BLAKE PIERCE

the perfect lie

a jessie hunt psychological suspense--book 5

Blake Pierce

The Perfect Lie

Серия «A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller», книга 5

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=50217708
The Perfect Lie (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller—Book Five):
ISBN 9781094310398

Аннотация

“A masterpiece of thriller and mystery. Blake Pierce did a magnificent job developing characters with a psychological side so well described that we feel inside their minds, follow their fears and cheer for their success. Full of twists, this book will keep you awake until the turn of the last page.”

—-Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Once Gone)

THE PERFECT LIE is book #5 in a new psychological suspense series by bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose #1 bestseller Once Gone (a free download) has over 1,000 five-star reviews.

When a gorgeous, popular gym trainer is found murdered in a wealthy suburban town, criminal profiler and FBI agent Jessie Hunt, 29, is called in to find out who killed her. Yet the twisted secrets that this affair-ridden town holds is unlike anything she has encountered before.

Who was this woman sleeping with? How many marriages did she shatter?

And why did they want her dead?

A fast-paced psychological suspense thriller with unforgettable characters and heart-pounding suspense, THE PERFECT LIE is book #5 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

Book #6 in the Jessie Hunt series will be available soon.

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Blake Pierce
The Perfect Lie (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller—Book Five)

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Blake Pierce is author of the bestselling RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes sixteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising thirteen 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 five books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising six books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising five books (and counting); and of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising five 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

Jessie almost had him.

The suspect was about ten yards ahead of her. They were both running on the sand, which felt surprisingly cold under her bare feet. The beach was virtually empty and she wondered when her backup would arrive. The suspect was bigger than her and if he turned around, she might have to shoot him to maintain her advantage. She wanted to avoid that if at all possible.

Suddenly, with the man almost in grasping distance, he seemed to collapse. But then she realized that he was actually sinking. A moment later he dropped through the sand right before her eyes.

Jessie barely had time to process that he'd fallen through a sinkhole on the beach before she felt herself being sucked down too. She tried to grab onto anything she could to prevent herself from falling into the hole. But there was nothing but loose sand. Still, she clung to it even as she disappeared under the dune.

When she regained consciousness, she realized she was in what seemed like a sea cave. She had no recollection of how she got there. She saw the suspect she'd been chasing lying on his stomach in the dirt across from her. He wasn't moving, likely knocked out.

Glancing around, she tried to get a better sense of her surroundings. It was only then that she realized she was standing

up with her arms above her head. Her wrists were tied with a rope that was attached to the top of the cave wall. The rope was so tight that the tips of her toes barely touched the ground below.

As her head cleared, a horrifying realization hit her: she'd been in this position before. This was the exact scenario she'd faced two months ago when her own father, the brutal serial killer Xander Thurman, had captured and tortured her before she'd managed to kill him.

Was this some copycat killer? How was that even possible? The details of the incident had been kept secret. Then she heard a noise and saw a shadow in the mouth of the cave. As he stepped into view she tried to identify him. But he was backlit by the sun and his features were obscured. All she could see was the silhouette of a tall, thin man and the gleam of the long knife in his hand.

He stepped forward and kicked the body of the unconscious man in the sand that she'd been chasing earlier. He rolled over and she saw that he wasn't unconscious. He was dead. His throat had been slit roughly and blood covered his chest.

Jessie looked back up, still unable to see the face of her captor. In the background, she heard a quiet groaning. She looked in the corner of the cave and noticed something she'd missed earlier. A young woman, in her teens, was tied to a chair with her mouth gagged. She was the one groaning. Her terrified eyes were wide.

This too seemed impossible. It was just what had happened before. Another girl had been tied up just like this in that last

encounter. That had also been kept secret. And yet the man approaching her now seemed to know every detail. He was only a few feet from her when she finally saw his face and gasped.

It was her father.

That was unfathomable. She had killed him herself in a brutal fight. She remembered crushing his skull with her legs. Had that been an imposter? Had he somehow survived? It seemed irrelevant as he lifted the knife and prepared to plunge it into her.

She tried to get better footing so she could leap up and kick him backward but her feet wouldn't reach the ground no matter how hard she stretched. Her father looked at her with an expression of amused pity.

"Did you think I would make the same mistake twice, Junebug?" he asked.

Then, without another word, he swung the knife down, aiming it directly at her heart. She closed her eyes tight, preparing for the death blow.

*

She gasped as she felt a sharp twinge, not in her chest but in her back.

Jessie opened her tightly clenched eyes to discover that she was not in a sea cave at all but in her own sweat-drenched bed in her downtown Los Angeles apartment. Somehow, she was sitting upright.

