



BLAKE PIERCE

a jessie hunt psychological suspense--book 3

the
perfect
house

A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller

Блейк Пирс

The Perfect House

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The Perfect House / Б. Пирс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», 2019 — (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller)

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In THE PERFECT HOUSE (Book #3), criminal profiler Jessie Hunt, 29, fresh from the FBI Academy, returns to find herself hunted by her murderous father, locked in a dangerous game of cat and mouse. Meanwhile, she must race to stop a killer in a new case that leads her deep into suburbia—and to the brink of her own psyche. The key to her survival, she realizes, lies in deciphering her past—a past she never wanted to face again. A fast-paced psychological suspense thriller with unforgettable characters and heart-pounding suspense, THE PERFECT HOUSE is book #3 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Book #4 in the Jessie Hunt series will be available soon.

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Содержание

CHAPTER ONE	8
CHAPTER TWO	11
CHAPTER THREE	16
CHAPTER FOUR	18
CHAPTER FIVE	21
CHAPTER SIX	25
CHAPTER SEVEN	28
CHAPTER EIGHT	31
CHAPTER NINE	35
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	36

Blake Pierce

The Perfect House (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense—Book 3)

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 four 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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CHAPTER ONE

Eliza Longworth took a long sip of her coffee as she looked out over the Pacific Ocean, marveling at the view only steps from her bedroom. Sometimes she had to remind herself just how lucky she was.

Her friend of twenty-five years, Penelope Wooten, sat in the adjoining chaise lounge on the patio overlooking Los Liones Canyon. It was a relatively clear March day and in the distance Catalina Island was visible. Looking to her left, Eliza could see the gleaming towers of downtown Santa Monica.

It was mid-morning on Monday. The kids had been packed off to daycare and school and the rush hour traffic had subsided. The only thing the longtime friends had on the schedule until lunchtime was hanging out in Eliza's three-story hillside Pacific Palisades mansion. If she wasn't so blissed out at the moment, she might even start to feel a little guilty. But as the notion slipped into her brain, she immediately forced it out.

You'll have lots of time to stress later today. Just allow yourself this moment.

"Want a coffee refill?" Penny asked. "I need a potty break anyway."

"No thanks. I'm good for now," Eliza said, before adding with a mischievous grin, "By the way, you know you can call it a bathroom break when there are just adults around, right?"

Penny stuck her tongue out in response as she got up, unfolding her impossibly long legs from the chair like a giraffe getting up after a nap. Her long, lustrous blonde hair, so much more stylish than Eliza's shoulder-length light brown variety, was tied up in a fashionably utilitarian ponytail. She still looked like the runway fashion model she'd been for much of her twenties before she gave it up for an admittedly less exciting, but far less manic, life.

She headed inside, leaving Eliza alone with her thoughts. Almost immediately, despite her best efforts, her mind returned to their conversation from minutes earlier. She replayed it as if on a loop she couldn't turn off.

"Gray seems so distant lately," Eliza had said. "Our one priority was always to have family dinner with the kids. But since he made senior partner, he's had all these dinner meetings."

"I'm sure he's as frustrated as you are," Penny had assured her. "Once things settle down, you'll probably get back to your old routine."

"I can handle him being gone more. I get it. He's got more responsibility for the success of the firm now. But what bugs me is that he doesn't seem to have any sense of loss about it. He's never expressed regret that he has to miss out. I'm not even sure he notices."

"I'm sure he does, Lizzie," Penny had said. "He probably just feels guilty about it. Acknowledging what he's missing would make it that much worse. I bet he's blocking it out. I do that sometimes."

"Do what exactly?" Eliza asked.

"Pretend that something I'm doing in my life that's not really admirable is no big deal because admitting it *is* a big deal would just make me feel worse about it."

"What do you do that's so bad?" Eliza asked mockingly.

"Just last week I ate half a can of Pringles in one sitting, for one thing. And then I yelled at the kids for wanting ice cream as an afternoon snack. So there's that."

"You're right. You're a horrible person."

Penny stuck her tongue out before responding. Penny was big on sticking out her tongue.

"My point is, maybe he's not as oblivious as it seems. Have you considered counseling?"

"You know I don't believe in that crap. Besides, why should I see a therapist when I have you? Between Penny therapy and yoga, I'm set emotionally. Speaking of, are we still on for tomorrow morning at your place?"

“Absolutely.”

Thinking about it now, all joking aside, maybe marriage counseling wasn’t such a bad idea. Eliza knew that Penny and Colton went every other week and they seemed to be the stronger for it. If she did go, she knew at least her best friend wouldn’t rub it in.

They’d had each other’s back ever since they were in elementary school. She still remembered when Kelton Prew pulled her pigtails and Penny had kicked him in the shin. That was the first day of third grade. They’d been thick as thieves ever since.

They’d helped each other through countless struggles. Eliza had been there for Penny when she had her bout with bulimia in high school. In their sophomore year of college, Penny had been the one to convince her it was *not* just a bad date, but that Ray Houson had raped her.

Penny went with her to campus police and sat in the courtroom to offer moral support when she testified. And when the tennis coach wanted to drop her from the team and pull her scholarship because she was still struggling months later, Penny went to him and threatened to help her friend sue the bastard. Eliza stayed on the team and won conference player of the year as a junior.

When Eliza miscarried after trying to get pregnant for eighteen months, Penny came over every day until she was finally ready to crawl out of bed. And when Penny’s older son, Colt Jr., was diagnosed with autism, it was Eliza who did weeks of research and found the school that finally helped him start thriving.

They’d been through so many battles together that they liked to call themselves the Westside Warriors, even if their husbands thought the name was ridiculous. So if Penny was suggesting she reconsider marriage counseling, maybe she should.

Eliza was pulled out of her thoughts by a ding on Penny’s phone. She reached over and grabbed it, ready to let her friend know someone was reaching out. But when she saw the name on the text, she opened the message. It was from Gray Longworth, Eliza’s husband. It read:

Can’t wait 2 c u 2nite. I miss your scent. Three days without u is too long. I told Lizzie I have a partner’s dinner. Same time & place, right?

Eliza put the phone down. Her head was suddenly swimming and she felt weak. The mug slipped from her hand, hit the ground, and shattered into dozens of ceramic shards.

Penny ran back outside.

“Everything okay?” she asked. “I heard something break.”

She looked down at the mug with coffee splattered all around it, and then up at Eliza’s stunned face.

“What is it?” she asked.

Eliza’s eyes moved involuntarily to Penny’s phone and she watched her friend track them with her own. She saw the moment of recognition in Penelope’s eyes as she put two and two together and realized what must have so startled her oldest, dearest friend.

“It’s not like it seems,” Penny said anxiously, dispensing with any attempt to deny what they both knew.

“How could you?” Eliza demanded, barely able to get the words out. “I trusted you more than anyone in the world. And you do this?”

She felt like someone had opened a trap door below her and she was falling into a pit of nothingness. Everything that grounded her life seemed to be disintegrating before her eyes. She thought she might throw up.

“Please, Eliza,” Penny begged, kneeling down beside her friend. “Let me explain. It did happen, but it was a mistake—one that I’ve been trying to fix ever since.”

“A mistake?” Eliza repeated, sitting upright in her chair as nausea mixed with anger, making a churning cauldron of bile bubble up from her stomach to her throat. “A mistake is tripping on a curb and knocking someone over. A mistake is forgetting to carry the one in a subtraction problem. A mistake isn’t accidentally letting your best friend’s husband inside you, Penny!”

"I know," Penny acknowledged, her voice choking with regret. "I shouldn't have said that. It was a terrible decision, made in a moment of weakness, fueled by too many glasses of viognier. I told him it was over."

"'Over' suggests it was more than once," Eliza noted, scrambling to her feet. "Exactly how long have you been sleeping with my husband?"

Penny stood there silently, clearly debating whether being honest would do more harm than good.

"About a month," she finally admitted.

Suddenly her husband's recent time away from the family made more sense. Each new revelation seemed to pack a new punch to the gut. Eliza felt that the only thing keeping her from collapsing was her sense of righteous rage.

"Funny," Eliza pointed out bitterly. "That's about how long Gray has been having those late-night partner meetings you told me he probably felt bad about. What a coincidence."

"I thought I could control it..." Penny started to say.

"Don't give me that," Eliza said, shutting her down. "We both know you can get restless. But this is how you dealt with it?"

"I know this doesn't help," Penny insisted. "But I was going to break it off. I haven't talked to him in three days. I was just trying to find a way to end it with him without blowing things up with you."

"Looks like you're going to need a new plan," Eliza spat, fighting the urge to kick the coffee cup shards at her friend. Only her bare feet prevented her. She clung to her anger, knowing it was the only thing keeping her from falling apart completely.

"Please, let me find a way to make this right. There has to be something I can do."

"There is," Eliza assured her. "Leave now."

Her friend stared at her for a moment. But she must have sensed how serious Eliza was because her hesitation was brief.

