



the
perfect
block

a jessie hunt psychological suspense--book 2

BLAKE PIERCE

Блейк Пирс
The Perfect Block
Серия «A Jessie Hunt Psychological
Suspense Thriller», книга 2

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=40177687
The Perfect Block. A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller—Book
Two:
ISBN 9781640296565

Аннотация

In THE PERFECT BLOCK (Book #2), rookie criminal profiler Jessie Hunt, 29, picks up the pieces of her broken life and leaves suburbia to start a new life in downtown Los Angeles. But when a wealthy socialite is murdered, Jessie, assigned the case, finds herself back in the world of picture-perfect suburbia, hunting a deranged killer amidst the false facades of normalcy and sociopathic women.

Jessie, thriving again in downtown LA, is sure she's moved on from her suburban nightmare. Ready to put her failed marriage behind her, she lands a job with the local police department, deferring her acceptance to the FBI's Academy.

She is assigned a straightforward murder in a wealthy neighborhood, a simple case to start her career. But little do her bosses know, there's more to the case than anyone suspected. Nothing can prepare her for her first case, one that will force her to probe the

minds of the wealthy, suburban couples she'd thought she'd left behind. Behind their polished family pictures and manicured hedges, Jessie realizes, perfection is not what it seems.

A fast-paced psychological suspense thriller with unforgettable characters and heart-pounding suspense, **THE PERFECT BLOCK** is book #2 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

Book #3 in the Jessie Hunt series—**THE PERFECT HOUSE**—is now also available for pre-order.

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Blake Pierce

The Perfect Block. A

Jessie Hunt Psychological

Suspense Thriller—Book Two

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes fifteen 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 three books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising two books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising three books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising three books (and counting).

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

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Recap of Book 1 in the Jessie Hunt series

In “The Perfect Wife,” masters candidate in forensic psychology Jessie Hunt and her investment banker husband, Kyle Voss, leave their downtown Los Angeles apartment for a McMansion in the Orange County community of Westport Beach after he gets transferred and promoted.

While Kyle is thrilled about their new life, Jessie had misgivings and feels uncomfortable among the entitled elite. Nonetheless, she tries to embrace their new life, making friends in the neighborhood and joining the local yacht club with its secret, seemingly sinister rituals.

In class, Jessie impresses visiting lecturer LAPD detective Ryan Hernandez by solving a complicated case study. To complete her field work, she manages to get assigned to a nearby state mental hospital where notorious serial killer Bolton Crutchfield is incarcerated.

Crutchfield’s crimes remind her of a man called the Ozarks Executioner, who abducted and killed dozens of people when she was a child in Missouri. Those abducted included Jessie and her mother, who was murdered in front of her. Jessie sees Dr. Janice Lemmon regularly to deal with the trauma.

In interviews, Crutchfield reveals that he is an admirer of

the Ozarks Executioner, who was never caught, and that they've somehow communicated. He also suggests, based purely on observing and talking to Jessie, that her suspicions about her new wealthy, lifestyle are legitimate.

As her criminal profiling skills improve, a now-pregnant Jessie discovers the yacht club is actually a front for a high-end prostitution ring. She also uncovers the dark truth about her husband: Kyle is a sociopath who killed a club worker he'd been sleeping with and has tried to frame Jessie for it. Jessie has a miscarriage, a result of being drugged by Kyle. Only Jessie's quick thinking prevents Kyle from killing her, as well as two neighbors. She is injured but Kyle is arrested.

Jessie returns to her old neighborhood in downtown L.A. to rebuild her life. Not long after, the mental hospital's head of security, Kat Gentry, visits Jessie and passes along a message from Crutchfield: The Ozarks Executioner is looking for her. Jessie reveals to Kat her deepest secret: the reason The Ozarks Executioner is pursuing her is because he is her father.

Jessie Hunt is a soon-to-be divorced aspiring criminal profiler. Kyle Voss is her sociopathic, now jailed, estranged husband. Bolton Crutchfield is a brilliant serial killer who idolizes Jessie's murderous father.

Kat Gentry is the head of security at the mental hospital where Crutchfield is incarcerated.

Dr. Janice Lemmon is Jessie's psychiatrist and a former

profiler herself.

Lacy Cartwright is Jessie's college friend, with whom she's staying for now.

Ryan Hernandez is the LAPD detective who lectured in Jessie's class.

The Ozarks Executioner is a notorious, never-caught serial killer—and Jessie's father.

CHAPTER ONE

Splinters from the wooden arms of the chair dug into Jessica Thurman's forearms, which were tied to the chair by a coarse rope. The skin on her arms was raw and bleeding in several places from her constant attempts to yank herself free.

Jessica was strong for a six-year-old. But not strong enough to break free of the ropes her captor had strapped to her. She could do nothing but sit there with her eyelids taped open as she watched her own mother stand helplessly before her, her arms manacled to the wooden ceiling beams of the isolated Ozarks cabin where they were both being held.

She could hear the whispers of their abductor, standing behind her, instructing her to watch, softly calling her "Junebug." She knew the voice well.

After all, it belonged to her father.

Suddenly, with an unexpected strength she didn't think possible, little Jessica flung her body sideways, sending the chair—and her along with it—toppling to the ground. She didn't feel the thud of hitting the floor, which she found odd.

She looked up and saw that she was no longer lying in the cabin. Instead, she was on the hallway floor of an impressive, modern mansion. And she was no longer six-year-old Jessica Thurman. She was now twenty-eight-year-old Jessie Hunt, lying on the floor of her own home, staring up at a man holding a

fireplace poker above his head, about to bring it down on her. But the man was no longer her father.

Instead, it was her husband, Kyle.

His eyes blazed with frenzied intensity as he thrust the poker down toward her face.

She brought her arms up to defend herself but knew it was too late.

*

Jessie woke up with a gasp. Her hands were still raised above her head as if to block an attack. But she was alone in the apartment bedroom. She pushed herself forward in bed so that she was sitting upright. Her body along with the bed sheets were covered in sweat. Her heart was nearly beating out of her chest.

She swung her legs off the bed and placed her feet on the floor as she bent over, resting her elbows on her thighs and her head in her palms. After giving her body a few seconds to acclimate to her real surroundings—the downtown Los Angeles apartment of her friend Lacy—she glanced at the bedside clock. It was 3:54 a.m.

As she felt the sweat start to dry on her skin, she reassured herself.

I am no longer in that cabin. I am no longer in that house. I am safe. These are just nightmares. Those men can't hurt me anymore.

But of course only half of that was true. While her soon-to-be-

ex-husband, Kyle, was locked up in jail awaiting trial for various crimes, including attempting to murder her, her father had never been captured.

He still haunted her dreams regularly. Worse, she had recently learned that even though she had been placed into Witness Protection as a child, given a new home and a new name, he was still out there looking for her.

Jessie stood up and headed for the shower. There was no point in trying to go back to sleep. She knew it would be useless.

Besides, an idea was circling in her head, one that she wanted to cultivate. Maybe it was time she stopped accepting that these nightmares were inevitable. Maybe she needed to stop fearing the day her father found her.

Maybe it was time to hunt him.

CHAPTER TWO

By the time her old college friend and current roommate Lacy Cartwright came out to the breakfast room, Jessie had been awake for over three hours. She had brewed a fresh pot of coffee and poured a cup for Lacy, who walked over and took it gratefully as she offered a sympathetic smile.

“Another bad dream?” she asked.

Jessie nodded. In the six weeks that Jessie had been living in Lacy’s apartment, trying to rebuild her life, her friend had gotten used to the semi-regular middle-of the-night screams and early morning wakeups. It had happened occasionally in college, so it wasn’t a total surprise. But the frequency had increased dramatically since her husband had tried to kill her.

“Was I loud?” Jessie asked apologetically.

“A little,” Lacy acknowledged. “But you stopped yelling after a couple of seconds. I went right back to sleep.”

“I’m really sorry, Lace. Maybe I should buy you better earplugs until I move out, or a louder noise-canceling machine. I swear it won’t be much longer.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re handling things much better than I would be,” Lacy insisted as she tied her long hair in a ponytail.

“That’s nice of you to say.”

“I’m not just being polite, girl. Think about it. In the last two

months, your husband murdered a woman, tried to frame you for it, and then attempted to kill you when you figured it out. That doesn't include your miscarriage."

Jessie nodded but didn't say anything. Lacy's list of horrors didn't include her serial killer father because Lacy didn't know about him; almost no one did. Jessie preferred it that way—for her own safety and for theirs. Lacy continued.

"If it was me, I'd still be curled up in the fetal position. The fact that you're almost done with physical therapy and about to enter a special FBI training program makes me wonder if you're some kind of cyborg."

Jessie had to admit that when things were laid out like that, it was pretty impressive that she was so functional. Her hand involuntarily moved to the spot on the left side of her abdomen where Kyle had plunged the fireplace poker. The doctors had told her she was lucky it had missed her internal organs.

She had an ugly scar. It made for an unsightly addition to go with the one from childhood that cut across her collarbone. She still felt a sharp twinge in her gut every now and then. But mostly she felt okay. She'd been given permission to ditch the walking cane a week ago and her physical therapist had only scheduled one more rehab session, which was today. After that, she was supposed to do the required exercises on her own. As to the mental and emotional rehab required after learning her husband was a sociopathic murderer, she was far from getting an all-clear.

