxes, crossing off items as she located them, her minded drifted to her NRD thesis.

Had it not been for their fight, Jessie would have almost certainly told Kyle about not just her impending practicum at the facility, but about the aftermath of her original thesis as well, including her interrogation. That would have been a violation of her NDA.

He obviously knew the broad strokes, as she'd discussed the project with him as she'd researched it. But The Panel had sworn her to secrecy about it afterward, even from her husband.

It had felt weird hiding such a huge part of her life from her partner. But she'd been assured that it was necessary. And other than some general questions about how the whole thing had gone, he didn't really press her on the subject. A few vague answers left him satisfied, which had been a relief at the time.

But yesterday, with her enthusiasm for what she'd be doing—visiting a mental hospital for killers—at an all-time high, she was prepared to finally loop him in, despite the prohibition and its consequences. If their fight had one positive outcome, it was that it stopped her from telling him and putting both their futures at risk.

*But what kind of future is it if I can't share my secrets with my own husband? And if he seems oblivious to me keeping them?*

A slight ripple of melancholy washed over her at the thought. She tried to push it out of her head but couldn't quite sweep it away.

She was startled by the ring of the doorbell. Glancing at her watch, she realized that she'd been sitting in the same spot, lost in her glumness, hands resting on an unopened packing box, for the last ten minutes.

She stood up and walked to the door, trying to shake the gloom out of her system with each step. When she opened the door, Kimberly from across the street stood before her with a cheery smile on her face. Jessie tried to match it.

"Hello, neighbor," Kimberly said enthusiastically. "How goes the unpacking?"

“Slowly,” Jessie admitted. “But thanks for asking. How are you?”

“I’m good. I actually have a few ladies from the neighborhood at my place right now for mid-morning coffee and wondered if you wanted to join us.”

“Sure,” Jessie replied, happy for an excuse to get out of the house for a few minutes.

She grabbed her keys, locked up, and walked over with Kimberly. When they arrived, four heads turned in their direction. None of the faces looked familiar. Kimberly introduced everyone and led Jessie over to the coffee station.

“They don’t expect you to remember their names,” she whispered as she poured them cups. “So don’t feel any pressure. They’ve all been where you are now.”

“That’s a load off,” Jessie confessed. “I have so much bouncing around in my head these days, I can barely remember my *own* name.”

“Totally understandable,” Kimberly said. “But I should warn you, I mentioned the whole FBI profiler thing so you may get a few questions about it.”

“Oh, I don’t work for the FBI. I haven’t even gotten my degree yet.”

“Trust me—that doesn’t matter. They all think you’re a real-life Clarice Starling. My over/under on serial killer references is three.”

Kimberly had underestimated.

“Do you sit in the same room as these guys?” asked a woman named Caroline with hair so long that some strands reached her backside.

“It depends on the rules of the facility,” Jessie answered. “But I’ve never interviewed one without an experienced profiler or investigator with me, taking lead.”

“Are serial killers all as smart as they seem in the movies?” a mousy woman named Josette asked hesitantly.

“I haven’t interviewed enough to say definitively,” Jessie told her. “But based on the literature, as well as my personal experience, I’d say no. Most of these men—and they are almost always men—are no smarter than you or me. Some get away with it for a long time because of sloppy investigating. Some manage to evade capture because they choose victims no one cares about—prostitutes, the homeless. It takes a while for people to notice those folks are missing. And sometimes they’re just lucky. Once I graduate, my job will be to change their luck.”

The women politely pummeled her with questions, seemingly uninterested in the fact that she had not even graduated, much less formally taken on a profiling case.

“So you’ve never actually solved a case?” asked one particularly inquisitive woman named Joanne.

“Not yet. Technically, I’m just a student. The pros handle the live cases. Speaking of professionals, what do *you* do?” she asked in the hopes of redirecting her.

“I used to be in marketing,” Joanne said. “But that was before Troy was born. He keeps me pretty busy these days. It’s a full-time job all on its own.”

“I’ll bet. Is he somewhere napping now?” Jessie asked, looking around.

“Probably,” Joanne said, glancing at her watch. “But he’ll be up soon for snack. He’s at daycare.”

“Oh,” Jessie said, before broaching her next question as delicately as possible. “I thought most kids in daycare had working moms.”