"Okay," Penny said, picking up her things and scurrying toward the front door. "I'll go. But let's talk later. We've been through so much together, Lizzie. Let's not let this ruin everything."

Eliza forced herself not to scream epithets in response. This might be the last time she ever saw her "friend" again and she needed her to understand the magnitude of the situation.

"This is different," she said slowly, with emphasis on each word. "All those other times were us against the world, having each other's back. This time you stabbed me in mine. Our friendship is over."

Then she slammed the door in her best friend's face.

CHAPTER TWO

Jessie Hunt woke up with a start, briefly unsure where she was. It took a moment to remember that she was in midair, on a Monday morning flight from Washington, D.C., back to Los Angeles. She looked at her watch and saw she still had two hours left before they landed.

Trying not to drift off again, she roused herself by taking a sip from the water bottle stuffed in the seatback pocket. She swished it around her mouth, trying to get rid of the cottonmouth coating her tongue.

She had good reason to nap. The last ten weeks had been among the most exhausting of her life. She had just completed the FBI's National Academy, an intense training program for local law enforcement personnel designed to familiarize them with FBI investigative techniques.

The exclusive program was only available to those nominated to attend by their supervisors. Unless accepted to go to Quantico to become a formal FBI agent, this crash course was the next best thing.

Under normal circumstances, Jessie wouldn't have been eligible to go. Until recently, she had only been an interim junior criminal profiling consultant for the LAPD. But after she solved a high-profile case, her stock had risen rapidly.

In retrospect, Jessie understood why the academy preferred more experienced officers. For the first two weeks of the program, she'd felt completely overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information being thrown at her. She had classes in forensic science, law, terrorist mindsets, and her area of focus, behavioral science, which emphasized getting inside the minds of killers to better understand their motives. And none of that included the relentless physical training that left every muscle aching.

Eventually, she found her bearings. The courses, which were reminiscent of her recent graduate work in criminal psychology, began to make sense. After about a month, her body was no longer screaming when she woke up each morning. And best of all, the time she spent in the Behavioral Sciences Unit allowed her to interact with the best serial killer experts in the world. She hoped to one day be among them.

There was one added benefit. Because she worked so hard, both mentally and physically, for almost every waking moment, she hardly ever dreamed. Or at least, she didn't have nightmares.

Back home, she often woke up screaming in a cold sweat as memories of her childhood or her more recent traumas replayed in her unconscious. She still remembered her most recent source of anxiety. It was her last conversation with incarcerated serial killer Bolton Crutchfield, the one in which he'd told her he would be chatting with her own murderous father sometime soon.

If she had been back in L.A. for the last ten weeks, she'd have spent most of that time obsessing over whether Crutchfield was telling the truth or screwing with her. And if he *was* being honest, how would he manage to coordinate a discussion with an on-the-lam killer while he was being held in a secure mental hospital?

But because she'd been thousands of miles away, focused on unrelentingly challenging tasks for almost every waking second, she hadn't been able to fixate on Crutchfield's claims. She likely would again soon, but not just yet. Right now, she was simply too tired for her brain to mess with her.

As she settled back into her seat, allowing sleep to envelop her again, Jessie had a thought.

So all I have to do to get good sleep for the rest of my life is spend every morning working out until I almost throw up, followed by ten hours of non-stop professional instruction. Sounds like a plan.

Before she fully formed the grin that was beginning to play at her lips, she was asleep again.

*

That sense of cozy comfort disappeared the second she walked outside of LAX just after noon. From this moment on, she would need to be on constant guard again. After all, as she'd learned before she left for Quantico, a never-captured serial killer was on the hunt. Xander Thurman had been looking for her for months. Thurman also happened to be her father.

She took a rideshare from the airport to work, which was the Central Community Police Station in downtown L.A. She didn't formally start work again until tomorrow and wasn't in the mood to chat, so she didn't even go into the main bullpen of the station.

Instead, she went to her assigned mailbox cubby and collected her mail, which had been forwarded from a post office box. No one—not her work colleagues, not her friends, not even her adoptive parents—knew her actual address. She'd rented the apartment through a leasing company; her name was nowhere on the agreement and there was no paperwork connecting her to the building.

Once she grabbed the mail, she walked along a side corridor to the motor pool, where taxis were always waiting in the adjoining alley. She hopped in one and directed it to the retail strip center that was situated next to her apartment complex, about two miles away.

One reason she'd picked this place to live after her friend Lacy had insisted she move out was that it was difficult to find and even harder to access without permission. First of all, its parking structure was under the adjoining retail complex in the same building, so anyone following her would have a hard time determining where she was going.

Even if someone did figure it out, the building had a doorman and a security guard. The front door and the elevators both required keycards. And none of the apartments themselves had unit numbers listed on the outside. Residents just had to remember which was theirs.

Still, Jessie took extra precautions. Once the cab, which she paid for with cash, dropped her off, she walked into the retail center. First she passed quickly through a coffee shop, meandering through the crowd before taking a side exit.

Then, pulling the hood of her sweatshirt over her shoulder-length brown hair, she passed through a food court to a hallway that had restrooms next to a door marked "Employees Only." She pushed open the women's restroom door so that anyone following her would see it closing and think she'd gone in. Instead, not looking back, she hurried through the employee entrance, which was a long hallway with back door entrances to each business.

She jogged along the curved corridor until she found a stairwell with a sign marked "Maintenance." Hurrying down the steps as quietly as possible, she used the keycard she'd gotten from the building manager to unlock that door too. She'd negotiated special authorization to this area based on her LAPD connection rather than by trying to explain that her precautions were related to having an on-the-loose serial killer for a father.

The maintenance door closed and locked behind her as she navigated her way along a narrow passage with exposed pipes jutting out at all angles and metal cages securing equipment she didn't understand. After several minutes of dodging and weaving among the obstacles, she reached a small alcove near a large boiler.

Midway down the passage, the recessed area was unlit and easy to miss. She'd had to have it pointed out to her the first time she'd been down here. She stepped into the alcove as she pulled out the old key she'd been given. The lock to this door was an old-school bolt. She turned it, pushed open the heavy door, and quickly closed and locked it behind her.

Now in the supply room on the basement level of her apartment building, she had officially transitioned from the retail center property to the apartment complex. She hurried through the darkened room, nearly tripping over a tub of bleach lying on the floor. She opened that door, passed

through the empty maintenance manager's office, and walked up the tight stairwell that opened onto the back hallway of the apartment building's main floor.

She rounded the corner to the vestibule with the bank of elevators, where she could hear Jimmy the doorman and Fred the security guard amiably chatting with a resident in the front lobby. She didn't have time to catch up with them now but promised herself she would reconnect later.

Both were nice guys. Fred was a former highway patrolman who had retired early after a bad on-the-job motorcycle accident. It left him with a limp and a large scar on his left cheek, but that didn't stop him from constantly joking around. Jimmy, in his mid-twenties, was a sweet, earnest kid using this job to pay his way through college.

She moved past the vestibule to the service elevator, which wasn't visible from the lobby, swiped her card, and waited anxiously to see if anyone had followed her. She knew the chances were remote but that didn't stop her from shifting nervously from one foot to the other until the elevator arrived.

When it did, she stepped in, pushed the button for the fourth floor, and then the one to close the door. When the doors opened, she scurried down the hall until she got to her apartment. Taking a moment to catch her breath, she studied her door.

On first glance, it looked as nondescript as all the others on the floor. But she'd had several security upgrades added when she moved in. First, she stepped back so that she was three feet away from the door and directly in line with the peephole. A dull green glow that wasn't visible from any other angle emanated from the rim around the hole, an indicator that the unit had not been forcibly accessed. Had it been, the rim around the peephole would have been red.

In addition to the Nest doorbell camera she'd had installed, there were also multiple hidden cameras in the corridor. One had a direct view of her door. Another focused on the hall facing back to the elevator and the adjoining stairwell. A third pointed in the other direction of the second set of stairs. She'd checked them all on the way over in the cab and found no suspicious movement around her place today.

The next step was entry. She used a traditional key to open one bolt, then swiped her card and heard the other sliding bolt open as well. She stepped inside as the motion sensor alarm warning went off, dropped her backpack on the floor, and ignored the alarm as she rebolted both doors and pulled the sliding security bar across as well. Only then did she punch in the eight-digit code.

After that she grabbed the nightstick she kept by the door and hurried to the bedroom. She lifted up the removable picture frame beside the light switch to reveal the hidden security panel and punched in the four-digit code for the second, silent alarm—the one that went straight to the police if she didn't deactivate it in forty seconds.

Only then did she allow herself to breathe. As she inhaled and exhaled slowly, she walked around the small apartment, nightstick in hand, ready for anything. Searching the whole place, including the closets, shower, and pantry, took under a minute.

When she was confident that she was alone and secure, she checked the half dozen nanny-cams she had placed throughout the unit. Then she evaluated the locks on the windows. Everything was in working order. That left only one place to review.