"I guess things aren't that bad," she finally replied

unconvincingly as she watched her friend finish getting dressed.

Lacy slid on her three-inch heels, turning her from a tall woman into a full-on Amazon. All long legs and cheekbones, she looked more like a runway model than an aspiring fashion designer. Her hair was tied back in a high ponytail that revealed her neck. She was meticulously decked out in an outfit of her own design. She might be a buyer for a high-end boutique right now. But she had plans to have her own design firm before thirty and be the highest-profile lesbian African-American fashion designer in the country soon after that.

"I don't get you, Jessie," she said as she threw on her coat. "You get accepted into a prestigious FBI program at Quantico for promising criminal profilers and you seem to be lukewarm to the idea. I'd think you'd jump at the chance to change your surroundings for a bit. Besides, it's only ten weeks. It's not like you have to move there."

"You're right," Jessie agreed as she downed the last of her third cup of coffee. "It's just that there's so much going on right now, I'm not sure the time is right. The divorce from Kyle isn't final yet. I still have to lock down the sale of the house in Westport Beach. I'm not a hundred percent physically. And I wake up screaming most nights. I don't know that I'm up for the rigors of the FBI's behavior analysis training program just yet."

"Well, you better decide quickly," Lacy said as she moved to the front door. "Don't you have to give them an answer by the end of the week?"

“I do.”

“Well, let me know what you decide. Also, can you open the window to your bedroom before you head out? No offense but it smells a bit like a gym in there.”

She was gone before Jessie could reply, though she wasn't sure what to say to that. Lacy was a great friend who could always be counted on to give her honest opinion. But tact wasn't her strong suit.

Jessie got up and headed to her room to change. She caught a glimpse of herself in the full-length mirror on the back of the door and didn't immediately recognize herself. On the surface, she still looked the same, with her shoulder-length brown hair, her green eyes, her tall, five-foot-ten frame.

But the eyes were red-rimmed with exhaustion, and the hair was stringy and greasy, so much so that she decided to put it in a ponytail and wear a cap. And she felt permanently hunched, a result of the ever-present worry that her abdomen might unexpectedly pulse in pain.

Will I ever get back to who I was? Does that person even still exist?

She shook the thought away, forcing the self-pity to take a backseat, at least for a while. She was too busy to cater to it right now.

It was time to get ready for her physical therapy session, her meeting with the apartment broker, her appointment with her psychiatrist, and then one with her OB-GYN. It was going to be

a full day of pretending to be a functional human being.

*

The apartment broker, a petite whirling dervish in a pantsuit named Bridget, was showing her the third apartment of the morning when Jessie started getting the urge to jump off a balcony.

Everything was fine at first. She was on a bit of a high from her final physical therapy session, which had ended with the pronouncement that she was “reasonably equipped for the tasks of daily living.” Bridget had kept things moving as they looked at the first two apartments, focusing on unit details, pricing, and amenities. It was only when they got to the third option, the only one Jessie was intrigued by so far, that the personal questions began.

“Are you sure you’re only interested in one-bedrooms?” Bridget asked. “I can tell you like this one. But there’s a two-bedroom one floor up with virtually the same floor plan. It’s only thirty thousand dollars more and it would have greater resale value. Plus, you never know what your situation might be a couple of years from now.”

“That’s true,” Jessie acknowledged, mentally noting that only two months ago she was married, pregnant, and living in a mansion in Orange County. Now she was separated from an admitted killer, she’d lost her unborn child, and she was bunking

with a friend from school. "But I'm fine with a one-bedroom."

"Of course," Bridget said in a tone that suggested she wasn't about to let it lie. "Do you mind if I ask what your circumstances are? It might better help me target your preferences. I can't help but notice the skin on your finger is white where a wedding ring might recently have been. I could gear location choices based on whether you're looking to aggressively move on or... hunker down."

"We're in the right area," Jessie said, her voice tightening involuntarily. "I just want to see one-bedrooms around here. That's the only information you need right now, Bridget."

"Of course. I'm sorry," Bridget said, chastened.

"I need to borrow the restroom for a moment," Jessie said, the tightness in her throat now expanding to her chest. She wasn't sure what was happening to her. "Is that okay?"

"No problem," Bridget said. "You remember where it is, down the hall?"

Jessie nodded and walked there as quickly as she could without actually running. By the time she got in and locked the door, she feared she might pass out. It felt like a panic attack coming on.

What the hell is happening to me?

She splashed her face with cold water, then rested her palms on the counter as she ordered herself to take slow, deep breaths.

Images flashed through her head without rhyme or reason: cuddling on the couch with Kyle, shivering in an isolated cabin deep in the Ozark Mountains, looking at the ultrasound of her

unborn and never-to-be-born child, reading a bedtime story in a rocking chair with her adoptive father, watching as her husband dumped a body from a yacht in the waters off the coast, the sound of her father whispering “Junebug” in her ear.

Why Bridget’s mostly innocuous question about her circumstances and references to hunkering down had set her off, Jessie didn’t know. But they had and now she was in a cold sweat, shaking involuntarily, staring back in the mirror at a person she barely recognized.

It was a good thing her next stop was to see her therapist. The thought calmed Jessie slightly and she took a few more deep breaths before leaving the bathroom and heading down the hall to the front door.

“I’ll be in touch,” she called out to Bridget as she closed the door behind her. But she wasn’t sure she would be. Right now she wasn’t sure of anything.

CHAPTER THREE

Dr. Janice Lemmon's office was only a few blocks from the apartment building Jessie was leaving and she was glad for the chance to walk and clear her head. As she walked down Figueroa, she almost welcomed the sharp, cutting wind making her eyes water and immediately dry up. The bracing cold pushed most thoughts other than moving fast from her head.

She zipped her coat up to the neck and put her head down as she passed a coffee shop, then a diner filled to near overflowing. It was mid-December in Los Angeles and local businesses were doing their best to make their storefronts look holiday festive in a town where snow was almost an abstract concept.

But in the wind tunnels created by downtown skyscrapers, cold was ever-present. It was almost 11 a.m. but the sky was gray and the temperature was in the low fifties. Tonight it would drop close to forty. For L.A., that was bone-chilling. Of course, Jessie had been through far more frigid weather.

As a child in rural Missouri, before everything fell apart, she would play in the tiny front yard of her mom's mobile home in the trailer park, her fingers and face half-numb, fashioning unimpressive but happy-faced snowmen while her mom watched protectively from the window. Jessie remembered wondering why her mother never took her eyes off her. Looking back now, it was clear.

A few years later, in the suburbs of Las Cruces, New Mexico, where she'd lived with her adoptive family after going into Witness Protection, she would go skiing on the bunny slopes of the nearby mountains with her second father, an FBI agent who projected calm professionalism, no matter the situation. He was always there to help her up when she fell. And she could usually count on a hot chocolate when they got off the barren, windswept hills and went back to the lodge.

Those chilly memories warmed her as she rounded the final block to Dr. Lemmon's office. She meticulously chose not to think about the less pleasant memories that inevitably intertwined with the good ones.

She checked in and peeled off her layers as she waited to be called into the doctor's office. It didn't take long. Right at 11 a.m., her therapist opened the door and welcomed her inside.

Dr. Janice Lemmon was in her mid-sixties but didn't look it. She was in great shape and her eyes, behind thick glasses, were sharp and focused. Her curly blonde ringlets bounced when she walked and she had a coiled intensity that couldn't be masked.

They sat down in plush chairs across from each other. Dr. Lemmon gave her a few moments to settle in before speaking.

"How are you?" she asked in that open-ended way that always made Jessie genuinely ponder the question more seriously than she did in her daily life.

"I've been better," she admitted.

"Why is that?"

Jessie recounted her panic attack in the apartment and the subsequent flashbacks.

“I don’t know what set me off,” she said in conclusion.

“I think you do,” Dr. Lemmon prodded.

“Care to give me a hint?” Jessie countered.

“Well, I’m wondering if you lost your cool in the presence of a near stranger because you don’t feel like you have any other place to release your anxiety. Let me ask you this—do you have any stressful events or decisions coming up?”

“You mean other than an OB-GYN appointment in two hours to see if I’m recovered from my miscarriage, finalizing a divorce from the man who tried to murder me, selling the house we shared together, processing the fact that my serial killer father is looking for me, deciding whether or not to go to Virginia for two and a half months to have FBI instructors laugh at me, and having to move out of my friend’s apartment so she can get a decent night’s sleep? Besides those things, I’d say I’m cool.”

“That does sound like quite a bit,” Dr. Lemmon replied, ignoring Jessie’s sarcasm. “Why don’t we start with the immediate concerns and work outward from there, okay?”

“You’re the boss,” Jessie muttered.

“Actually, I’m not. But tell me about your upcoming appointment. Why does that have you concerned?”

“It’s not so much that I’m concerned,” Jessie said. “The doctor already told me that it looks like I don’t have any permanent damage and will be able to conceive in the future. It’s more that

I know going there will remind of what I lost and how I lost it.”

“You’re talking about how your husband drugged you so he could frame you for murdering Natalia Urgova? And how the drug he used induced your miscarriage?”

“Yes,” Jessie said drily. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

“Well, I’ll be surprised if anyone there brings that up,” Dr. Lemmon said, a gentle smile playing at her lips.

“So you’re saying I’m creating stress for myself about a situation that need not be stressful?”