“Yes,” Joanne said, apparently not offended. “But they’re so good over there that I couldn’t *not* enroll him. He doesn’t go every day. But Wednesdays are a challenge, so I usually take him then. Hump days are hard, right?”

Before Jessie could respond, the door from the garage opened and a burly thirty-something guy with a shock of unruly red hair burst into the room.

“Morgan!” Kimberly exclaimed happily. “What are you doing home?”

“I left my report in the study,” he replied. “My presentation is in twenty minutes so I have to get back fast.”

Morgan, apparently Kimberly's husband, didn't look at all surprised to see half a dozen women in his living room. He barreled through them, offering general greetings to the group. Joanne leaned over to Jessie.

"He's some kind of engineer," she said quietly, as if it was some kind of secret.

"For whom? One of the defense contractors?" Jessie asked.

"No, for some real estate outfit."

Jessie didn't understand why that merited such discretion but decided not to pursue it. Moments later, Morgan blasted back into the living room with a thick ream of paper in his hand.

"Nice to see you, ladies," he said. "Sorry I can't stick around. Kim, remember I've got that thing at the club tonight so I'll be back late."

"Okay, sweetie," his wife said, chasing after him to secure a kiss before he rushed out the door.

When he was gone, she returned to the living room, still flushed from the unexpected visit.

"I swear he moves with such purpose, you'd think *he* was a criminal profiler or something."

The comment sent the group into a wave of giggles. Jessie smiled, not sure exactly what was so funny.

\*

An hour later, she was back in her own sitting room, trying to find the energy to open the box in front of her. As she carefully sliced through the tape, she went over the coffee outing. There was something odd about it. But she couldn't quite place what.

Kimberly was a sweetheart. Jessie genuinely liked her and especially appreciated the effort she was making to help the new girl. And the other women were all nice and personable, if a little bland. But there was something...mysterious about their interactions, as if they were all in on some shared secret that Jessie wasn't privy to.

Part of her thought she was paranoid to suspect such a thing. It wouldn't be the first time she'd incorrectly jumped to faulty conclusions. Then again, all of her instructors in the Forensic Psych program at USC had praised her for her intuitive sense. They didn't seem to think she was paranoid so much as "suspiciously inquisitive," as one professor had called her. It had sounded like a compliment at the time.

She opened the box and pulled out the first item, a framed photo from her wedding. She stared at it for a moment, looking at the happy expressions on her and Kyle's faces. On either side of them were family members, all beaming as well.

As her eyes drifted over the group, she suddenly felt the melancholy from earlier rise up again inside her. An anxious tightness gripped her chest. She reminded herself to take deep breaths but no amount of inhaling or exhaling calmed her down.

She wasn't sure exactly what had brought this on—the memories, the new environment, the fight with Kyle, a combination of all of it? Whatever it was, she recognized one fundamental truth. She was unable to control this on her own anymore. She needed to talk to someone. And despite the feeling of acute failure that began to overwhelm her as she reached for the phone, she dialed the number she had hoped she'd never have to use again.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

She made an appointment with her old therapist, Dr. Janice Lemmon, and just knowing that going would necessitate a visit back to her old stomping grounds set her at ease. The panic had subsided almost immediately after she scheduled the session.

When Kyle came home that night—early even—they ordered takeout and watched a cheesy but fun movie about alternate realities called *The 13<sup>th</sup> Floor*. Neither of them formally apologized but they seemed to have rediscovered their comfort zone. After the movie, they didn't even go upstairs to have sex. Instead, Kyle just climbed on top of her right there on the couch. It reminded Jessie of their newlywed days.

He'd even made her breakfast this morning before he headed out for work. It was awful—burnt toast, runny eggs, and undercooked turkey bacon—but Jessie appreciated the attempt. She felt a little bad about not telling him her plans for the day. But then again, he hadn't asked so she wasn't really lying.

It wasn't until she was on the freeway the next day, in sight of the downtown Los Angeles skyscrapers, that Jessie truly felt the gnawing pit of nervousness in her gut subside. She had made the midday trip from Orange County in under an hour and got into the city early just so she could walk around a bit. She parked in the lot near Dr. Lemmon's office across from the Original Pantry at the corner of Figueroa and West 9<sup>th</sup>.