She stepped into the bathroom and opened the narrow closet that held shelves with supplies like extra toilet paper, a plunger, some bars of soap, shower scrubbers, and mirror cleaning fluid. There was a small clasp on the left side of the closet, not visible unless one knew where to look. She flipped it and tugged, feeling the hidden latch click.

The shelving unit swung open, revealing an extremely narrow shaft behind it, with a rope ladder attached to the brick wall. The tube and ladder extended from her fourth-floor unit down to a crawl space in the basement laundry room. It was designed as her last-ditch emergency exit if all her other security measures fell through. She hoped she'd never need it.

She replaced the shelf and was about to return to the living room when she caught sight of herself in the bathroom mirror. It was the first time she'd really studied herself at length since she left. She liked what she saw.

On the surface, she didn't look that different from before. She'd had a birthday while at the FBI and was now twenty-nine, but she didn't look older. In fact, she thought she looked better than when she'd left.

Her hair was still brown, but it seemed somehow bouncier, less limp than it had been when she left L.A. all those weeks ago. Despite the long days at the FBI, her green eyes sparkled with energy and no longer had the dark shadows underneath that had become so familiar to her. She was still a lean five feet ten, but she felt stronger and firmer than before. Her arms were more toned and her core was tight from endless sit-ups and planks. She felt...prepared.

Moving into the living room, she finally turned on the lights. It took her a second to remember that all the furniture in the space was hers. She'd bought most of it just before she'd left for Quantico. She hadn't had much choice. She'd sold all the stuff from the house she'd owned with her sociopathic, currently incarcerated ex-husband, Kyle. For a while after that, she crashed at the apartment of her old college friend, Lacy Cartwright. But after it was broken into by someone sending a message to Jessie on behalf of Bolton Crutchfield, Lacy had insisted she leave, pretty much right then.

So she'd done exactly that, living in a weekly hotel for a while until she found a place—this place—that met her security needs. But it was unfurnished, so she'd burned a chunk of her money from the divorce all at once on furniture and appliances. Since she'd had to leave for the National Academy so soon after buying it all, she hadn't gotten a chance to appreciate any of it.

Now she hoped to. She sat down on the love seat and leaned back, settling in. There was a cardboard box marked "stuff to go through" sitting on the floor beside her. She picked it up and began rifling through it. Most of it was paperwork she had no intention of dealing with now. At the very bottom of the box was an 8x10 wedding photo of her and Kyle.

She stared at it almost uncomprehendingly, amazed that the person who had that life was the one sitting here now. Almost a decade ago, during their sophomore year at USC, she'd started dating Kyle Voss. They'd moved in together soon after graduation and gotten married three years ago.

For a long time, things seemed great. They lived in a cool apartment not far from here in downtown Los Angeles, or DTLA as it was often called. Kyle had a good job in finance and Jessie was getting her master's degree. Their life was comfortable. They went to new restaurants and checked out the hot bars. Jessie was happy and probably could have stayed that way for a long time.

But then Kyle got a promotion at the company's office in Orange County and insisted they move to a McMansion there. Jessie had consented, despite her apprehension. It was only then that Kyle's true nature was revealed. He became obsessed with joining a secret club that turned out to be a front for a prostitution ring. He began an affair with one of the women there. And when it went bad, he killed her and tried to frame Jessie for it. To top it all off, when Jessie uncovered his plot, he tried to kill her too.

But even now, as she studied the wedding photo, there was no hint of what her husband was ultimately capable of. He looked like a handsome, amiable, rough-around-the-edges future master of the universe. She crumpled up the photo and tossed it toward the trash can in the kitchen. It dropped right in the center, giving her an unexpected cathartic rush.

Swish! That must mean something.

There was something freeing about this place. Everything—the new furniture, the lack of personal mementos, even the borderline paranoid security measures—belonged to *her*. She had a fresh start.

She stretched out, allowing her muscles to relax after the long flight on the tightly packed plane. This apartment was hers—the first place in over half a dozen years she could truly say that about.

She could eat pizza on the couch and leave the box lying around without worrying about anyone complaining. Not that she was the type to do that. But the point was, *she could*.

The thought of pizza made her suddenly hungry. She got up and checked the fridge. Not only was it empty, it wasn't even turned on. Only then did she remember that she'd left it that way, not seeing any reason to pay for the electricity if she was going to be gone for two and a half months.

She plugged it in and, feeling restless, decided to make a grocery run. Then she had another idea. Since she didn't start work until tomorrow and it wasn't too late in the afternoon there was another stop she could make: a place—and a person—she knew she'd eventually have to visit.

She had managed to put it out of her head for most of her time at Quantico but there was still the matter of Bolton Crutchfield. She knew she should let it go, that he had been baiting her during their last meeting.

And yet she had to know: had Crutchfield really found a way to meet with her father, Xander Thurman, the Ozarks Executioner? Had he found a way to reach out to the murderer of countless people, including her mother; the man who left her, a six-year-old child, tied up next to the body to face certain death in a freezing, isolated cabin?

She was about to find out.

CHAPTER THREE

Eliza was waiting when Gray got home that night. He arrived in time for dinner, with a look on his face that suggested he knew what was coming. Since Millie and Henry were sitting right there eating their mac & cheese with hot dog slices, neither parent said anything about the situation.

It was only after the kids were down for the night that it came up. Eliza was standing in the kitchen when Gray walked in after putting them to sleep. He had taken off his sport coat but was still wearing his loosened tie and slacks. She suspected it was to make him look more credible.

Gray wasn't a big man. At five foot nine and 160 pounds he was only an inch taller than she was, though he outweighed her by a good thirty pounds. But they both knew that he was far less imposing in a T-shirt and sweatpants. Business attire was his armor.

"Before you say anything," he began, "please let me try to explain."

Eliza, who had spent much of the day turning over how this could have happened, was happy let her anguish take a temporary back seat and allow him to squirm as he tried to justify himself.

"Be my guest," she said.

"First. I'm sorry. No matter what else I say, I want you to know that I apologize. I should never have let it happen. It was a moment of weakness. She's known me for years and she knew my vulnerabilities, what would pique my interest. I should have known better but I fell for it."

"What are you saying?" Eliza asked, dumbfounded as much as hurt. "That Penny was some seductress who manipulated you into having an affair with her? We both know that you're a weak man, Gray, but are you kidding me?"

"No," he said, choosing not to respond to the "weak" comment. "I take full responsibility for my actions. I had the three whiskey sours. I ogled her legs in the dress with the slit up the side. But she knows what makes me tick. I guess it's all those heart-to-hearts you two have had over the years. She knew to brush her fingertip along my forearm. She knew to talk, almost purr in my left ear. She likely knew you hadn't done any of those things in a long time. And she knew you wouldn't be walking into that cocktail party because you were back home, knocked out on the sleeping pills you take most nights."

That hung in the air for several seconds as Eliza tried to compose herself. When she was sure she wouldn't yell, she replied in a shockingly quiet voice.

"Are you blaming me for this? Because it sounds like you're saying you couldn't keep it in your pants because I have trouble sleeping at night."

"No, I didn't mean it like that," he sniveled, backing down at the venom in her words. "It's just that you *always* have trouble sleeping at night. And you never seem all that interested in staying up with me."

"Just to be clear, Grayson—you say you're not blaming me. But then you immediately transition into saying I'm too knocked out on Valium and don't give you enough big boy attention, so you had to have sex with my best friend."

"What kind of best friend is she to do that anyway?" Gray tossed out desperately.

"Don't change the subject," she spat, forcing herself to keep her voice steady, partly to avoid waking the kids but mostly because doing so was the only thing keeping her from losing it. "She's already on my list. It's your turn now. You couldn't have come to me and said, 'Hey honey, I'd really love to spend a romantic evening with you tonight' or 'Sweetie, I feel disconnected from you lately. Can we get closer this evening?' Those weren't options?"

"I didn't want to wake you up to bother you with questions like that," he replied, his voice meek but his words cutting.

"So you've decided sarcasm is the way to go here?" she demanded.

“Look,” he said, wriggling around for any way out, “it’s over with Penny. She told me that this afternoon and I agreed. I don’t know how we move past this but I want to, if only for the kids.”

“If only for the kids?” she repeated, stunned at how many ways he could fail at once. “Just get out. I’m giving you five minutes to pack a bag and be in your car. Book a hotel until further notice.”

“You’re kicking me out of my own house?” he asked, disbelieving. “The house I paid for?”

“Not only am I kicking you out,” she hissed, “if you’re not pulling out of the driveway in five minutes, I’m calling the cops.”

“To tell them what?”

“Try me,” she seethed.

Gray stared at her. Undeterred, she walked over to the phone and picked it up. It was only when he heard the dial tone that he snapped into action. Within three minutes, he was scampering out the door like a dog with its tail between its legs, his duffel bag stuffed with dress shirts and jackets. A shoe fell out as he rushed toward the door. He didn’t notice and Eliza didn’t say anything.