She glanced over at the clock and saw that it was 2:51 a.m. The pain in her back was not from a recent stab wound but rather the intensity of her final physical therapy session earlier today. But the lingering soreness originally came from her father's real attack eight weeks ago.

He had sliced through her flesh from just below her right shoulder blade down to near her kidney, mowing through muscle and sinew. The subsequent surgery required thirty-seven stitches.

Gingerly, she got out of bed and made her way to the bathroom. Once there she looked in the mirror and took stock of her wounds. Her eyes passed right over the scar on the left side of her abdomen, a permanent gift of her ex-husband and a fireplace poker. She also barely noticed the childhood scar that ran along much of her collarbone, a remnant of her father's knife.

Instead, she focused on the multiple injuries she'd suffered in the actual death match with her father. He'd sliced into her multiple times, especially around the legs, leaving scars that would never go away and would make wearing a bathing suit without getting shocked stares a challenging proposition.

The worst blow was to her right thigh, where he'd stabbed her in a final, unsuccessful attempt to break free from the knees that were crushing his temples. She was no longer limping but still felt mild discomfort every time she put pressure on the leg, which meant every time she took a step. The physical therapist said there was some nerve damage and that while the pain would decrease over the next few months, it might never completely

subside.

Despite that, she had been cleared to return to work as a forensic profiler for the LAPD. Her first day back was supposed to be tomorrow, which might help explain the extra-vivid nightmare. She'd had lots of others but this was an award-winner.

She tied her shoulder-length brown hair back in a ponytail and, with her penetrating green eyes, studied her face. So far, it was free of scars and, so she'd been told, was still quite striking. At a lean, athletic five foot ten, she'd often been mistaken for a sports model, though she doubted she'd be doing lingerie work anytime soon. Still, for someone about to turn thirty who'd been through as much as she had, she thought she was holding up pretty well.

She walked to the kitchen, poured herself a glass of water, and sat down at the breakfast table, resigned to the likelihood that she wouldn't be getting much more sleep tonight. She was used to sleepless nights back when she had two serial killers searching for her. But now one of them was dead and the other had apparently decided to leave her be. So theoretically she should be able to really catch up. But it didn't seem to work that way.

Part of it was that she couldn't be one hundred percent certain that the other serial killer who'd taken an interest in her, Bolton Crutchfield, was really gone for good. All indications were that he was. No one had seen or heard from him since her own final sighting of him eight weeks ago. Not a single lead had emerged.

More importantly, she knew he was fond of her in a non-

murdery kind of way. Her multiple interviews with him in his cell before he'd escaped had established a connection. He'd actually warned her about the threat from her own father on two occasions, putting himself in his one-time mentor's crosshairs. He seemed to have moved on from her. So why couldn't she? Why wouldn't she allow herself to get a good night's sleep?

Part of it was probably that she couldn't *ever* let anything go. Part of it was that she was still in some physical discomfort. Part of it was almost certainly that she would be starting work again in about five hours and likely working again with Detective Ryan Hernandez, for whom her feelings were, to put it mildly, complicated.

Sighing in resignation, Jessie officially made the transition from water to coffee. As she waited for it to brew, she wandered around the apartment, her third in the last two months, checking to make sure all the doors and windows were locked.

This was supposed to be her new, semi-permanent address and she was pretty happy with it. After bouncing around from one sterile U.S. Marshal Service–approved location to another, she'd finally been allowed to have a say in what was intended to be her long-term living quarters. The Service had helped find the place and ensured its security.

The apartment was in a twenty-story building only blocks from her last real apartment in the fashion district section of downtown L.A. The building had its own full security team, not just a single guard in the lobby. There were always three guards

on duty, one of whom patrolled the parking garage while another made regular rounds on the various floors.

The parking garage was secured by a gate manned 24/7 by an on-duty attendant. The rotating doorman was all retired cops. There was a metal detector built into the dedicated non-resident entryway to the building. All elevators and units had dual key fob and fingerprint access requirements. Every floor of the complex, including the on-site laundry facilities, gym, and pool, had multiple security cameras. Every unit had alert buttons and direct intercom access to the security desk. And that was just the stuff the building provided.

It didn't account for her service weapon or for the additional security measures the Marshals had helped her set up inside the unit. They included shatterproof, bulletproof glass for the windows and sliding patio door, a double-thick front door that required a law-enforcement-level battering ram to knock off its hinges, and interior motion-activated and heat-sensing cameras that could be turned on or off using her phone.