Then she got the idea of calling her former USC roommate and oldest college friend, Lacey Cartwright, who lived and worked in the area, to see if she could hang out. She got her voicemail and left a message. As she started down Figueroa in the direction of the Bonaventure Hotel, Lacey texted her to say she was too busy to hang out that day but that they'd hook up the next time Jessie was around.

*Who knows when that will be?*

She put her disappointment out of her head and focused on the city around her, taking in the bustling sights and sounds that were so different from her new living environment. When she hit 5<sup>th</sup> Street, she made a right and continued ambling.

This reminded her of the days, not so long ago, when she would do this exact thing multiple times a week. If she was struggling with a case study for class, she'd just step outside and stroll along the streets, using the traffic as white noise as she turned the case over in her mind until she found a way to approach it. Her work was almost always strongest if she'd had time to wander around downtown and noodle with it a bit.

She kept the imminent discussion with Dr. Lemmon at the back of her head as she mentally revisited yesterday's coffee at Kimberly's house. She still couldn't pin down the nature of the mysterious secretiveness of the women she'd met there. But one thing did jump out at her in retrospect—how desperate they'd all been to hear the details of her profiling studies.

She couldn't tell if it was because the profession she was entering seemed so unusual or simply that it was a profession at all. Looking back, she realized that none of the women worked.

Some used to. Joanne had been in marketing. Kimberly said she used to be a real estate agent when they lived in Sherman Oaks. Josette had run a small gallery in Silverlake. But they were all stay-at-home moms now. And while they appeared happy with their new lives, they also seemed hungry for details from the professional world, greedily, almost guiltily devouring any morsel of intrigue.

Jessie stopped, realizing she had somehow arrived at the Biltmore Hotel. She'd been here many times before. It was famous for, among other things, hosting some the early Academy Awards in 1930s. She'd also once been told it was where Robert Kennedy was assassinated by Sirhan Sirhan in 1968.

Back before she decided to do her thesis on NRD, Jessie had toyed with the idea of profiling Sirhan. So she'd shown up one day unannounced and asked the concierge if they gave tours of the hotel that included the site of the shooting. He was perplexed.

It took a few embarrassing moments for him to understand what she was after and several more for him to politely explain that the assassination had not occurred there but at the now-demolished Ambassador Hotel.

He tried to soften the blow by telling her that JFK had gotten the Democratic nomination for president at the Biltmore in 1960. But she was too humiliated to stick around to hear that story.

Despite the shame, the experience taught her a valuable lesson that had stuck with her ever since: Don't make assumptions, especially in a line of work where assuming wrong might get you killed. The next day she changed thesis topics and resolved to do her research from then on *before* she showed up at a location.

Despite that debacle Jessie returned often, as she loved the old-fashioned glamour of the place. This time, she immediately settled into her comfort zone as she meandered through the halls and ballrooms for a good twenty minutes.

As she passed through the lobby on her way out, she noticed a youngish man in a suit standing nonchalantly near the bellhop station, perusing a newspaper. What drew her attention was how sweaty he was. With the air-conditioning blasting through the hotel, she didn't see how that was physically possible. And yet, every few seconds, he dabbed at the beads of perspiration constantly forming on his forehead.

*Why is a guy just casually reading a paper so sweaty?*

Jessie moved a little closer and pulled out her phone. She pretended to be reading something but put it in camera mode and tilted it so she could watch the guy without really looking at him. Every now and then she took a quick photo.

He didn't seem to actually be reading the paper but rather using it as a prop while he intermittently looked up in the direction of the bags being placed on the luggage cart. When one of the bellhops began pushing the cart in the direction of the elevator, the man in the suit put the newspaper under his arm and ambled along behind him.

The bellhop pushed the cart into the elevator and the suited man followed and stood on the other side of the cart. Just as the doors closed, Jessie saw the suited man grab a briefcase from the side of the cart that wasn't visible to the bellhop.

She watched the elevator slowly go up and stop at the eighth floor. After about ten seconds, it began to descend again. As it did, she walked over to the security guard near the front door. The guard, an amiable-looking guy in his late forties, smiled at her.

"I think you've got a thief working the hotel," Jessie said without preamble, wanting to give him the situation fast.

"How's that?" he asked, now frowning slightly.