It was only when she heard the car peel out that she put the phone back in its dock. She looked down at her left hand and saw that her palm was bleeding where she’d been digging her nails into it. Only now did she feel the sting.

CHAPTER FOUR

Despite being out of practice, Jessie navigated the traffic from downtown L.A. to Norwalk without too much trouble. Along the way, as a way to push her impending destination out of her mind, she decided to call her folks.

Her adoptive parents, Bruce and Janine Hunt, lived in Las Cruces, New Mexico. He was retired FBI and she was a retired teacher. Jessie had spent a few days with them on her way to Quantico and had hoped to do the same on the way back as well. But there wasn't enough time between the end of the program and her start back at work so she'd had to forgo the second visit. She hoped to return again soon, especially since her mom was battling cancer.

It didn't seem fair. Janine had been fighting it on and off for over a decade now and that was on top of the other tragedy they'd faced years ago. Just before they took Jessie in when she was six, they had lost their toddler son, also to cancer. They were eager to fill the void in their hearts, even if it meant adopting the daughter of a serial killer, one who had murdered her mother and left her for dead. Because Bruce was in the FBI, the fit seemed logical to the U.S. Marshals who had put Jessie in Witness Protection. On paper, it all made sense.

She forced that out of her head as she dialed their number.

"Hi, Pa," she said. "How's it going?"

"Okay," he answered. "Ma's napping. Do you want to call back later?"

"No. We can talk. I'll speak to her tonight or something. What's happening there?"

Four months ago, she would have been reluctant to speak to him without her mom there too. Bruce Hunt was a hard man to get close to and Jessie wasn't a ball of cuddliness either. Her memories of her youth with him were a mix of joy and frustration. There were ski trips, camping and hiking in the mountains, and family vacations to Mexico, only sixty miles away.

But there were also screaming matches, especially when she was a teenager. Bruce was a man who appreciated discipline. Jessie, with years of pent-up resentment over losing her mother, her name, and her home all at once, tended to act out. During her years at USC and after, they probably spoke less than two dozen times total. Visits back and forth were rare.

But recently, the return of Ma's cancer had forced them to speak without a middleman. And the ice had somehow broken. He'd even come out to L.A. to help her recuperate after her abdominal injury when Kyle attacked her last fall.

"Things are quiet here," he said, answering her question. "Ma had another chemo session yesterday, which is why she's recuperating now. If she feels well enough, we may go out for dinner later."

"With the whole cop crew?" she asked jokingly. A few months ago, her folks had moved from their home to a senior living facility populated primarily by retirees from the Las Cruces PD, Sheriff's Department, and FBI.

"Nah, just the two of us. I'm thinking a candlelit dinner. But somewhere where we can put a bucket beside the table in case she has to puke."

"You really are a romantic, Pa."

"I try. How are things with you? I'm assuming you passed the FBI training."

"Why do you assume that?"

"Because you knew I'd ask you about it and you wouldn't have called if you had to deliver bad news."

Jessie had to hand it to him. For an old dog, he was still pretty sharp.

"I passed," she assured him. "I'm back in L.A. now. I start work again tomorrow and I'm... out running errands."

She didn't want to worry him with her actual current destination.

“That sounds ominous. Why do I get the feeling you’re not out shopping for a loaf of bread?”

“I didn’t mean for it to sound like that. I guess I’m just wiped out from all the travel. I’m actually almost here,” she lied. “Should I call back tonight or wait until tomorrow? I don’t want to mess with your fancy, puke bucket dinner.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” he advised.

“Okay. Say hi to Ma. I love you.”

“Love you too,” he said, hanging up.

Jessie tried to focus on the road. The traffic was getting worse and the drive to the NRD facility, which took about forty-five minutes, still had a half hour left.

NRD, short for Non-Rehabilitative Division, was a special stand-alone unit affiliated with the Department State Hospital–Metropolitan in Norwalk. The main hospital was home to a wide array of mentally disordered perpetrators deemed unfit to serve time in a conventional prison.

But the NRD annex, unknown to the public and even to most law enforcement and mental health personnel, served a more clandestine role. It was designed to house a maximum of ten felons off the grid. Right now there were only five people being held there, all men, all serial rapists or killers. One of them was Bolton Crutchfield.

Jessie’s mind wandered to the most recent time she’d been there to see him. It was her last visit before she left for the National Academy, though she hadn’t told him that. Jessie had been visiting Crutchfield regularly ever since last fall, when she’d gotten permission to interview him as part of her master’s practicum. According to the staff there, he almost never consented to talk to doctors or researchers. But for reasons that didn’t become clear to her until later, he’d agreed to meet with her.

Over the next few weeks they came to a kind of agreement. He would discuss the particulars of his crimes, including methods and motives, if she shared some details of her own life. It seemed like a fair trade initially. After all, her goal was to become a criminal profiler specializing in serial killers. Having one willing to discuss the details of what he’d done could prove invaluable.

And there turned out to be an added bonus. Crutchfield had a Sherlock Holmesian ability to deduce information, even when locked in a cell in a mental hospital. He could discern details about Jessie’s life at that moment just by looking at her.

He’d used that skill, along with case information she shared, to give her clues to several crimes, including the murder of a wealthy Hancock Park philanthropist. He’d also tipped her off that her own husband might not be as trustworthy as he seemed.

Unfortunately for Jessie, his skills at deduction also worked against her. The reason she’d wanted to meet with Crutchfield in the first place was because she’d noticed that he’d modeled his murders after those of her father, legendary, never-caught serial killer Xander Thurman. But Thurman committed his crimes in rural Missouri over two decades earlier. It seemed like a random, obscure choice for a Southern California–based killer.

But it turned out that Bolton was a big fan. And once Jessie started by asking him about his interest in those old murders, it didn’t take him long to piece things together and determine that the young woman in front of him was personally connected to Thurman. Eventually he admitted that he knew she was his daughter. And he revealed one more tidbit—he’d met with her dad two years earlier.

With glee in his voice, he’d informed her that her father had entered the facility under the guise of a doctor and managed to have an extended conversation with the prisoner. Apparently he was looking for his daughter, whose name had been changed and who had been put in the Witness Protection Program after he killed her mother. He suspected that she might one day visit Crutchfield because their crimes were so similar. Thurman wanted Crutchfield to let him know if she ever showed up and give him her new name and location.

From that moment on, their relationship had an inequality that made her incredibly uncomfortable. Crutchfield still gave her information about his crimes and hints about others. But they both knew that he held all the cards.

He knew her new name. He knew what she looked like. He knew the city she lived in. At one point she discovered he even knew she'd been living at her friend Lacy's place and where that was. And apparently, despite being incarcerated in a supposedly secret facility, he had the capability of giving her father all those details.

Jessie was pretty sure that was at least part of the reason that Lacy, an aspiring fashion designer, had taken a six-month gig working in Milan. It was a great opportunity but it was also half a world away from Jessie's dangerous life.

As Jessie pulled off the freeway, only minutes from reaching NRD, she recalled how Crutchfield had finally pulled the trigger on the unspoken threat that had always hung over their meetings.

Maybe it was because he sensed she was leaving for several months. Maybe it was just out of spite. But the last time she'd looked through the glass into his devious eyes, he'd dropped a bombshell on her.

"I'll be having a little chat with your father," he'd told her in his courtly Southern accent. "I won't spoil things by saying when. But it's going to be lovely, I'm quite certain."

She had barely managed to choke out the word "How?"

"Oh, don't you worry about that, Miss Jessie," he'd said soothingly. "Just know that when we do talk, I'll be sure to give him your regards."

As she pulled onto the hospital property, she asked herself the same question that had been eating at her ever since, the one she could only put out of her head when she was intently focused on other work: had he really done it? While she was off learning how to catch people like him and her dad, had the two of them really met a second time, despite all the security precautions designed to prevent just that sort of thing?

She had a feeling that mystery was about to be solved.

CHAPTER FIVE

Entering the NRD unit was just as she'd remembered. After getting authorization to enter the enclosed hospital campus through a guard gate, she drove behind the main building to a second, smaller, nondescript one in the back.

It was a bland concrete and steel one-story structure in the middle of an unpaved parking lot. Only the roof was visible behind a large, green-meshed barbed-wire metal fence that surrounded the whole place.

She passed through a second guard gate to access NRD. After parking, she walked toward the main entrance, pretending to ignore the multiple security cameras that followed her every step. When she got to the exterior door, she waited to be buzzed in. Unlike the first time she'd come, she was now recognized by the staff and admitted on sight.

But that was only for the outer door. After passing through a small courtyard, she reached the main entrance to the facility, which had thick, bulletproof glass doors. She swiped her entry card, which made the panel light turn green. Then the security officer behind the desk inside, who could see the color change as well, buzzed her in, completing the entry process.