“I’m saying that if you deal with the emotions ahead of time, it might not be so overwhelming when you’re actually in the room.”

“Easier said than done,” Jessie said.

“Everything is easier said than done,” Dr. Lemmon replied. “Let’s table that for now and move on to your pending divorce. How are things going on that front?”

“The house is in escrow. So I’m hoping that gets finished without complications. My attorney says that my request for an expedited divorce was approved and that it should be final before the end of year. There is a bonus on that front—because California is a community property state, I get half the assets of my murdering spouse. He gets half of mine too, despite going on trial for nine major felonies early next year. But considering I was a student until a few weeks ago, that doesn’t amount to much.”

“Okay, how do you feel about all that?”

“I feel good about the money. I’d say I more than earned it. Did you know I used the health insurance from his job to pay for

the injury I got from him stabbing me with a fireplace poker? There's something poetic about that. Otherwise, I'll be glad when it's all over. I mostly just want to move on and try to forget that I spent nearly a decade of my life with a sociopath and never realized it."

"You think you should have known?" Dr. Lemmon asked.

"I am trying to become a professional criminal profiler, Doctor. How good can I be when I didn't notice the criminal behavior of my own husband?"

"We've talked about this, Jessie. It's often difficult for even the best profilers to identify illicit behavior in those close to them. Often professional distance is required to see what's really going on."

"I gather you speak from personal experience?" Jessie asked.

Janice Lemmon, in addition to being a behavioral therapist, was a highly regarded criminal consultant who used to work full time for the LAPD. She still offered her services on occasion.

Lemmon had used her considerable string-pulling influence to get Jessie permission to visit the state hospital in Norwalk so she could interview serial killer Bolton Crutchfield as part of her graduate work. And Jessie suspected that the doctor had also played an integral part in her being accepted to the FBI's vaunted National Academy program, which typically only took seasoned local investigators, not recent graduates with almost no practical experience.

"I do," Dr. Lemmon said. "But we can save that for another

time. Would you like to discuss how you feel about being played by your husband?"

"I wouldn't say I was *totally* played. After all, because of me, he's in prison and three people who would otherwise be dead, including myself, are walking around. Don't I get any credit for that? After all, I did *eventually* figure it out. I don't think the cops ever would have."

"That's a fair point. I assume from your snark that you'd rather move on. Shall we discuss your father?"

"Really?" Jessie asked, incredulous. "Do we have to go there next? Can't we just talk about my apartment troubles?"

"I gather they're related. After all, isn't the reason your roommate can't get any sleep because you have scream-inducing nightmares?"

"You don't play fair, Doctor."

"I'm only working from things you tell me, Jessie. If you didn't want me to know, you wouldn't have mentioned it. Can I assume the dreams are related to your mother's murder at the hands of your father?"

"Yep," Jessie answered, keeping her tone overly jaunty. "The Ozarks Executioner may have gone underground but he's still got one victim very much in his clutches."

"Have the nightmares gotten worse since we last met?" Dr. Lemmon asked.

"I wouldn't say worse," Jessie corrected. "They've been pretty much at the same level of terrifyingly awful."

“But they got dramatically more frequent and intense once you got the message, correct?”

“I assume we’re talking about the message Bolton Crutchfield passed along to me revealing that he’s been in contact with my father, who would very much like to find me.”

“That’s the message we’re talking about.”

“Then yes, that’s around the time they got worse,” Jessie answered.

“Setting aside the dreams for a moment,” Dr. Lemmon said, “I wanted to reiterate what I I’ve told you previously.”

“Yes, Doctor, I haven’t forgotten. In your capacity as an advisor to the Department of State Hospitals, Non-Rehabilitative Division, you’ve consulted with the security team at the hospital to ensure that Bolton Crutchfield doesn’t have access to any unauthorized outside personnel. There is no way for him to communicate with my father to let him know my new identity.”

“How many times have I said that?” Dr. Lemmon asked. “It must have been a few for you to have it memorized.”

“Let’s just say more than once. Besides, I’ve become friendly with the head of security at the NRD facility, Kat Gentry, and she told me basically the same thing—they’ve updated their procedures to ensure that Crutchfield has no communication with the outside world.”

“And yet you don’t sound convinced,” Dr. Lemmon noted.

“Would you be?” Jessie countered. “If your dad was a serial killer known to the world as the Ozarks Executioner *and* you’d

personally seen him eviscerate his victims and he was never caught, would your mind be set at ease by a few platitudes?"

"I admit I'd probably be a bit skeptical. But I'm not sure how productive it is to dwell on something you can't control."

"I was meaning to broach that with you, Dr. Lemmon," Jessie said, dropping the sarcasm now that she had a genuine request. "Are we sure I don't have any control over the situation? It seems that Bolton Crutchfield knows a fair bit about what my father has been up to in recent years. And Bolton...enjoys my company. I was thinking another visit to chat with him might be in order. Who knows what he might reveal?"

Dr. Lemmon took a deep breath as she considered the proposal.

"I'm not sure playing mind games with a notorious serial killer is the best next step for your emotional well-being, Jessie."

"You know what would be great for my emotional well-being, Doctor?" Jessie said, feeling her frustration rise despite her best efforts. "Not fearing that my psycho dad is going to jump out from around a corner and get all stabby on me."

"Jessie, if just talking to me about this gets you so riled up, what's going to happen when Crutchfield starts pushing your buttons?"

"It's not the same. I don't have to censor myself around you. With him I'm a different person. I'm professional," Jessie said, making sure her tone was more measured now. "I'm tired of being a victim and this is something tangible I can do to

change the dynamic. Will you just consider it? I know that your recommendation is pretty much a golden ticket in this town.”

Dr. Lemmon stared at her for a few seconds from behind her thick glasses, her eyes boring into her.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she finally said. “Speaking of golden tickets, have you formally accepted the FBI’s National Academy invitation yet?”

“Not yet. I’m still weighing my options.”

“I think you could learn a lot there, Jessie. And it wouldn’t hurt to have it on your résumé when you’re trying to get work out here. I worry that passing on it might be a form of self-sabotage.”

“It’s not that,” Jessie assured her. “I know it’s a great opportunity. I’m just not sure this is the ideal time for me to up and move across the country for almost three months. My whole world is in flux right now.”

She tried to keep the agitation out of her voice but could hear it creeping in. Clearly Dr. Lemmon did too because she shifted gears.

“Okay. Now that we’ve gotten a big picture view of how things are going, I’d like to dig a little deeper on a few subjects. If I recall, your adoptive father came out here recently to help get you squared away. I want to get into how that went momentarily. But first, let’s discuss how you’re recovering physically. I understand you just had your last physical therapy session. How was that?”

The next forty-five minutes made Jessie feel like a tree having its bark peeled back. When it was over, she was happy to leave,

even if it meant her next stop was getting checked to reconfirm she could have kids in the future. After nearly an hour of Dr. Lemmon poking and prodding her psyche, she figured getting her body poked and prodded would be a breeze. She was wrong.



It wasn't so much the poking that set her off. It was the aftermath. The appointment itself was pretty uneventful. Jessie's doctor confirmed that she hadn't suffered any permanent damage and assured her that she should be able to conceive in the future. She also gave the all-clear to resume sexual activity, a notion that had genuinely not crossed Jessie's mind since Kyle attacked her. The doctor said that barring something unexpected, she should return for a follow-up in six months.

It was only when she was in the elevator on the way down to the parking garage that she lost it. She wasn't completely sure why but she felt like she was falling into a dark hole in the ground. She ran to the car and sat in the driver's seat, letting the heaving sobs wrack her body.

And then, in the middle of the tears, she got it. Something about the finality of the appointment had hit her hard. She didn't have to come back for six months. It would be a normal visit. The pregnancy stage of her life was, for the foreseeable future, over.

She could almost feel the emotional door slam shut and it was jarring. On top of her marriage ending in the most shocking way

possible and learning that the murderous father she thought she'd put in the past was back in her present, the realization that she'd had a living being inside her and now she didn't was too much to bear.

She peeled out of the parking garage, her vision blurred by tear-stained eyes. She didn't care. She found herself pressing down hard on the accelerator as she roared south on Robertson. It was early afternoon and there wasn't much traffic. Still, she weaved wildly in and out of lanes.

Ahead of her, at a stoplight, she saw a large moving truck. She hit the gas hard and felt her neck snap back as she accelerated. The speed limit was thirty-five, but she was at forty-five, fifty-five, passing sixty. She was sure that if she hit that truck hard enough, all her pain would vanish in an instant.

She glanced to her left and as she whizzed by, she saw a mother walking along the sidewalk with her toddler son. The thought of that little boy being witness to a mass of crumpled metal, blistering fire, and charred remains snapped her out of it.

Jessie hit the brakes hard, squealing to a stop only feet from the back of the truck. She pulled into the gas station parking lot to her right, parked, and turned off the car. She was breathing heavily and adrenaline coursed through her body, making her fingers and toes tingle to the point of discomfort.

After about five minutes sitting there motionless with her eyes closed, her chest stopped heaving and her breathing returned to normal. She heard a buzzing and opened her eyes. It was her

phone. The caller ID said it was Detective Ryan Hernandez of the LAPD. He'd spoken to her criminology class last semester, where she'd impressed him with how she'd solved a sample case he presented to the class. He'd also visited her in the hospital after Kyle tried to kill her.