"I saw this guy," she said, holding up the photo on her phone, "swipe a briefcase from a luggage cart. It's possible that it was his. But he was pretty sneaky about it and he was sweating like a guy who was nervous about something."

"Okay, Sherlock," the guard said skeptically. "Assuming you're right, how am I supposed to find him? Did you see what floors the elevator stopped on?"

"Eight. But if I'm right, that won't matter. If he's a hotel guest, I gather that's his floor and that's where he'll stay."

"And if he's not a guest?" the guard asked.

"If he's not, I'm guessing he'll be coming straight back down on the elevator that's returning to the lobby right now."

Just as she said that, the elevator door opened and the sweaty, suited man stepped out, newspaper in one hand, briefcase in the other. He began walking to the exit.

“I’m guessing he’s going to stash that one somewhere and start the whole procedure over again,” Jessie said.

“Stay here,” the guard said to her, and then spoke into his radio. “I’m gonna need backup in the lobby ASAP.”

He approached the suited man, who saw him out of the corner of his eye and picked up the pace of his stride. So did the guard. The suited man broke into a run and was just pushing his way out the front door when he collided with another security guard running in the opposite direction. Both of them sprawled out on the ground.

Jessie’s guard grabbed hold of the suited man, lifted him up, yanked his arm behind his back, and slammed him against the hotel wall.

“Mind if I look in your bag, sir?” he demanded.

Jessie wanted to see how it would all play out but a quick glance at her watch showed that her appointment with Dr. Lemmon, set for 11 a.m., was in five minutes. She’d have to skip the walk back and catch a cab just to make it in time. She wouldn’t even have the chance to say goodbye to the guard. She worried that if she tried, he’d insist that she stick around to give the police her statement.

She barely made it and was out of breath and just sitting down in the waiting room when Dr. Lemmon opened her office door to invite her in.

“Did you run here from Westport Beach?” the doctor asked with a chuckle.

“Actually, I kind of did.”

“Well, come in and get comfortable,” Dr. Lemmon said, closing the door behind her and pouring them both glasses of water from a pitcher filled with lemon and cucumber slices. She still had the same awful perm that Jessie remembered, with tight little blonde ringlets that bounced when they touched her shoulders. She wore thick glasses that made her sharp, owl-like eyes appear tinier. She was a small woman, barely over five feet tall. But she was visibly wiry, probably a result of the yoga she’d told Jessie she did three times a week. For a woman in her mid-sixties, she looked great.

Jessie sat down in the comfy easy chair she always used for sessions and immediately settled back into the old vibe she was used to. She hadn’t been here in a while, well over a year, and had hoped to keep it that way. But it was a place of comfort, where she’d struggled with, and intermittently succeeded in, making peace with her past.

Dr. Lemmon handed her the water, sat down across from her, picked up a legal pad and pen, and rested them on her lap. That was her sign that the session had formally started.

“What are we discussing today, Jessie?” she asked warmly.

“Good news first, I guess. I’m doing my practicum at DSH-Metro, NRD Unit.”

“Oh wow. That is impressive. Who’s your faculty adviser?”

“Warren Hosta at UC-Irvine,” Jessie said. “Do you know him?”

“We’ve interacted,” the doctor said cryptically. “I think you’re in good hands. He’s prickly but he knows his stuff, which is what matters for you.”

“I’m glad to hear that because I didn’t have much choice,” Jessie noted. “He was only one The Panel would approve in the area.”

“I guess that in order to get what you want, you have to color inside their lines a bit. This is what you wanted, right?”

“It is,” Jessie said.

Dr. Lemmon looked at her closely. An unspoken moment of understanding passed between them. Back when Jessie had been interrogated about her thesis by the authorities, Dr. Lemmon had shown up at the police station out of the blue. Jessie remembered watching as her psychiatrist spoke quietly to several people who’d been silently observing her interview. After that, the questions seemed less accusatory and more respectful.

It was only later that Jessie learned Dr. Lemmon was a member of The Panel and was well aware of the goings-on at NRD. She had even treated some of the patients there. Looking back, it

shouldn't have been a surprise. After all, Jessie had sought this woman out as a therapist precisely because of her reputation for expertise in that area.

"Can I ask you something, Jessie?" Dr. Lemmon said. "You say working at NRD is what you want. But have you considered that the place may not give you the answers you're looking for?"