Jessie stood in a small vestibule, waiting for the outer door to close. Experience had taught her that the inner door couldn't be opened until the outer one shut completely. Once it locked audibly, the security guard unlocked the interior door.

Jessie stepped inside, where a second armed officer stood waiting for her. He collected her personal belongings, which were minimal. She'd learned over time that she was better off leaving almost everything in the car, which was in no danger of being broken into.

The guard patted her down and then motioned for her to go through the airport security-style millimeter wave scanner, which gave a detailed impression of her entire body. After she'd gone through, her items were returned without a word. It was the only indication that she was free to continue on.

"Is Officer Gentry meeting me?" she asked the officer behind the desk.

The woman looked up at her, an expression of complete disinterest on her face. "She'll be out in a moment. Just wait by the Transitional Prep door."

Jessie did as she was instructed. Transitional Prep was the room where all visitors went to change before interacting with a patient. Once inside, they were required to change into gray, hospital-style scrubs, remove all jewelry, and wash off any makeup. As she'd been warned, these men didn't need any additional stimulation.

A moment later, Officer Katherine "Kat" Gentry stepped out the prep door to greet her. She was a sight for sore eyes. Though they hadn't exactly gotten off on the right foot when they'd first met last summer, now the two women were friends, connected by a shared awareness of the darkness inside some people. Jessie had grown to trust her so much that Kat was one of fewer than a half dozen people in the world who knew she was the daughter of the Ozarks Executioner.

As Kat walked over, Jessie noted once again how much of a hard-ass NRD's head of security was. Physically imposing despite being an unexceptional five foot seven, her 140-pound body was comprised almost entirely of muscle and steel will. A former Army Ranger who'd served two tours in Afghanistan, she bore the remnants of those days on her face, which was pockmarked from shrapnel burns and had a long scar that started just below her left eye and ran vertically down the side of her cheek. Her gray eyes were measured, thoroughly taking in everything she saw to determine if it was a threat.

She clearly didn't consider Jessie one. She broke into a grin and gave her a big hug.

"Long time, no see, FBI lady," she said enthusiastically.

Jessie gasped for breath at the viselike embrace, only speaking once she was released.

"I'm not FBI," she reminded Kat. "It was just a training program. I'm still affiliated with LAPD."

"Whatever," Kat said dismissively. "You were at Quantico, working with the authorities in your field, learning fancy FBI techniques. If I want to call you an FBI lady, that's what I'll do."

"If it means you won't crack my spine in half, you can call me whatever you want."

"Speaking of, I don't think I could do that anymore," Kat noted. "You seem stronger than before. I'm guessing they didn't just work out your brain while you were there."

"Six days a week," Jessie told her. "Long trail runs, obstacle courses, self-defense, and weapons training. They definitely kicked my butt into halfway decent shape."

"Should I be worried?" Kat asked with faux concern, stepping back and lifting her arms into a defensive stance.

"I don't think I'm any threat to you," Jessie admitted. "But I do feel like I could protect myself around a suspect, which was definitely not the case before. Looking back, I was lucky to have survived a few of my recent encounters."

"That's awesome, Jessie," Kat said. "Maybe we should spar sometime, go a few rounds, just to keep you sharp."

"If by go a few rounds, you mean a few rounds of shots, I'm in. Otherwise, I may take a little break from the daily running and hitting and such."

"I take it all back," Kat said. "You're still the same wuss you always were."

"Now *that's* the Kat Gentry I've come to know and love. I knew there was a reason you were the first person I wanted to see when I got back in town."

"I'm flattered," Kat said. "But I think we both know I'm not the person you're really here to see. Should we stop stalling and head in?"

Jessie nodded and followed Kat into Transitional Prep, where the sterility and silence put an end to the visit's playful vibe.

*

Fifteen minutes later, Kat led Jessie to the door that connected to the NRD security wing to some of the most dangerous people on the planet. They'd already gone to her office for a debriefing about the last few months, which had been surprisingly uneventful.

Kat informed her that once Crutchfield had threatened an imminent meeting with her father, the already tight security had been increased even more. The facility added additional security cameras and even more identity verification for visitors.

There was no evidence that Xander Thurman had tried to visit Crutchfield. His only guests had been the doctor who came every month to check his vitals, the psychiatrist he almost never spoke to, an LAPD detective who hoped, futilely as it turned out, that Crutchfield would share info on a cold case he was working, and his court-appointed lawyer, who showed up only to make sure he wasn't being tortured. He barely engaged with any of them.

According to Kat, he hadn't mentioned Jessie to the staff, not even to Ernie Cortez, the easygoing officer who supervised his weekly showers. It was as if she didn't exist. She wondered if he was pissed at her.

"I know you remember the drill," Kat said, as they stood at the security door. "But it's been a few months so let's just review the security procedures as a precaution. Don't approach the prisoner. Don't touch the glass barrier. I know this one will get thrown out the window, but officially, you're not supposed to share any personal information. Got it?"

"Yep," Jessie said, happy for the reminders. It was helpful to get her in the proper frame of mind.

Kat swiped her badge and nodded at the camera over the door. Someone inside buzzed them in. Jessie was immediately overwhelmed by the surprising flurry of activity. Instead of the usual four security guards, there were six. In addition, there were three men in workmen uniforms walking around with various pieces of technical equipment.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Oh, I forgot to mention—we’re getting a few new residents at mid-week. We’ll be full up in all ten cells. So we’re checking the surveillance equipment in the empty cells to make sure everything’s working right. We’ve also increased the security staff on each shift from four officers to six during the day, not including me, and from three to four at night.”

“That’s sounds...risky,” Jessie said diplomatically.

“I fought it,” Kat admitted. “But the county had a need and we had available cells. It was a losing battle.”

Jessie nodded as she looked around. The fundamentals of the place seemed the same. The unit was designed like a wheel with a command center in the middle and spokes extending out in every direction, leading to inmate cells. There were currently six officers in the now-cramped space of the command center, which looked like an extremely busy hospital nurses’ station.

A few of the faces were new to her but most were familiar, including Ernie Cortez. Ernie was a massive specimen of a man, about six foot six and 250 well-muscled pounds. He was in his thirties and just starting to show bits of gray in his close-cropped black hair. He gave a big grin when he saw Jessie.

“Vogue chick,” he called out, using the affectionate nickname he’d given her on their first meeting when she’d shown up and he tried to hit on her, suggesting she should be a model. She’d shut him down pretty fast but he didn’t seem to hold a grudge.

“How’s it going, Ernie?” she asked, smiling back.

“You know; same old. Making sure pedophiles, rapists, and murderers mind their P’s and Q’s. You?”

“Mostly the same,” she said, deciding not to get into the particulars of her activities the last few months with so many unfamiliar faces around.

“So now that you’ve had a few months to get over your divorce, you want to spend a little quality time with the Ernster? I’m planning to go to Tijuana this weekend.”

“The Ernster?” Jessie repeated, unable to stop herself from giggling.

“What?” he said, faux-defensively. “It’s a nickname.”

“I’m sorry, Ernster, but I’m pretty sure I’m going to have plans this weekend. But you have fun at the jai alai track. Buy some Chiclets for me, okay?”

“Ouch,” he replied, grabbing at his chest as if she’d shot an arrow in his heart. “You know, big boys have feelings too. We’re also, you know...big boys.”

“All right, Cortez,” Kat interjected, “enough of that. You just made me throw up a little in my mouth. And Jessie has business to attend to.”

“Hurtful,” Ernie muttered under his breath as he returned his attention to the monitor in front of him. Despite his words, his tone suggested he wasn’t all that broken up. Kat motioned for Jessie to follow her to the spoke with Crutchfield’s cell.

“You’ll want this,” she said, holding up the small key fob with the red button in the middle. It was the “in case of emergency, break glass” device. Jessie considered it a kind of digital security blanket.

If Crutchfield was messing with her head and she wanted to leave the room without letting him know the impact he was having, she was to push the button hidden in her hand. That would alert Kat, who could remove her from the room for some official, made-up reason. Jessie was pretty sure Crutchfield was aware of the device but she was glad to have it nonetheless.

She grabbed the key fob, nodded to Kat that she was ready to enter, and took a deep breath. Kat opened the door and Jessie stepped inside.

Apparently Crutchfield had anticipated her arrival. He was standing up, only inches from the glass wall dividing the room in half, smiling broadly at her.

CHAPTER SIX

It took Jessie a second to rip her eyes away from his crooked teeth and evaluate the situation.

On the surface, he didn't look that different than she remembered. He still had the blond hair, shorn close to his head. He still wore the same mandatory aqua-blue scrubs. He still had the slightly pudgier face than one would expect of a man who was about five foot eight and 150 pounds. It made him look closer to twenty-five than the thirty-five years old he was.

And he still had the probing, almost stalking brown eyes. They were the only hint that the man across from her had killed at nineteen least people and perhaps twice that many.