"Hello, hello," Jessie said out loud to herself, making sure her voice sounded normal. Close enough. She answered the call.

"This is Jessie."

"Hi, Ms. Hunt. This is Detective Ryan Hernandez calling. Do you remember me?"

"Of course," she said, pleased that she sounded like her usual self. "What's up?"

"I know you graduated recently," he said, his voice sounding more hesitant than she remembered. "Have you secured a position yet?"

"Not yet," she answered. "I'm weighing my options right now."

"In that case, I'd like to talk to you about a job."

CHAPTER FOUR

An hour later, Jessie was sitting in the reception area of the Central Community Police Station of the Los Angeles Police Department, or as it was more commonly called, Downtown Division, where she was waiting for Detective Hernandez to come out to meet her. She expressly refused to think about what happened with the near crash. It was too much to process at the moment. Instead, she focused on what was about to happen.

Hernandez had been cagey on the call, telling her he couldn't go into detail—just that a junior position was opening up and he'd thought of her. He asked her to come in to discuss it in person as he wanted to gauge her interest before mentioning her to the higher-ups.

While Jessie waited, she tried to recall what she knew about Hernandez. She had met him earlier that fall when he'd visited her master's program forensic psychology class to discuss the practical applications of profiling. It turned out that when he was a beat cop, he'd been instrumental in catching Bolton Crutchfield.

In the class, he'd presented an elaborate murder case to the students and asked if anyone could determine the perpetrator and the motive. Only Jessie had figured it out. In fact, Hernandez had said she was only the second student ever to solve the case.

The next time she saw him was in the hospital when she was

recovering from Kyle's attack. She was still a bit drugged up at the time, so her memory was a little hazy.

He had only been there in the first place because she'd called him, suspicious about Kyle's background before she'd met him at age eighteen, hoping to get any leads he could offer. She'd left a voicemail with the detective and when he couldn't reach her after multiple calls back—primarily because her husband had tied her up in their house—he'd tracked her cell and found she was in the hospital.

When he visited, he'd been helpful, walking her through the state of the pending case against Kyle. But he'd also quite clearly been suspicious (with good reason) that Jessie hadn't done all she could to come clean after Kyle killed Natalia Urgova.

It was true. After Kyle had persuaded Jessie that she had killed Natalia herself in a drunken rage that she couldn't remember, he'd offered to cover up the crime by dumping the woman's body at sea. Despite her misgivings at the time, Jessie hadn't been forceful about going to the police to confess. It was something she regretted to this day.

Hernandez had sussed that out but as far as she knew, never said anything about it to anyone after that. Some small part of her feared that was the real reason he'd called her here today and that the job was just a pretense to get her in the station. She figured that if he took her to an interrogation room, she'd know which way things were headed.

After a few minutes, he came out to greet her. He was much

as she remembered him, about thirty, well-built but not overly imposing. At about six feet tall and a little under 200 pounds, he was clearly in good shape. It was only as he got closer that she remembered how ripped he was.

He had short black hair, brown eyes, and a wide, warm smile that probably even made suspects feel at ease. She wondered if he cultivated it for that very reason. She saw the wedding band on his left hand and remembered that he was married but had no kids.

“Thanks for coming in, Ms. Hunt,” he said, extending his hand.

“Please call me Jessie,” she said.

“Okay, Jessie. Let’s go to my desk and I’ll fill you in on what I had in mind.”

Jessie felt a stronger than expected surge of relief when he didn’t suggest the interrogation room but managed to avoid making it obvious. As she followed him back to the bullpen, he talked softly.

“I’ve been keeping up with your case,” he admitted. “Or more accurately, your husband’s case.”

“Soon to be ex,” she noted.

“Right. I heard that too. No plans to stick it out with the guy who tried to frame you for murder and then kill you, huh? No loyalty these days.”

He grinned to let her know he was kidding. Jessie couldn’t help but be impressed by a guy willing to make a crack about a

murder to the person who was almost murdered.

“The guilt is overwhelming,” she said, playing along.

“I’ll bet. I’ve got to say, it’s not looking good for your soon-to-be former hubby. Even if prosecutors don’t seek the death penalty, I doubt he’s ever getting out.”

“From your lips...” Jessie muttered, not needing to finish the sentence.

“Let’s move to a happier subject, shall we?” Hernandez suggested. “As you may or may not recall from my visit to your classroom, I work for a special unit in Robbery-Homicide. It’s called Homicide Special Section, or HSS for short. We specialize in high-profile cases—the kinds that generate lots of media interest or public scrutiny. That might include arsons, murders with multiple victims, murders of notable individuals, and of course, serial killers.”

“Like Bolton Crutchfield, the guy you helped capture.”

“Exactly,” he said. “Our unit also employs profilers. They’re not exclusive to us. The whole department has access to them but we have priority. You may have heard of our senior profiler, Garland Moses.”

Jessie nodded. Moses was a legend in the profiling community. A former FBI agent, he’d relocated to the West Coast to retire in the late 1990s after spending decades bouncing around the country hunting serial killers. But the LAPD had made him an offer and he agreed to work as a consultant. He was paid by the department but wasn’t an official employee, so

he could come and go as he chose.

He was over seventy years old now but still showed up to work just about every day. And at least three or four times a year, Jessie read a story of him cracking a case no one else could nail down. He supposedly had an office on the second floor of this building in what was said to be a converted broom closet.

“Am I going to meet him?” Jessie asked, trying to keep her enthusiasm in check.

“Not today,” Hernandez said. “Maybe if you take the job and have settled in for a while, I’ll introduce you. He’s a little on the crusty side.”

Jessie knew Hernandez was being diplomatic. Garland Moses had a reputation for being a taciturn, short-tempered asshole. If he wasn’t great at catching murderers, he’d probably be unemployable.

“So Moses is kind of the department’s profiler emeritus,” Hernandez continued. “He only shows his face for really big cases. The department has a number of other staff and freelance profilers it uses for less celebrated cases. Unfortunately, our junior profiler, Josh Caster, tendered his resignation yesterday.”

“Why?”

“Officially?” Hernandez said. “He wanted to relocate to a more family-friendly area. He has a wife and two kids he never got to see. So he accepted a position up in Santa Barbara.”

“And unofficially?”

“He couldn’t hack it anymore. He worked robbery-homicide a

half dozen years, went to the FBI's training program, came back all gung ho and really pushed hard as a profiler for two years after that. Then he just hit a wall."

"What do you mean?" Jessie asked.

"This is an ugly business, Jessie. I feel like I don't need to tell you that, with what happened with your husband. But it's one thing to have a brush with violence or death. It's another to face it every day, to see the foul things human beings can do to each other. It's hard to keep your humanity under the onslaught of that stuff. It grinds you down. If you don't have somewhere to put it at the end of the day, it can really mess you up. That's something to think about as you consider my proposal."

Jessie decided now wasn't the time to tell Detective Hernandez that her experience with Kyle wasn't the first time she'd seen death close up. She wasn't sure if watching her father murder multiple people as a child, including her own mother, might hurt her job prospects.

"What exactly is your proposal?" she asked, steering clear of the topic entirely.

They had reached Hernandez's desk. He motioned for her to sit down across from him as he continued.

"Replacing Caster, at least on an interim basis. The department isn't ready to hire a new full-time profiler just yet. They put a lot of resources into Caster and they feel burned. They want to do a big candidate search before hiring his permanent replacement. In the meantime, they're looking for someone

junior, who won't mind not being a full-time hire and won't mind being underpaid."

"That's sure to reel in top applicants," Jessie said.

"Agreed. That's my fear—that in the interest of keeping costs low, they'll go with someone who doesn't have the chops. Me? I'd rather try someone who might be green but has talent rather than a hack who can't profile worth a damn."

"You think I have talent?" Jessie asked, hoping she didn't sound like she was fishing for a compliment.

"I think you have potential. You showed that in the classroom scenario. I respect your professor in the class, Warren Hosta. And he tells me you have real talent. He wouldn't get specific but he indicated that you'd been granted permission to interview a high-value inmate and that you'd established a rapport that might prove fruitful in the future. The fact that he couldn't read me in on something a fresh-scrubbed master's graduate is doing suggests you're not as untested as you seem. Plus, you managed to uncover your husband's elaborate murder plot and not get killed in the process. That's nothing to sneeze at. I also know you were accepted into the FBI's National Academy without any law enforcement experience. That almost never happens. So I'm willing to take a flyer on you and throw your name into the mix. Assuming you're interested. Are you interested?"

CHAPTER FIVE

“So you’re not doing the FBI thing?” Lacy asked incredulously as she took another sip of wine.

They were sitting on the couch, halfway through a bottle of red and devouring the Chinese food that had just been delivered. It was after 8 p.m. and Jessie was exhausted from the longest day she could remember in months.

“I’m still going to do it, just not now. They gave me a one-time deferment. I can join with another Academy class, as long as I attend at some time in the next six months. Otherwise I have to reapply. Since I was lucky to get in this time, that pretty much guarantees I’ll be going soon.”

“And you’re bailing to do grunt work for the LAPD?” Lacy asked, disbelieving.

“Once again, not bailing,” Jessie pointed out, taking a big glug from her own glass, “just delaying. I was already on the fence with everything going on with the house sale and my physical recovery. This was just the clincher. Besides, it sounds cool!”