"I just want to better understand how these people think," Jessie insisted, "so that I can be a better profiler."

"I think we both know you're looking for much more than that."

Jessie didn't respond. Instead she folded her hands in her lap and took a deep breath. She knew how the doctor would interpret that but she didn't care.

"We can come back to that," Dr. Lemmon said quietly. "Let's move on. How's married life treating you?"

"That's the main reason I wanted to see you today," Jessie said, happy to change subjects. "As you know, Kyle and I just moved from here to Westport Beach because his firm reassigned him to their Orange County office. We've got a big house in a great neighborhood within walking distance of the harbor..."

"But...?" Dr. Lemmon prodded.

"Something just feels a little off about the place. I've been having trouble nailing it down. Everyone has been incredibly friendly so far. I've been invited to coffees and brunches and barbecues. I've gotten suggestions for the best grocery stores and daycare options, should we eventually need one. But something just feels...off-kilter. And it's starting to affect me."

"In what way?" Dr. Lemmon asked.

"I find myself feeling down for no good reason," Jessie said. "Kyle came home late for a dinner I made and I let it weigh me down much more than I should have. It wasn't that big a deal but he was so nonchalant about it. It just ate at me. Also, just unpacking boxes seems daunting in a way that's outsized for the task at hand. I have this constant, overwhelming sense that I don't belong, that there's some secret key to a room everyone else has been in and no one will give it to me."

"Jessie, it's been a while since our last session so I'm going to remind you of something we've discussed before. There doesn't have to be a 'good reason' for these feelings to take hold. What you're dealing with can appear out of nowhere. And it's not a shock that a stressful, new situation, no matter how seemingly picture-perfect, could stir them up. Are you taking your medication regularly?"

"Every day."

"Okay," the doctor said, making a note on her pad. "It's possible that we may need to switch it up. I also noticed you mentioned daycare might be necessary in the near future. Is that something you two are pursuing actively—kids? If so, that's another reason to switch your meds."

"We are trying...intermittently. But sometimes Kyle seems excited by the prospect and then he gets...distant; almost cold. Sometimes he says something and I wonder 'who is that guy?'"

"If it's any reassurance, all of this is very normal, Jessie. You're in a new environment, surrounded by strangers, with only one person you know well to cling to. It's stressful. And he's feeling a lot of those same things, so you're bound to butt heads and have moments where you don't connect."

"But that's the thing, Doctor," Jessie pressed. "Kyle doesn't seem stressed. He obviously likes his job. He has an old high school friend who lives in the area so he's got that outlet. And all signs indicate that he's totally psyched to be there—no adjustment period necessary. He doesn't appear to miss anything from our old life—not our friends, not our old hangouts, not being in a place where stuff actually happens after nine at night. He's completely adjusted."

"It might look that way. But I'd be willing to bet he's not as sure of things on the inside."

"I'd take that bet," Jessie said.

"Whether you're right or not," Dr. Lemmon said, noting the edge in Jessie's voice, "the next step is to ask yourself what you are going to do about this new life. How can you make it work better for you as an individual and as a couple?"

“I’m really at a loss,” Jessie said. “I feel like I’m giving this place a shot. But I’m not like him. I’m not a ‘dive right in’ kind of gal.”

“That’s certainly true,” the doctor agreed. “You’re a naturally wary person, with good reason. But you may have to turn the volume down on that a smidgen to get by for a while, especially in social situations. Maybe try to open yourself up a little more to the possibilities around you. And perhaps give Kyle the benefit of the doubt a bit more. Are these reasonable requests?”

“Of course they are, when you ask in this room. Out there it’s different.”

“Maybe that’s a choice you’re making,” Dr. Lemmon suggested. “Let me ask you something. The last time we met, we discussed the source of your nightmares. I gather you’re still having them, yes?”

Jessie nodded. The doctor continued.

“Okay. We also discussed you sharing that with your husband, letting him know why you wake up in a cold sweat several times a week. Have you done that?”

“No,” Jessie admitted guiltily.

“I know you’re concerned about how he’ll react. But we talked about how telling him the truth about your past might help you deal with it more effectively and bring the two of you closer together.”