The cell hadn't changed either. It was small, with a narrow sheetless bed bolted to the far wall. A small desk with an attached chair sat in the back right corner beside a small metal wash basin. Behind that was a toilet, set off in the back, with a sliding plastic door for a modicum of privacy.

"Miss Jessie," he purred softly. "What an unexpected surprise running into you here."

"And yet, you're standing there as if you expected my imminent arrival," Jessie countered, not wanting to give Crutchfield even a moment's advantage. She walked over and sat down in the chair behind a small desk on the other side of the glass. Kat took up her usual position, standing alertly in the corner of the room.

"I sensed a change in the energy of this facility," he replied, his Louisiana accent as pronounced as ever. "The air seemed sweeter and I thought I could hear a bird chirping outside."

"You're not usually this full of flattery," Jessie noted. "Care to share what has you in such a complimentary mood?"

"Nothing in particular, Miss Jessie. Can't a man just appreciate the small joy that comes from having an unexpected visitor?"

Something in the way he said that last line made Jessie's scalp tingle, as if there was more to the comment. She sat quietly for a moment, allowing her mind to work, unconcerned about any time constraints. She knew Kat would let her handle the interview however she chose.

Turning over Crutchfield's words in her head, she realized they might have more than one meaning.

"When you talk about unexpected visitors, are you referring to me, Mr. Crutchfield?"

He stared at her for several seconds without speaking. Finally, slowly, the wide, forced smile on his face twisted into a more malevolent—and more believable—smirk.

"We haven't established the ground rules for this visit," he said, suddenly turning his back on her.

"I think the days of ground rules have long since passed, don't you, Mr. Crutchfield?" she asked. "We've known each other long enough that we can just talk, can't we?"

He walked back to the bed attached to the back wall of the cell and sat down, his expression slightly hidden in shadow now.

"But how can I be certain that you'll be as forthcoming as you'd like me to be with you?" he asked.

"After ordering one of your flunkies to break into my friend's apartment and scaring her to the point that she still can't sleep, I'm not sure you've fully earned my trust or my willingness to be accommodating."

"You bring up that incident," he said, "but you neglect to mention the multiple times I've assisted you in cases both professional and personal. For every so-called indiscretion on my part, I've compensated with information that has proved invaluable to you. All I'm asking for are assurances that this won't be a one-way street."

Jessie looked at him hard, trying to determine how accommodating she could be while still keeping a professional distance.

“What is it exactly that you’re looking for?”

“Right now? Just your time, Miss Jessie. I’d prefer you not be such a stranger. It’s been seventy-six days since you last graced me with your presence. A less confident man than myself might take offense at the long absence.”

“Okay,” Jessie said. “I promise to visit you on a more regular basis. In fact, I’ll make sure to stop by at least once more this week. How does that sound?”

“It’s a start,” he replied noncommittally.

“Great. Then let’s get back to my question. You said before that you appreciated the joy that comes from having an unexpected visitor. Were you referring to me?”

“Miss Jessie, while it is always a delight to revel in your company, I must confess that my comment was indeed in reference to another visitor.”

Jessie could sense Kat stiffen in the corner behind her.

“And who are you referring to?” she asked, keeping her voice level.

“I think you know.”

I’d like you to tell me,” Jessie insisted.

Bolton Crutchfield stood up again, now more visible in the full light, and Jessie could see that he was rolling his tongue around in his mouth, like it was a fish on a line that he was toying with.

“As I assured you the last time that we spoke, I would be having a chat with your daddy.”

“And have you?”

“I have indeed,” he answered as casually as if he were telling her the time. “He asked me to pass along his regards, after I offered yours.”

Jessie stared at him closely, looking for any hint of deception in his face.

“You spoke to Xander Thurman,” she reconfirmed, “in this room, sometime in the last eleven weeks?”

“I did.”

Jessie knew that Kat was bursting to ask her own questions in order to try to confirm the veracity of his claim and how it might have happened. But in her mind, that was secondary and could be addressed later. She didn’t want the conversation to get sidetracked so she followed up before her friend could say anything.

“What did you discuss?” she asked, trying to keep the judgment out of her voice.

“Well, we had to be rather cryptic, so as not to reveal his true identity to those listening in. But the gist of our chat was about you, Miss Jessie.”

“Me?”

“Yes. If you’ll recall, he and I chatted a couple of years ago and he warned me that you might one day visit. But that you would have a different name than the one he’d given you, Jessica Thurman.”

Jessie flinched involuntarily at the name she hadn’t heard spoken aloud by anyone but herself in two decades. She knew he saw her reaction but there was nothing she could do about it. Crutchfield smiled knowingly and continued.

“He wanted to know how his long-lost daughter was doing. He was interested in all kinds of details—what you do for a living, where you live, what you look like now, what your new name is. He’s very anxious to reconnect, Miss Jessie.”

As he spoke, Jessie told herself to breathe slowly in and out. She reminded herself to unclench her body and do her best to look calm, even if it was a facade. She had to appear unperturbed as she asked her next question.

“Did you share any of those details with him?”

“Just one,” he said impishly.

“And what was that?”

“Home is where the heart is,” he said.

“What the hell does that mean?” she demanded, her heart suddenly beating rapidly.

“I told him the location of the place you call home,” he said matter-of-factly.

“You gave him my address?”

“I wasn’t that specific. To be honest, I don’t know your exact address, despite my best efforts to uncover it. But I know enough for him find his way to you if he’s smart. And as we both know, Miss Jessie, your daddy is very smart.”

Jessie gulped hard and fought the urge to scream at him. He was still answering her questions and she needed as much information as she could get before he stopped.

“So how long do I have before he knocks on my door?”

“That depends on how long it takes for him to put the pieces together,” Crutchfield said with an exaggerated shrug. “As I said, I had to be a bit cryptic. If I had been too specific, it would have sent off warning signs with the folks who monitor my every conversation. That wouldn’t have been productive.”

“Why don’t you tell me exactly what you told him? That way, I can figure out the likely timetable for myself.”

“Now where’s the fun in that, Miss Jessie? I’m quite taken with you. But that strikes me as an unreasonable advantage. We have to give the man a chance.”

“A chance?” Jessie repeated, disbelieving. “To what? Get a head start on gutting me like he did my mother?”

“Now that hardly seems fair,” he replied, seeming to get calmer the more agitated Jessie became. “He could have done that back in that snowy cabin all those years ago. But he didn’t. So why assume he means you harm now? Maybe he just wants to take his little lady to Disneyland for the day.”

“You’ll forgive me if I’m not as inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt,” she spat. “This isn’t a game, Bolton. You want me to visit you again? I need to be alive to do that. I won’t be very chatty if your mentor chops up your favorite gal pal.”

“Two things, Miss Jessie: first of all, I understand that this is disruptive news, but I’d prefer you not take such a familiar tone with me. Calling me by my first name? That’s not only unprofessional, it’s unbecoming of you.”

Jessie seethed silently. Even before he told her the second thing, she knew he wasn’t going to tell her what she wanted. Still, she remained silent, literally biting her tongue in case he had a change of heart.

“And second,” he continued, clearly enjoying watching her squirm, “while I do enjoy your company, don’t presume that you’re my favorite gal pal. Let’s not forget about the ever-vigilant Officer Gentry there behind you. She’s a real peach—a rotting, rancid peach. As I’ve told her on more than one occasion, when I depart this place, I intend to give her a special send-off, if you take my meaning. So please don’t try to jump the gal pal line.”

“I…” Jessie began, hoping to change his mind.

“Our time is up, I’m afraid,” he said curtly. With that, he turned and walked over to the tiny niche of the cell with the toilet in it and pulled the plastic divider across, ending the conversation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jessie kept her head on a swivel, on the lookout for anyone or anything out of the ordinary.

As she returned to her place, following the same circuitous route as earlier in the day, all the security precautions she'd been so proud of only hours earlier now seemed woefully inadequate.

This time around, she tied her hair into a bun and hid it under a baseball cap and the hood of a sweatshirt she bought on the way back from Norwalk. Her small backpack purse was attached in the front so that it hugged her chest. Despite the added anonymity they might have provided, she didn't wear sunglasses out of concern they would limit her line of sight.

Kat had promised to review the tape of all Crutchfield's recent visits to see if they'd missed something. She also said that if Jessie could wait until work ended, she'd make the drive to DTLA, even though she lived in far-off City of Industry, and help ensure that she got back safe. Jessie politely declined the offer.

"I can't count on having an armed escort everywhere I go from now on," she'd insisted.

"Why not?" Kat had asked only half-jokingly.

Now, as she walked down the corridor to her apartment, she wondered if she should have taken her friend up on the offer. She felt especially vulnerable with the bag of groceries in her arms. The hall was deathly quiet and she hadn't seen anyone at all since entering the building. Before she could dismiss it out of hand, a crazy notion popped into her head—that her father had killed everyone on her floor so that he wouldn't have to deal with complications when he approached her.