“No it doesn’t,” Lacy said. “It sounds totally boring. Even your detective buddy said you’d be doing routine tasks and handling the low-profile cases no one else wanted to take on.”

“At first. But once I’ve got a bit of experience I’m sure they’ll throw me on something more interesting. This is Los Angeles, Lacey. They’re not going to be able to keep the crazy away from

me.”

*

Two weeks later, as the patrol car dropped Jessie off a block from the crime scene, she thanked the officers and headed for the alley where she saw police tape already up. As she crossed the street, avoiding the drivers who seemed more intent on hitting than avoiding her, it occurred to her that this would be her first murder case.

Looking back on her brief time at Central Station, she realized that she'd been wrong to think they couldn't keep the crazy away from her. Somehow, at least so far, they had. In fact, most of her time these days was spent in the station, going through open cases to make sure the paperwork Josh Caster had filed before he left was up to date. It was drudgery.

It didn't help that Central Station felt like a busy bus station. The main bullpen area was massive. People swarmed around her all the time and she was never quite sure if they were staff, civilians, or suspects. She had to repeatedly move desks as profilers without the “interim” tag used their seniority to lay claim to work stations they preferred. No matter where she ended up, Jessie always seemed to be situated right below a flickering fluorescent light.

But not today. Stepping into the alley just off East 4th Street, she saw Detective Hernandez at the far end and hoped this case

would be different from the others she'd been assigned so far. For each of those, she'd shadowed detectives but wasn't asked for her opinion. There wasn't much need for it anyway.

Of the three field cases she'd shadowed, two were robberies and one was arson. In each instance, the suspect confessed within minutes of arrest, once without even being questioned. The detective had to Mirandize the guy and get him to re-confess.

But today might finally be different. It was the Monday just before Christmas, and Jessie hoped the spirit of the season might make Hernandez more generous than some of his colleagues. She joined him and his partner for that day, a bespectacled forty-something guy named Callum Reid, as they investigated the death of a junkie found at the end of the alley.

He still had a needle sticking out of his left arm and the uniformed officer had only called in the detectives as a formality. As Hernandez and Reid talked to the officer, Jessie ducked under the police tape and approached the body, making sure not to step anywhere sensitive.

She looked down at the young man, who didn't look any older than her. He was African-American, with a high fade haircut. Even lying down and shoeless, she could tell he was tall. Something about him felt familiar.

"Should I know who this guy is?" she called out to Hernandez. "I feel like I've seen him somewhere before."

"Probably," Hernandez shouted back. "You went to USC, right?"

“Yeah,” she said.

“He likely overlapped with you for a year or two. His name was Lionel Little. He played basketball there for a couple of years before going pro.”

“Okay, I think I remember him,” Jessie said.

“He had a gorgeous left-handed finger roll shot,” Detective Reid recalled. “Reminded me a little of George Gervin. He was a highly touted rookie but he ended up washing out after a few years. He couldn’t play defense and he didn’t know how to handle all the money or the NBA lifestyle. He only lasted three seasons before he was out of the league entirely. The drugs pretty much took over at that point. Somewhere along the line, he ended up on the streets.”

“I’d see him around from time to time,” Hernandez added. “He was a sweet kid—never cited him for more than loitering or public urination.”

Jessie leaned over and looked more closely at Lionel. She tried to imagine herself in his position, a lost kid, addicted but not much trouble, wandering the back alleys of downtown L.A. for the last few years. Somehow he’d managed to maintain his habit without overdosing or ending up in jail. And yet here he was, lying in an alley, needle in his arm, shoeless. Something didn’t feel right.

She knelt down to get a closer look at where the needle jutted out from his skin. It was jammed in deep on his otherwise smooth skin.

His smooth skin...

“Detective Reid, you said Lionel had a nice left-handed finger roll, right?”

“Thing of beauty,” he replied appreciatively.

“So can I assume he was left-handed?”

“Oh yeah, he was totally left-hand dominant. He had real trouble going to his right. Defenders would overplay him to that side and completely shut him down. It was another reason he never made it in the pros.”

“That’s weird,” she muttered.

“What is it?” Hernandez asked.

“It’s just...can you guys come over here? There’s something that doesn’t make sense about this crime scene to me.”

The detectives walked over and stopped right behind where she was kneeling. She pointed at Lionel’s left arm.

“That needle looks like it’s halfway through his arm and it’s not anywhere near a vein.”

“Maybe he had bad aim?” Reid suggested.

“Maybe,” Jessie conceded. “But look at his right arm. There’s a precise line of tracks that all follow along his veins. It’s pretty meticulous for a drug addict. And it makes sense, because he was a lefty. Of course he’d inject his right arm with his dominant hand.”

“That does make sense,” Hernandez agreed.

“So then I thought maybe he was just sloppier when he used his right,” Jessie continued. “Like you said, Detective Reid,

maybe he just had bad aim.”

“Exactly,” Reid said.

“But look,” Jessie said pointing at the arm. “Other than the spot with the needle in it right now, his left arm is smooth—no track marks at all.”

“What does that tell you?” Hernandez asked, starting to see where she was going.

“It tells me that he didn’t shoot up in his left arm, pretty much ever. From what I can tell, this isn’t the kind of guy who would let someone else shoot him up in that arm either. He had a system. He was very methodical. Look at the back of his right hand. He’s got marks there too. He’d rather shoot up his hand than trust someone else. I bet if we took off his socks, we’d find track marks between the toes on his right foot too.”

“So you’re suggesting he didn’t overdose?” Reid asked skeptically.

“I’m suggesting that someone wants to make it look like he OD’d but did a sloppy job and just jammed the needle somewhere in his left arm, the one right-handed people would typically use.”

“Why?” Reid asked.

“Well,” Jessie said cautiously, “I started thinking about the fact that his shoes are missing. None of his other clothes are. I’m wondering if, him having been a former pro player, his shoes were expensive. Don’t some of them go for hundreds of dollars?”

“They do,” Hernandez answered, sounding excited. “Actually,

when he first joined the league and everyone thought he was going to be a big deal, he signed a shoe contract with an upstart company called Hardwood. Most guys signed with one of the big sneaker companies—Nike, Adidas, Reebok. But Lionel went with these guys. They were viewed as edgy. Maybe too edgy because they went out of business a few years ago.”

“So then the sneakers wouldn’t be that valuable,” Reid said.

“Actually the opposite is true,” Hernandez corrected. “Because they went bankrupt, the shoes became a hot commodity. There are only so many in circulation, so each one is quite valuable with collectors. As a spokesman for the company, Lionel probably got a truckload of them when he first signed on. And I’d be willing to bet that’s what he had on tonight.”

“So,” Jessie picked up, “someone saw him wearing the shoes. Maybe they were desperate for cash. Lionel’s not viewed as a tough guy. He’s an easy mark. So this person takes Lionel down, steals the shoes, and shoves a needle in his arm, hoping we’d just mark it down as another overdose.”

“It’s not a crazy theory,” Hernandez said. “Let’s see if we can get a search going for someone in the area wearing a pair of Hardwoods.”

“If Lionel didn’t overdose, then how did the perp kill him?” Reid mused. “I don’t see any blood.”

“I think that’s a great question...for the medical examiner,” Hernandez said, grinning as he stepped back to the other side of the police tape. “Why don’t we call one in and get some lunch?”

"I've got to run to the bank," Reid said. "Maybe I'll just meet you back at the station."

"Okay. It looks like it's just you and me, Jessie," Hernandez said. "How do you feel about a street vendor hot dog? I saw a guy across the street earlier."

"I feel like I'm going to regret it but I'll do it anyway because I don't want to look like a wuss."

"You know," he pointed out, "if you say you're doing it so you won't look like a wuss, everyone knows you're just eating it for the credit. That's kind of wussy. Just a pro tip."

"Thanks, Hernandez," Jessie replied. "I'm learning all kinds of new stuff today."

"It's called on-the-job training," he said, continuing to rib her as they walked down the alley to the street. "Now if you put both onions *and* peppers on the dog, you might earn some street cred."

"Wow," Jessie said, grimacing. "How does your wife like lying next to you at night when you stink of that stuff?"

"Not much of a problem," Hernandez said, then turned to the vendor to place his order.

Something in Hernandez's response struck her as odd. Maybe his wife was simply unfazed by the smell of onions and peppers in bed. But his tone suggested that perhaps it wasn't much of a problem because he and his wife weren't sharing a bed these days.

Despite her curiosity, Jessie let it lie. She barely knew this man. She wasn't about to interrogate him about the state of his

marriage. But she did wish she could somehow find out if her gut was way off or if her suspicions were correct.

Speaking of guts, the vendor was looking at her expectantly, waiting for her to place her order. She looked at Hernandez's dog, overflowing with onions, peppers, and what looked to be salsa. The detective was eyeing her, clearly ready to mock her.

"I'll have what he's having," she said. "Exactly what he's having."



Back at the station a few hours later, she was emerging from the ladies' room for the third time when Hernandez approached her with a broad smile on his face. She forced herself to seem casual and ignored the uncomfortable gurgling in her lower abdomen.

"Good news," he said, thankfully oblivious to her discomfort. "We got word that someone was picked up a few minutes ago wearing Hardwoods that match Lionel's foot size, which was a sixteen. The person wearing the sneakers has size nine feet. So that's—you know—a little suspicious. Good job."

"Thanks," Jessie said, trying to play it off as no big deal. "Any word from the M.E. on possible cause of death?"