“Or it could tear us apart,” Jessie countered. “I understand what you’re saying, Doctor. But there’s a reason so few people know about my personal history. It’s not warm and fuzzy. Most people can’t handle it. You only know because I did research on your background and determined that you had specific training and experience with this kind of thing. I sought you out and let you into my head because I knew you could handle it.”

“Your husband has known you for almost a decade. You don’t think he can handle it?”

“I think a seasoned professional like you had to use every ounce of restraint and empathy you had not to run out of the room screaming when I told you. How do you think a regular dude from suburban Southern California is going to react?”

“I don’t know Kyle so I couldn’t say,” Dr. Lemmon replied. “But if you’re planning to start a family with him—spend the rest of your life with him—you might want to consider whether you can realistically wall off a whole chunk of it from him.”

“I’ll take it under consideration,” Jessie said noncommittally.

She could sense that Dr. Lemmon understood that she wasn’t going to engage on the topic anymore.

“So let’s talk medication,” the doctor said, changing subjects. “I have a few suggestions for alternatives now that you’re planning to get pregnant.”

Jessie stared at Dr. Lemmon, watching her mouth move. But try as she might, she couldn’t concentrate. The words drifted by as her thoughts returned to those dark woods from her childhood, the ones that haunted her dreams.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Jessie lay in bed, tangled up in the sheets, trying to ignore the sunlight poking at her eyes through the open slit in the bedroom curtains.

It was her first Saturday morning in this house and she wanted it to be a lazy one, just her and Kyle, casually opening boxes, sipping coffee, making love. Yesterday had been a good day. Professor Hosta had sent her an email letting her know she'd get to visit NRD for the first time next week. She'd had a great run all the way down to the harbor and back. It was the first chance she'd gotten to really get some exercise and clear her head since they'd moved and she felt energized and hopeful. Kyle didn't have to go into the office so they had the whole weekend free.

She heard movement and reluctantly opened her eyes. Kyle was walking into the room with a coffee mug in each hand. She stretched happily and sat up.

"My hero," she said as she took the one he handed her.

"Is that all it takes these days?" he asked.

"Ten thousand years ago I would have expected you to bag an elk or something. But these days, a strong cup of coffee makes you a mighty fine provider."

"Well, I'm happy to meet my marital obligations."

"There are a few other marital obligations I expect you to meet today, mister," Jessie said, shimmying close to him.

"Oh yeah?" he said, playing dumb. "Like what?"

"Like ravaging me...once I've brushed my teeth; like finally unpacking that box of china in the dining room; like having your way with me again; like taking me to lunch and a movie to get out of this heat—maybe back in the old neighborhood; like coming back home for a quickie before ordering takeout and cuddling up on the couch to binge the rest of *Killing Eve*. How does that sound for a perfect Saturday?"

The look on his face suggested he didn't consider it a perfect plan.

"The first part sounds good," he said carefully. "But maybe we can rethink the evening plans."

"Oh, is that show too scary for you, big man?" she asked, trying to keep her voice playful even though she sensed he was about to make that impossible.

"I think I can handle it," he said, not playing along. "But maybe we do that another night. And maybe we have lunch around here."

"But you know how I love the theater near LA Live."

"Yeah, but that's a long way to go for a movie. I think we should find a theater near here that can become your new favorite. After all, this is home now. You promised me you'd give Westport a real chance."

Jessie, irked, was about to respond when she heard Dr. Lemmon's voice in her head, reminding her to give Kyle the benefit of the doubt. Besides, she could tell he wasn't done. Reluctantly, she bit her tongue as he continued.

"Also, I was hoping we could go to the club tonight. There were some other people who were excited to meet us and a bunch of them are going to be there this evening. It seems like the perfect chance to get to know some new people."

"Why does all the social stuff we do have to center around this club?" Jessie asked. "We're not even members there. Can't we just join a book club or something?"

"I'm happy to join a book club too, Jess," Kyle said, frustratingly calm. "But I don't see the harm in going back to Club Deseo. The whole point of being here, at least partly, is to become part of a community. I felt really isolated in the city. Seeing friends was a challenge. Meeting new ones was even harder. There's a ready-made community here, with people who are opening their arms to

us. Our neighbors might actually become our friends. And a lot of them go to this club. It's a social hub. Why would we intentionally cut ourselves off from that?"

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