Her peephole light was green, which gave her some assurance as she opened the door, looking down both ends of the hall for anyone who might jump out at her. No one did. Once inside, she flicked on the lights and then turned all the locks back before disarming both alarms. Immediately after, she rearmed the main one in "home" mode so that she could move about the apartment without setting off the motions sensors.

She put the grocery bag on the kitchen counter and searched the place, nightstick in hand. She had successfully applied for a firearms permit before she left for Quantico and was supposed to get her weapon when she went to the station for work tomorrow. Part of her wished she had just picked it up when she stopped by to get her mail earlier today. When she was finally confident that the apartment was secure, she began to put the groceries away, leaving out the sashimi she'd picked up for dinner instead of pizza.

Nothing like supermarket sushi on Monday night to make a single gal feel special in the big city.

The thought made her chuckle to herself briefly before she remembered that her serial killer father had been given a guide to her place of residence. Maybe it wasn't a complete roadmap. But from what Crutchfield had said, it was enough for him to eventually find her. The big question was: when was "eventually"?

*

Ninety minutes later, Jessie was punching a heavy bag, sweat pouring off her body. After finishing her sushi, she had felt restless and cooped up and decided to work out her frustrations in a constructive way at the gym.

She'd never been much of a workout fiend. But while at the National Academy she'd come to an unexpected discovery. When she worked out to exhaustion, there was no space left inside her for the anxiety and fear that consumed her so much of the rest of the time. If only she'd known this a decade ago, she could have saved herself thousands of sleepless nights, even the nights filled with endless nightmares.

It might also have saved her a few trips to see her therapist, Dr. Janice Lemmon, a renowned forensic psychologist in her own right. Dr. Lemmon was one of the few people who knew every detail about Jessie's past. She'd been an invaluable resource in recent years.

But she was currently in recovery from a kidney transplant and wasn't available for sessions for a few more weeks. Jessie was tempted to think she could dispense with the visits altogether. But while it might be cheaper to go with workout therapy alone, she knew there would surely be times she'd need to see the doctor in the future.

As she went in for a series of jabs, she recalled how, prior to her trip to Quantico, she'd often wake up covered in perspiration, breathing heavily, trying to remind herself that she was safe in Los Angeles and not back in a small cabin in the Missouri Ozarks, tied to a chair, watching blood drip from the slowly freezing body of her dead mother.

If only that had just been a dream too. But it was all real. When she was six years old and her parents' marriage was on the rocks, her father had taken her and her mother to his remote cabin. While there, he revealed that he'd been abducting, torturing, and killing people for years. And then he did the same to his own wife, Carrie Thurman.

As he manacled her hands to the ceiling beams of the cabin and intermittently stabbed her with a knife, he made Jessie—then Jessica Thurman—watch. He tied her arms to a chair and taped her eyelids open as he finally cut her mother open for good.

Then he used the same knife to slice a large gash across his own daughter's collarbone from her left shoulder to the base of her neck. After that, he simply left the cabin. It was three days later when, hypothermic and in shock, she was discovered by two hunters who had just happened by.

After she recovered, she told the police and FBI the story. But by then, her dad was long gone and any hope of catching him was gone with it. Jessica was put into Witness Protection in Las Cruces with the Hunts. Jessica Thurman became Jessie Hunt and a new life began.

Jessie shook the memories out of her head, switching from jabs to knee kicks intended for an attacker's groin. She embraced the ache in her quad as she slammed it upward. With each blow, the image of her mother's pale, lifeless skin faded.

Then another memory popped into her head, that of her former husband, Kyle, attacking her in their own home, trying to kill her and frame her for the murder of his mistress. She could almost feel the sting of the fireplace poker he jammed into the left side of her abdomen.

The physical pain of that moment was only matched by the humiliation she still felt at having spent a decade involved with a sociopath and never realizing it. She was, after all, supposed to be an expert at identifying these kinds of people.

Jessie switched it up again, hoping to push the shame out of her mind with a series of elbow shots to the bag near where an assailant's jaw would be. Her shoulders were starting to shout at her in displeasure but she continued pummeling the bag, knowing that her mind would soon be too tired to be distressed.

This was the part of herself she hadn't expected to discover at the FBI—the physical badass. Despite the standard apprehension she felt when she arrived, she had suspected she'd do well on the academic side of things. She had just spent the previous three years in that environment, immersed in criminal psychology.

And she'd been right. The classes in law, forensic science, and terrorism had come easy. Even the behavior science seminar, where the instructors were heroes of hers and she thought she'd be nervous, came naturally. But it had been the physical fitness classes, and the self-defense training in particular, where she'd surprised herself the most.

Her instructors had shown her that at five-foot-ten and 145 pounds, she had the physical size to contend with most perpetrators if she was properly prepared. She would likely never have the hand-to-hand combat skills of a former Special Forces veteran like Kat Gentry. But she left the program confident that she could defend herself in most situations.

Jessie yanked off the gloves and moved to the treadmill. Glancing at the clock, she saw that it was approaching 8 p.m. She decided that a solid five-mile run should wipe her out enough to let her sleep dream-free tonight. That was a priority as she started back at work tomorrow where she knew all her colleagues would give her crap, expecting her to be some kind of FBI superhero now.

She set the time for forty minutes, putting pressure on herself to complete the five miles at an eight-minute-per-mile pace. Then she turned up the volume on her ear buds. As the first few seconds of Seal's "Killer" started to play, her mind went blank, focusing only on the task in front of her. She was completely oblivious to the song's title or any personal memories it might conjure up. There was only the beat and her legs pounding in harmony with it. It was as close to peace as Jessie Hunt could get.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Eliza Longworth hurried to Penny's front door as quickly as she could. It was almost 8 a.m., which was when their yoga instructor usually showed up.

It had been a largely sleepless night. Only in the first light of morning did she feel like she knew the path she had to take. Once the decision was made, Eliza felt a weight lift off her.

She texted Penny to tell her that the long night had given her time to think, and to reconsider if she'd been too hasty in ending their friendship. They should do the yoga lesson. And then afterward, once their instructor, Beth, had gone, they could try to find a way to hash things out.

Penny hadn't replied but that didn't stop Eliza from going over anyway. Just as she reached the front door, she saw Beth driving up the winding residential road and waved to her.

"Penny!" she yelled as she knocked on the door. "Beth's here. Are we still on for yoga?"

There was no answer so she pushed the Ring doorbell and waved her arms in front of the camera.

"Penny, can I come in? We should talk for a sec before Beth arrives."

There was still no answer and Beth was only about a hundred yards down the road so she decided to go in. She knew where the secret key was kept but tried the door anyway. It was unlocked. She stepped inside, leaving the door open for Beth.

"Penny," she called out. "You left the door unlocked. Beth's pulling up. Did you get my text? Can we talk privately for a minute before we start?"

She walked into the foyer and waited. There was still no response. She moved into the living room where they usually had the yoga sessions. It was empty too. She was about to go to the kitchen when Beth walked in.

"Ladies, I'm here!" she called out from the front door.

"Hey, Beth," Eliza said, turning to greet her. "The door was unlocked but Penny's not answering. I'm not sure what's up. Maybe she overslept or is in the bathroom or something. I can check upstairs if you want to get yourself something to drink. I'm sure it'll just be a minute."

"No problem," Beth said. "My nine thirty client cancelled so I'm not in a hurry. Tell her to take her time."

"Okay," Eliza said as she started up the stairs. "Just give us a minute."

She was about halfway up the first flight of stairs when she wondered if perhaps she should have taken the elevator. The master bedroom was on the third floor and she wasn't enthused about the hike. Before she could seriously reconsider, she heard a scream from down below.

"What is it?" she yelled as she turned and rushed back down.

"Hurry!" Beth shouted. "Dear god, hurry!"

Her voice was coming from the kitchen. Eliza broke into a run once she got to the bottom of the stairs, tearing through the living room and rounding the corner.

On the Spanish tile kitchen floor, lying in a massive pool of blood, was Penny. Her eyes were frozen open in terror, her body contorted into some horrifying death spasm.

Eliza hurried over to her oldest, dearest friend, slipping on the thick liquid as she approached. Her foot slid out from under her and she landed hard on the ground, her whole body splashing in the blood.

Trying not to gag, she crawled over and put her hands on Penny's chest. Even with clothes on, she was cold. Despite that, Eliza shook her, as if that might wake her up.

"Penny," she begged, "wake up."

Her friend didn't respond. Eliza looked up at Beth.

"Do you know CPR?" she asked.

"No," the younger woman said in a quavering voice, shaking her head. "But I think it's too late."

Ignoring the comment, Eliza tried to remember the CPR class she'd taken years ago. It was for treating children but the same principles should apply. She opened Penny's mouth, tilted her head back, pinched her nose, and blew hard down her friend's throat.

Then she climbed on top of Penny's waist, put one hand on top of the other with her palms down, and thrust the pad of her hand down into Penny's sternum. She did it a second time and then a third, trying to get into some kind of rhythm.