"Nothing official yet. But when they turned Lionel over, they found a massive welt on the back side of his head. So a subdural hematoma isn't a crazy hypothesis. That would explain the lack

of blood.”

“Great,” Jessie said, happy that her theory seemed to have panned out.

“Yeah, except not so great for his family. His mother was down there to identify the body and apparently she’s a total mess. She’s a single mom. I remember reading in some article about him that she worked three jobs when Lionel was a kid. She had to think she’d be able to scale it back once he hit it big. But I guess not.”

Jessie didn’t know what to say in response so she simply nodded and stayed silent.

“I’m cutting out for the day,” Hernandez said abruptly. “Some of us are going out for a drink, if you want to join us. You’ve definitely earned one on me.”

“I would but I’m supposed to go to a club tonight with my roommate. She thinks it’s time I get back in the dating scene.”

“Do *you* think it’s time?” Hernandez asked, his eyebrows raised.

“I think that she is relentless and won’t let this drop unless I go out at least once, even if it’s on a Monday night. That should give me a few weeks’ grace before she starts in again.”

“Well, have a good time,” he said, trying to sound optimistic.

“Thanks. I’m positive I won’t.”

CHAPTER SIX

The club was loud and dark and Jessie could feel a headache coming on.

An hour ago, when she and Lacy had been getting ready, things seemed much more promising. Her roommate's enthusiasm was infectious and she found herself almost looking forward to the evening as they put on their dresses and did their hair.

When they left the apartment, she couldn't say she disagreed with Lacy's contention that she looking "smokin' hot." She was wearing her red skirt with the slit up the thigh, the one she never got to bust out in her brief but tumultuous Orange County suburban existence. She wore a black sleeveless top that accentuated the muscle tone she'd developed during physical therapy.

She even deigned to put on a pair of three-inch black pumps that officially put her over six feet and in the Amazon woman club alongside Lacy. Originally she wore her brown hair up but her fashion impresario roommate convinced her to let it down, so that it cascaded past her shoulders to her upper back. Looking in the mirror, she didn't think it was totally ridiculous when Lacy said they looked like a couple of models slumming for the evening.

But an hour later her mood had soured. Lacy was having

a great time, playfully flirting with guys she wasn't interested in and seriously flirting with girls that she was. Jessie found herself at the bar talking to the bartender, who was obviously well practiced in entertaining girls not used to the scene.

She wasn't sure when she'd gotten so lame. It was true that she hadn't really been single in nearly a decade. But she and Kyle had gone out to exactly these kinds of clubs back when they lived here, before the move to Westport Beach. She had never felt out of place.

In fact, she used to love to check out new downtown L.A.—DTLA to locals—clubs, bars, and restaurants, a few of which seemed to open every week. The two of them would swoop in and take over the place, trying the most unconventional menu item or drink, dancing goofily in the center of the club, oblivious to the dubious glances they got. She didn't miss Kyle but she had to admit she longed for the life they'd shared together before everything went sideways.

A young guy, likely not older than twenty-five, sidled up next to her and eased onto the empty bar stool to her left. She gave him the once-over in the bar mirror, quietly sizing him up.

It was part of a private game she liked to play with herself. She informally called it "People Prediction." In it, she would try to guess as much about a person's life as possible, based only on how they looked, acted, and spoke. As she surreptitiously gave the guy a sideways glance, she was delighted to realize that the game now had professional benefits. After all, she was a junior,

interim criminal profiler. This was fieldwork.

The guy was moderately attractive, with shaggy, dirty-blond hair that swept down over the right side of his forehead. He was tan, but not in a beachy kind of way. It was too even and perfect. She suspected he visited a tanning salon periodically. He was in good shape but looked almost unnaturally lean, like a wolf that hadn't eaten in a while.

He'd clearly come from work, as he was still in "the uniform"—suit, shiny shoes, slightly loosened tie to show he was in relaxed mode. It was approaching 10 p.m. and if he was only just getting off work, it suggested he worked a job that required long office hours. Maybe finance, though that usually meant early starts more than late nights.

He was more likely a lawyer. Not for the government though; maybe an associate in his first year at some fancy firm in a nearby high rise where they were working him to death. He was well-paid, as the tailored suit proved. But he didn't have much time to enjoy the fruits of his labor.

He seemed to be deciding what line to use on her. He couldn't offer her a drink as she already had one that was still half full. Jessie decided to give him a hand.

"What firm?" she asked, turning to face him.

"What?"

"What legal firm are you with?" she repeated, nearly shouting to be heard over the pulsating music.

"Benson & Aguirre," he answered in an East Coast accent she

couldn't quite identify. "How did you know I was a lawyer?"

"Lucky guess; looks like they're really working you to the bone. You just get off?"

"About a half hour ago," he said, his voice betraying a tone more Mid-Atlantic than New York. "I've been looking forward to a drink for about three hours now. I could really go for a water ice but this'll have to do."

He took a swig from his bottle of beer.

"How does L.A. compare to Philadelphia?" Jessie asked. "I know it's been less than six months but do you feel like you're adjusting okay?"

"Jeez, what the hell? Are you some kind of private detective? How do you know I'm from Philly and that I only moved here in August?"

"It's kind of a talent I have. I'm Jessie, by the way," she said, extending her hand.

"Doyle," he said, shaking it. "Are you gonna tell me how you do that parlor trick? Because I'm kind of freaking out over here."

"I wouldn't want to spoil the mystery. Mystery's very important. Let me ask one more question, just to complete the picture. Did you go to Temple or Villanova for law school?"

He stared at her with his mouth agape. After blinking a few times, he regrouped.

"How do you know I didn't go to Penn?" he asked, feigning insult.

"Nah, you didn't order any water ices at Penn. Which is it?"

“Nova all the way, baby!” he shouted. “Go Wildcats!”

Jessie nodded appreciatively.

“I’m a Trojan girl myself,” she said.

“Oh, jeez. You went to USC? Did you hear about that Lionel Little guy—former ball player there? He got killed today.”

“I heard,” Jessie said. “Sad story.”

“I heard he was killed for his shoes,” Doyle said, shaking his head. “Can you believe that?”

“You should take care of yours, Doyle. They don’t look cheap either.”

Doyle glanced down, then leaned over and whispered in her ear, “Eight hundred bucks.”

Jessie whistled in fake awe. She was fast losing interest in Doyle, whose youthful exuberance was starting to be overwhelmed by his youthful self-satisfaction.

“So what’s your story?” he asked.

“You don’t want to try to guess?”

“Oh man, I’m not so good at that.”

“Give it a try, Doyle,” she coaxed. “You might surprise yourself. Besides, a lawyer needs to be perceptive, right?”

“That’s true. Okay, I’ll give it a shot. I’d say you’re an actress. You’re pretty enough to be one. But DTLA isn’t really actress territory. That’s more like Hollywood and points west. Model maybe? You could be. But you seem too smart to have that be your main thing as like, a career. Maybe you did some modeling as a teenager but now you’re into something more professional.

Oh, I've got it, you're in public relations. That's why you're so good at reading people. Am I right? I know I am."

"Really close, Doyle. But not quite."

"So what do you do then?" he demanded.

"I'm a criminal profiler with the LAPD."

It felt good to say it out loud, especially as she watched his eyes widen in shock.

"Like that show *Mindhunter*?"

"Yeah, kind of. I help the police get inside the heads of criminals so they have a better chance of catching them."

"Whoa. So do you hunt serial killers and stuff?"

"For a while now," she said, neglecting to mention that her search was for one particular serial killer and that it had nothing to do with work.

"That's awesome. What a cool job."

"Thanks," Jessie said, sensing that he'd finally built up the courage to ask what had been on his mind for a while now.

"So what's your deal? Are you single?"

"Divorced actually."

"Really?" he said. "You seem too young to be divorced."

"I know, right? Unusual circumstances. It didn't pan out."

"I don't want to be rude but can I ask—what was so unusual? I mean, you seem like a catch. Are you a psycho or something?"

Jessie knew he didn't mean any harm with the question. He was genuinely interested in both the answer and in her and he'd just fumbled it horribly. Still, she could feel all her remaining

interest in Doyle drain from her at that moment. In the same instant, the weight of the day and the discomfort of her high heels reared their heads. She decided to close out the evening with a bang.

“I wouldn’t call myself a psycho, Doyle. I’m definitely damaged, to the point of waking up screaming most nights. But psycho? I wouldn’t say that. Mostly we got divorced because my husband was a sociopath who murdered a woman he was sleeping with, attempted to frame me for it, and ultimately tried to kill me and two of our neighbors. He really embraced the ‘death do us part’ thing.”

Doyle stared at her, his mouth so wide it could have caught flies. She waited for him to recover, curious to see how smoothly he’d extricate himself. Not very, as it turned out.

“Oh, that really sucks. I would ask more about it but I just remembered I have an early deposition tomorrow. I should probably get home. Hope to see you around some time.”

He was off the stool and halfway to the door before she could get out a “Bye, Doyle.”

*

Jessica Thurman pulled the blanket up to cover her half-freezing little body. She’d been alone in the cabin with her dead mother for three days now. She was so delirious from lack of water, warmth, and human interaction that sometimes

she thought her mother was talking to her, even as her corpse slumped, unmoving, her arms held in the air by manacles attached to the wooden roof beams.

Suddenly there was banging on the door. Someone was just outside the cabin. It couldn't be her father. He had no reason to knock. He entered whatever place he wanted whenever he wanted.

The banging came again, only this time it sounded different. There was a ringing sound mixed in. But that made no sense. The cabin didn't have a doorbell. The ringing came again, this time without any knocking at all.

Suddenly Jessie's eyes popped open. She lay there in bed, allowing her brain a second to process that the ringing she'd heard had come from her cell phone. She leaned over to grab it, noting that while her heart was pumping fast and her breathing was shallow, she wasn't as sweaty as usual in the aftermath of a nightmare.

It was Detective Ryan Hernandez. As she answered the call, she glanced at the time: 2:13 a.m.

"Hello," she said, with almost no grogginess in her voice.

"Jessie. It's Ryan Hernandez. Sorry to call at this hour but I got a call to investigate a suspicious death in Hancock Park. Garland Moses doesn't do middle of the night calls anymore and everyone else is already spoken for. You up for it?"

"Sure," Jessie replied.

"If I text you the address, can you be here in thirty minutes?"

he asked.

“I can be there in fifteen.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Jessie pulled up in front of the mansion on Lucerne Blvd. at 2:29 a.m., there were already multiple police cars, an ambulance, and a medical examiner's vehicle out front. She got out and walked toward the front door, trying to look as professional as possible under the circumstances.

Neighbors stood on the sidewalk, many wrapped up in robes to protect against the chill of the night. This sort of thing wasn't typical for a wealthy neighborhood like Hancock Park. Nestled between Hollywood to the north and the Mid-Wilshire district to the south, it was an enclave of old money Los Angeles; or at least as "old money" as anything in a city so unconcerned with historical tradition could be.

The people who lived here weren't so much the movie stars or Hollywood moguls one might find in Beverly Hills or Malibu. These were the homes of the generationally wealthy, who might or might not actually work. If they did, it was often merely to avoid boredom. But they didn't have to worry about being bored tonight. After all, one of their own was dead and everyone was curious as to who.

Jessie felt a bit of thrill as she walked up the stairs to the front door, which was marked off with yellow police tape. This was the first time she'd arrived at a crime scene unaccompanied by a detective. And that meant it was the first time she'd have to show

her credentials to access a restricted area.

She remembered being so excited when she'd first gotten them. She even practiced flashing them to Lacy a few times back at the apartment. But now, as she fumbled through her coat pocket, trying to find them, she felt surprisingly nervous.

She needn't have been. The officer at the top of the stairs barely glanced at them as he pulled back the police tape and let her pass.

Jessie found Hernandez and another detective standing just inside the foyer of the house. The younger man looked like he'd drawn the short straw. Detective Reid's seniority must have allowed him to beg off this call. Jessie wondered why Hernandez hadn't pulled rank too. He saw her and waved her in.

"Jessie Hunt, I don't know if you've met Detective Alan Trembley. He was the detective on call tonight and he'll be working the case with me."

As Jessie shook his hand, she couldn't help but notice that, with his unkempt curly blond hair and glasses halfway down the bridge of his nose, he looked as scattered as she felt.

"Our victim is in the pool house," Hernandez said as he started walking, leading the way. "Her name is Victoria Missinger. Thirty-four years old. Married. No children. She's in a small, hidden nook off the main room, which may help explain why it took so long to find her. Her husband called in this afternoon, saying he hadn't been able to reach her for hours. There was some concern that it might have been a ransom situation so a full house

search wasn't done until a few hours ago. Her body was found by a cadaver dog."

"Jesus," Trembley muttered under his breath, making Jessie wonder just how experienced he was to be set off by the notion of a cadaver dog.

"How did she die?" she asked.

"The M.E. is still on sight and no blood work has been done yet. But the initial theory is an insulin overdose. A needle was found near the body. She was a diabetic."

"You can die from an insulin overdose?" Trembley asked.

"Sure, if left untreated," Hernandez said as they walked down a long hallway of the main house toward the back door. "And it looks like she was alone in the room for hours."

"We seem to be dealing with a lot of needle-related incidents lately, Detective Hernandez," Jessie noted. "You know, I am willing to handle a shooting now and then."

"Purely coincidence, I assure you," he replied, smiling.

They stepped outside and Jessie realized that the massive house in front hid an even larger backyard. An enormous pool took up half the space. Beyond that sat the pool house. Hernandez headed that way and the other two followed.

"What makes you suspect it wasn't just an accident?" Jessie asked him.

"I haven't drawn any conclusions yet," he answered. "The M.E. will be able to tell us more in the morning. But Mrs. Missinger has had diabetes all her life and, according to her

husband, she's never had an accident like this before. It sounds like she knew how to take care of herself."

"Have you spoken to him yet?" Jessie asked.

"No," Hernandez replied. "A uniformed officer took his initial statement. He's currently being babysat in the breakfast room. We'll talk to him after I show you the scene."

"What do we know about him?" Jessie asked.

"Michael Missinger, thirty-seven years old. Scion of the Missinger oil fortune. He sold his interest seven years ago and started a hedge fund that invests exclusively in environmentally friendly technologies. He works downtown in the penthouse of one of those buildings you have to crane your neck to see the top of."

"Any priors?" Trembley asked.

"Are you kidding?" Hernandez scoffed. "On paper, this guy is as straight as arrows come. No personal scandals. No financial issues. Not even a traffic ticket. If he's got secrets, they're well hidden."

They had arrived at the pool house. A uniformed officer pulled back the police tape so they could enter. Jessie followed Hernandez, who took the lead. Trembley brought up the rear.

As she stepped inside, Jessie tried to clear her head of all extraneous thought. This was her first high-profile potential murder case and she didn't want any distractions pulling her from the job at hand. She wanted to focus exclusively on her surroundings.

The pool house was all understated, old-world glamour. It reminded her of the cabanas she imagined movie stars from the 1920s would use when they visited the beach. The long couch at the back of the main room had a wood frame but luxurious cushions that looked extremely nap-friendly.

The coffee table appeared to have been hand-crafted from reclaimed wood, some of which looked to be old sections of boat hulls. The art on the walls looked to be Polynesian in origin. In the far corner of the room was a bumper pool table. The flat-screen TV was hidden behind a thick, silky-looking beige curtain that Jessie suspected might have cost more than her Mini Cooper out front. There was no sign that anything untoward had happened in here.

“Where’s the hidden nook?” she asked.

Hernandez led them past the bar that ran along the near wall. Jessie saw more police tape in front of what looked like a linen closet. Hernandez peeled it back and opened the closet door with a gloved hand. Then he stepped inside and seemed to disappear.

Jessie followed and saw that the closet did indeed have shelves with towels and some cleaning products. But as she got closer, she saw a narrow opening to the right between the door and the shelves. There appeared to be a sliding wooden door that receded into the wall.

Jessie put on a pair of gloves of her own and pulled the door closed. To an undiscerning eye, it looked like just another panel in the wall. She slid it open again and stepped inside the small

room where Hernandez stood waiting.

There wasn't much to it—just a little loveseat and a small wooden table beside it. On the floor was a lamp that had apparently been knocked over. Some shards had broken off and settled onto the plush white carpeting.

Slumped on the loveseat in a relaxed pose that could easily be mistaken for sleeping was Victoria Missinger. A needle rested on the cushion beside her.

Even in death, Victoria Missinger was a beautiful woman. It was hard to gauge her height but she was trim, with the look of a woman who met regularly with her trainer. Jessie made a mental note to follow up on that.

Her skin was creamy and vibrant, even as rigor mortis was setting in. Jessie could only imagine what it was like when she was alive. She had long blonde hair that covered part of her face, but not enough to obscure her perfect bone structure.

"She was pretty," Trembley said, understating it.

"Do you think there was a struggle?" Jessie asked Hernandez, nodding at the broken lamp on the carpet.

"Hard to be sure. She could have just bumped it trying to get up. Or it could mean there was a tussle of some kind."

"I feel like you have an opinion but are holding back," Jessie pressed.

"Well, as I said, I hate to draw conclusions too early. But I found this a little odd," he said, pointing at the carpet.

"What?" she asked, unable to discern anything notable other

than how thick the carpeting was.

“You see how deep the indentations in the carpet are from our footsteps?”

Jessie and Detective Trembley nodded.

“When we first came in after the dog found her, there were no footprints at all.”

“Not even hers?” Jessie asked, starting to figure it out.

“Nope,” Hernandez answered.

“What does that mean?” Trembley asked, not getting it yet.

Hernandez filled him in.

“It means that either the luxurious carpeting in here has unprecedented bounce-back capabilities or someone vacuumed it after the fact to hide the existence of footprints other than Victoria’s.”

“That’s interesting,” Jessie said, impressed by Detective Hernandez’s attention to detail. She prided herself on reading people but would never have picked up on a physical clue like this. It reminded her that this was the man who’d been instrumental in catching Bolton Crutchfield and that she shouldn’t underestimate his skills. She could learn a lot from him.

“Did you find a vacuum?” Trembley asked.

“Not out here,” Hernandez said. “But folks are checking the main house.”

“Hard to imagine either of the Missingers did a ton of housework,” Jessie surmised. “I wonder if they’d even know where the vacuum was kept. I assume they have a housekeeper?”

“They do indeed,” Hernandez said. “Her name is Marisol Mendez. Unfortunately, she’s out of town all week, on vacation in Palm Springs apparently.”