"Oh god," she heard Beth mutter and looked up to see what was going on.

"What is it?" she demanded harshly.

"When you push on her, blood oozes out of her chest."

Eliza looked down. It was true. Each compression caused a slow leak of blood from what appeared to be wide gashes in her chest cavity. She looked up again.

"Call nine-one-one!" she screamed, though she knew there was no point.

*

Jessie, who felt unexpectedly nervous, got to work early.

With all of the extra security precautions she had in place, she'd decided to leave for her first day of work in three months twenty minutes early to make sure she arrived by 9 a.m., the time Captain Decker had told her to show up. But she must have been getting better at negotiating all the hidden turns and stairwells because it didn't take nearly as long as she expected to get to Central Station.

As she walked from the parking structure to the main entrance of the station, her eyes darted back and forth, looking for anything out of the ordinary. But then she remembered the promise she'd made to herself just before she fell asleep last night. She would not allow the threat from her father to consume her.

She had no idea how vague or specific Bolton Crutchfield's information to her father had been. She couldn't even be sure that Crutchfield was telling her the truth. Regardless, there wasn't much more she could do about it than she was already doing. Kat Gentry was checking the tapes of Crutchfield's visits. She basically lived in a bunker. She'd be getting her official weapon today. Beyond that, she had to live her life. Otherwise she'd go crazy.

She made her way back to the station's main bullpen, more than a little apprehensive at the reception she'd receive after so long away. Add to that, when she'd last been here she was merely an interim junior profiling consultant.

Now the interim tag was gone and, though she was technically still a consultant, she was paid by the LAPD and got all the attendant benefits. That included health insurance, which if recent experience was any example, she'd need in spades.

When she stepped into the large central work area, comprised of dozens of desks, separated by nothing more than corkboards, she breathed in and waited. But there was nothing. No one said anything.

In fact, no one even seemed to notice her arrival. Some heads were down, studying case files. Others were fixed on the people across the tables from them, in most cases witnesses or handcuffed suspects.

She felt slightly deflated. But more than that, she felt silly.

What did I expect—a parade?

It's not like she won the mythical Nobel Prize for crime solving. She'd gone to an FBI training academy for two and a half months. It was pretty cool. But no one was going to break out in applause for her.

She walked quietly through the maze of desks, passing detectives she'd worked with previously. Callum Reid, in his mid-forties, glanced up from the file he was reading. As he nodded at her, his glasses almost fell off his forehead, where they had been resting.

Twenty-something Alan Trembley, his blond curls messy as usual, was wearing glasses too, but his were at the bridge of his nose as he intently questioned an older man who appeared to be drunk. He didn't even notice Jessie as she walked past him.

She reached her desk, which was embarrassingly tidy, tossed down her jacket and backpack purse, and took a seat. As she did, she saw Garland Moses slowly amble from the break room, coffee in hand, as he started up the stairs to his second-floor office in what was essentially a broom closet.

It seemed a rather unimpressive workspace for the most celebrated criminal profiler the LAPD had but Moses didn't appear to care. In fact, he couldn't be bothered about much. Over seventy years old and working as a consultant for the department mostly to avoid boredom, the legendary profiler could do pretty much whatever he wanted. A former FBI agent, he'd moved to the West Coast to retire but had been convinced to consult for the department. He agreed, as long as he could pick his cases and work his hours. Considering his track record, no one objected at the time and they still didn't now.

With a shock of unkempt white hair, leathery skin, and a wardrobe circa 1981, he had a reputation of being crusty at best and downright surly at worst. But in Jessie's one significant interaction with him, she'd found him to be, if not warm, at least conversational. She wanted to pick his brain more but was still a bit frightened to engage him directly.

As he shuffled up the stairs and out of sight, she glanced around, looking for Ryan Hernandez, the detective she'd worked with most often and whom she felt borderline comfortable calling her friend. They'd even recently started using each other's first name, a huge deal in cop circles.

They had actually met under non-professional circumstances, when her professor invited him to speak to her graduate criminal psychology class in her final semester at UC-Irvine last fall. He'd presented a case study, which Jessie, alone in the class, had been able to solve. Later, she learned she was only the second person ever to figure it out.

After that, they'd stayed in touch. She'd call him for help after she began to grow suspicious of her husband's motives but before he tried to kill her. And once she'd moved back to DTLA, she was assigned to Central Station, where he was based.

They worked several cases together, including the murder of high society philanthropist Victoria Missinger. It was in large part Jessie's discovery of the killer that had garnered the respect that secured her the FBI gig. And it wouldn't have been possible without Ryan Hernandez's experience and instincts.

In fact, he was so well regarded that he'd been assigned to a special unit in Robbery-Homicide called Homicide Special Section, or HSS for short. They specialized in high-profile cases that engendered lots of media interest or public scrutiny. That usually meant arsons, murders with multiple victims, murders of notable individuals, and, of course, serial killers.

Beyond his gifts as an investigator, Jessie had to acknowledge that he wasn't unpleasant to spend time with. The two of them had an easy rapport, as if they'd known each other much longer than six months. On a few occasions at Quantico, when her guard was down, Jessie wondered if things might have been different if they'd met under other circumstances. But at the time, Jessie had still been married and Hernandez and his wife had been together for over six years.

Just then Captain Roy Decker opened his office door and stepped out. Tall, skinny, and almost completely bald save for a few stray hairs, Decker was not yet sixty. But he looked much older than that, with a sallow, lined face that suggested constant stress. His nose came to a sharp point and his small eyes were alert, as if always on the hunt, which Jessie supposed he was.

As he stepped into the bullpen, someone followed him out. It was Ryan. He was just as she'd remembered him. About six feet tall and two hundred pounds with short black hair and brown eyes, he wore a coat and tie that hid what she knew to be a well-muscled frame.

He was thirty years old, young to be a full detective. But he had moved up fast, especially after, as a street officer, he'd helped catch a notorious serial killer named Bolton Crutchfield.

As he and Captain Decker walked out, something his boss said made him break into that warm, easy grin that was so disarming, even to suspects he was questioning. Much to her surprise, the sight of it caused an unexpected reaction in her. Somewhere in her stomach, she got a strange sensation she hadn't felt in years: butterflies.

Hernandez caught sight of her and waved as the two men walked over. She stood up, annoyed at the unexpected feeling and hoping movement would stifle it. Forcing her brain into professional mode, she tried to discern what they might have been talking about privately based on their expressions. But both men wore masks that suggested they were trying to keep the content of their discussion private. Jessie did notice one thing, however: Ryan looked tired.

"Welcome back, Hunt," Decker said perfunctorily. "I trust your time in Virginia was illuminating?"

"Very much so, sir," she replied.

"Excellent. While I would love to hear about the particulars, we'll have to hold off on that for now. Instead, you're going to put your new skills to the test right away. You've got a case."

"Sir?" she said, slightly surprised. She assumed he'd want to ease her back in and go over her new duties as a full-time non-interim profiler.

"Hernandez will explain the details to you en route," Decker said. "The case is a bit sensitive and your services were specifically requested."

"Really?" Jessie asked, regretting her enthusiasm the moment she said it.

"Really, Hunt," Decker answered, scowling slightly. "Apparently you've developed a bit of a reputation as the Suburbia Whisperer. I can't go into any more now. Suffice to say, the folks upstairs want this case handled delicately. I expect you'll keep that in mind as you proceed."

"Yes sir."

"All right. We'll catch up later," he said. Then he turned and walked off without another word. Ryan, who hadn't spoken until then, finally did now.

"Welcome home," he said. "How are you doing?"

"Not too bad," she said, ignoring the fluttering sensation that had suddenly returned. "Just getting back into the flow of things, you know?"

"Well, diving right back in should help," he said. "We've got to head out right away."

"Do I have time to pick up the weapon I requisitioned before I left for Quantico?"

"I checked on that for you earlier this morning," he said as they began walking through the bullpen. "Unfortunately, there was some kind of bureaucratic screw-up and it hadn't been processed yet. I resolved the paperwork issue but you probably won't get your gun until next week. Think you can survive just using your brain as a weapon for a few days?"

He smiled at her but she noticed something she hadn't picked up on earlier. He had shadows under his eyes, which were a little red.

"Sure," she said, nodding, trying to keep up with his brisk pace. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Why?" he asked, glancing over at her.

"You just look a little...tired."

"Yeah," he said, looking straight ahead again as he talked. "I've had a bit of trouble sleeping lately. Shelly and I are getting separated."

CHAPTER NINE

They had been in the car for several minutes before things felt normal again.

Jessie had offered her sympathies back at the station and Ryan had thanked her. But he hadn't been forthcoming beyond that and she didn't think that asking any questions was appropriate. And since whatever case they were handling was too sensitive to discuss inside the station, they were reduced to awkward chitchat about her flight back and the perils of supermarket sushi. They were out of rhythm.

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