“So the maid is out,” Trembley said. “Anyone else work around here? They’ve got to have a ton of employees.”

“Not as many as you might think,” Hernandez said. “Their landscaping is largely drought-resistant, so they only have a groundskeeper come in twice a month for maintenance. They have a pool management company and Missinger says someone comes around once a week, on Thursdays.”

“So who does that leave us with?” Trembley asked, afraid to voice the clear answer for fear of being too obvious.

“It leaves us with the same person we started with,” Hernandez said, unafraid to go there. “The husband.”

“Does he have an alibi?” Jessie asked.

“That is exactly what we’re going to find out,” Hernandez replied as he pulled out his radio and spoke into it. “Nettles, have Missinger transported to the station for questioning. I don’t want anyone else asking him a thing until we get him in an interrogation room.”

“Sorry, Detective,” came a crackly, apprehensive voice over the radio. “But someone already did that. He’s en route now.”

“Dammit,” Hernandez swore as he turned off the radio. “We have to go now.”

“What’s the problem?” Jessie asked.

“I wanted to be there waiting when Missinger got to the station

—to be the good cop, his lifeline, his sounding board. But if he gets there first and sees all those blue uniforms, guns, and fluorescent lights, he's going to spook and demand to see his lawyer before I can ask anything. Once that happens, we'll never get anything useful out of him."

"Then we better get moving," Jessie said, brushing past him and out the door.

CHAPTER EIGHT

By the time they arrived at the station, Missinger had already been there for ten minutes. Hernandez had called ahead and ordered the desk sergeant to have him taken to the family room, which was intended for crime victims and families of the deceased. It was a little less sterile than the rest of the station, with a couple of old couches, some curtains on the windows, and a few months-old magazines on the coffee table.

Jessie, Hernandez, and Trembley rushed to the family room door, where a tall officer stood guard outside.

“How’s he doing in there?” Hernandez asked.

“He’s fine. Unfortunately, he demanded his lawyer the second he walked through the front door.”

“Great,” Hernandez spat. “How long has he been waiting to make the call?”

“He already did, sir,” the officer said, shifting uncomfortably.

“What! Who let him do that?”

“I did, sir. Was I not supposed to?”

“How long have you been on the force, Officer...Beatty?” Hernandez asked, looking at the name tag on the guy’s shirt.

“Almost a month, sir.”

“Okay, Beatty,” Hernandez said, clearly trying to keep his frustration in check. “There’s nothing that can be done about it now. But in the future, you don’t have to immediately hand a

potential suspect a phone the second he requests it. You can put him in a room and tell him you'll get right on that. 'Right on that' might take a few minutes, maybe even an hour or two. It's a tactic to give us time to develop a strategy and keep the suspect off-balance. Will you please try to remember that in the future?"

"Yes, sir," Beatty said sheepishly.

"Okay. For now, take him to an open interrogation room. We probably don't have much time before his lawyer gets here. But I'd like to use what we do have to at least get a sense of the guy. And Beatty, when you're moving him, don't answer any of his questions. Just put him in a room and leave, got it?"

"Yes, sir."

As Beatty went into the family room to collect Missinger, Hernandez led Jessie and Trembley to the break room.

"Let's give him a minute to settle in," Hernandez said. "Trembley and I will go in. Jessie, you should watch from behind the mirror. It's too late to ask substantive questions but we can try to establish some kind of rapport with the guy. He doesn't have to tell us anything. But *we* can say a lot. And that can have an effect on him. We need him feeling as uncertain as possible before his attorney gets here and starts setting him at ease. We need to get those lingering doubts in his head, so that he wonders if maybe we're better allies to him than his high-paid lawyer. We don't have much time to do it, so let's get in there."

Jessie went to the observation room and took a seat. It was her first chance to get a look at Michael Missinger, who was standing

awkwardly in a corner. If anything, he was more beautiful than his wife had been. Even at 3 a.m., wearing jeans and a sweatshirt that he must have thrown on at the last minute, he looked like he had just stepped out of a photo shoot.

His short, sun-bleached blond hair was just mussed enough to look unpretentious but not so much as to seem disheveled. His skin was tan in parts, but white in others, the sign of a regular surfer.

He was tall and lanky, with the look of a guy who didn't have to work out much to get that way. The redness and puffiness of his blue eyes—likely from crying—didn't make them any less gorgeous. Jessie had to admit, despite herself, that if this guy had approached her at the bar last night, she would not have been so cavalier toward him. Even his nervous shifting from foot to foot was frustratingly endearing.

After a few seconds, Hernandez and Trembley walked in. They looked less impressed.

"Have a seat, Mr. Missinger," Hernandez said, making the instruction sound almost warm. "We know you've asked for your lawyer, which is fine. My understanding is that he's on his way. In the interim, we wanted to fill you in on where things stand with our investigation. Let me first start by offering my condolences on your loss."

"Thank you," Missinger said in a slightly raspy voice that Jessie wasn't sure was permanent or a result of the night's stresses.

“So we don’t yet know if this was foul play,” Hernandez continued, sitting down across from him. “But my understanding is that you told one of our officers that Victoria was extremely proficient in regulating her condition and that you can’t recall an incident anything like this in the past.”

“I…” Missinger started.

“No need to answer, Mr. Missinger,” Hernandez interrupted. “I don’t want to be accused of violating your Miranda rights, which I understand have been read to you, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Of course, that’s all standard. And though we don’t really view you as a suspect, you’re well within your rights to request your attorney. But from our perspective, we’re trying to move as quickly as we can to get to the bottom of this. Time is of the essence. So the more details we can confirm, like the one you shared about Victoria’s proficiency with self-medicating, the less likely we are to go down dead ends. Does that make sense?”

Missinger nodded. Trembley stood silently to the side, as though not sure if or when he should jump in.

“So,” Hernandez continued, “also just confirming, you said your housekeeper, Marisol, is on vacation this week in Palm Springs. You gave her cell number to an officer and I believe we’re reaching out to her. By the way, without formally replying, if you find that I’m stating something inaccurate, perhaps you could make me aware. No need to answer any questions, of course. Just steer me in the right direction if I get off course.

Fair?”

“Fair,” Missinger agreed.

“Great. We’re making progress here. We know you tried to reach out to Victoria several times over the course of the afternoon and she never responded. My understanding is that it was late yesterday afternoon, when you came home to meet up for a dinner reservation and found her car but not her, that you became concerned enough to call the police. If I’m getting any of this wrong, just tap your finger on the table or something to let me know.”

Hernandez continued to walk through the rest of the timeline but Jessie found herself only half-listening. She had noticed something during the last exchange and was wondering if what she’d seen was real or imagined. Right around the time that Hernandez said “over the course of the afternoon,” Michael Missinger had flinched slightly, almost reflexively. Not when Hernandez said “you tried to reach out.” Not when he said “she never responded.” Only at the words “over the course of the afternoon.”

What had he been thinking about when the afternoon was mentioned? It was so imperceptible that Missinger himself might not have noticed it. That seemed unlikely if he was recalling murdering his wife in the afternoon. She would have expected either a bigger reaction or a concerted effort to have no response at all. At yet, something about the mention of the “afternoon” had thrown him, if only slightly.

Jessie's thoughts were interrupted by a new person entering the interrogation room.

"Hello, Detectives," a short, balding, forty-something man said buoyantly. "I'm Brett Kolson, Mr. Missinger's attorney. I hope we're all having a good time here. And I'm confident that you haven't been questioning my client after he called me."

He breezed in and pulled out the metal chair beside Missinger. Jessie typed Kolson's name into the attorney database to see what she could glean about him.

"Nice to meet you, counselor," Hernandez replied with a tone that suggested he wasn't being entirely sincere. "I'm sure your client will tell you that we've been nothing but gentlemen prior to your arrival."

Missinger nodded.

"They've just been reconfirming stuff," he said quietly.

"That's right," Hernandez agreed. "But now that you're here, Mr. Kolson, we'd love to get a little clarity on some timeline-related matters."

"You're welcome to try. But I reserve the right to advise Mr. Missinger to refuse to answer anything I think is out of bounds. And I will pull him if I deem it appropriate. Mr. Missinger wants to help get to the bottom of this horrible event. I trust it won't be a witch hunt."

"Of course, not," Hernandez said, pretending not to be troubled by the very developments he was concerned would happen.

“Give us a moment to confer, privately, would you?” Kolson said.

“Sure,” Hernandez said. “We’ll be back momentarily.”

A few seconds later he and Trembley stepped into the observation room and looked at Missinger huddling quietly with his lawyer.

“We’re not going to get anything out of this guy,” Hernandez said, dispirited. “His lawyer is going to advise him not to answer anything of consequence. When we go back in there, he’s going to shut down every path we take.”

“Maybe not,” Jessie said, still studying the screen.

“What do you mean?” Hernandez asked.

“This Kolson guy isn’t a criminal lawyer. He may be putting on a good show but he’s the corporate attorney for Ecofund Investment Partners, Missinger’s hedge fund.”

“Does it really matter?” Trembley asked. “He’s still not going to let us start peppering his client with probing questions.”

“No,” Jessie agreed. “But Kolson’s legal obligation is ultimately to the fund, not to Missinger personally. If we can get Missinger to believe that his interests and his attorneys aren’t aligned, maybe he’ll say something useful.”

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