Finally, there was one last precaution, Jessie's favorite. She actually lived on the thirteenth floor, even though, like in many buildings, it supposedly didn't exist. There was no button for it on the elevator. The service elevator could get to the floor but required a security guard to accompany anyone using it. To access the floor under normal circumstances, one had to get off on level twelve or fourteen and open a nondescript door off the main hallway marked "service panel entry."

That door did actually lead to a small room with the service panel. But in the back of the room was an additional door marked "storage," which required a special key fob. That door led to a stairwell that accessed the thirteenth floor, which was comprised of eight apartments, just like the other floors.

But each of these units was occupied by someone who clearly placed a premium on privacy, security, or both. In the week that Jessie had been here, she'd encountered one well-known television actress, a high-profile whistleblower attorney, and a controversial radio talk show host in the halls.

Jessie, who had done well in her divorce, wasn't concerned about the cost. And because of some law enforcement discounts the LAPD and Marshal Service had secured on her behalf, it wasn't as expensive as she'd expected. Regardless, it was worth it to have the peace of mind. Of course, she'd thought her last place had been secure too.

Her coffee machine beeped and she went over to pour a cup. As she prepped it, adding cream and sugar, she wondered if any special measures had been taken to protect Hannah Dorsey. Hannah was the real seventeen-year-old girl who'd been tied up and gagged by Xander Thurman, forced to watch as he murdered her parents and almost killed Jessie.

Jessie's thoughts turned to Hannah often, in part because she wondered how the girl was doing in her foster home after suffering such trauma. Jessie had gone through something similar when she was a girl, though she'd been much younger, only six.

Xander had tied her up in an isolated cabin and forced her to watch as he tortured and killed her mom, his own wife.

The experience had left her permanently scarred and she was sure the same would be true for Hannah. Of course, what this girl didn't know, what she was blessed to be unaware of, was that Xander was her father too, which meant that she was Jessie's half-sister.

According to authorities, Hannah knew that she was adopted but had no knowledge of her real parents' identity. And since Jessie had been forbidden to meet with her after their shared ordeal, the girl had no idea that they were related. Despite her pleas to talk to the girl and her promise not to reveal their connection, everyone in authority agreed that they should not meet again until the doctors felt Hannah could handle it.

Intellectually, Jessie understood the decision and even agreed with it. But somewhere deeper, she felt the strong urge to talk to the girl. They had so much in common. Their father was a monster. Their mothers were mysteries. Hannah had never met hers and Jessie's was only a distant memory. And just as Xander had killed Hannah's adoptive parents, he'd done the same to Jessie's.

Despite all that, they were not alone. Each had a family connection that could offer solace and some hope for recovery. Each had a sister, something that Jessie had never even imagined possible. She yearned to reach out and create some bond with the only other surviving member of her bloodline.

And yet, even as she wished for a reunion, she couldn't help but wonder.

Would knowing me do this girl more harm than good?

CHAPTER TWO

The man skulked down the apartment complex's outdoor hallway, looking over his shoulder every few seconds. It was early in the morning and a guy like him, thick as a tank, African-American and wearing a hoodie, tended to draw attention.

He was on the eighth floor, just outside the apartment of the woman he knew lived here. He also knew what her car looked like and had seen it in the parking garage below, so he assumed she might be in. As a precaution, the man knocked softly on the front door.

It wasn't even seven a.m. yet and he didn't want any early riser neighbors to poke their curious heads out. It was cold outside this morning and the man didn't want to take off the hoodie. But fearing it would draw too much attention, he pulled it off his head, exposing his skin to the biting wind.

When he got no response to his knock, he made a perfunctory attempt to open the door he was sure would be locked. It was. He moved over to the adjacent window. He could see that it was slightly open. He debated whether he should really go ahead with this. After a moment's hedging he made up his mind, yanked the window up, and climbed in. He knew anyone who saw him would likely be calling the cops but decided it was worth the risk.

Once inside, he tried make his way quietly to the bedroom. All the lights were off and there was a strange smell he couldn't

identify. As he stepped further back into the apartment, he got a cold chill that had nothing to do with the weather. He reached the door of the bedroom, gently turned the knob, and peeked in.

There on the bed was the woman he'd been expecting to see. She appeared to be sleeping but something was weird. Even in the dim morning light, her skin looked strangely pale. Also, she didn't seem to be moving at all. No rising and falling of the chest. No movement at all. He stepped into the room and walked over to the bed. The smell was overwhelming now, a rotting stench that made his eyes water and his stomach turn.

He wanted to reach out and touch her but couldn't bring himself to. He wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. Finally he turned away and stepped out of the room.

He pulled out his phone and dialed the only number he could think of. It rang several times before giving him a recorded voice. He pushed several buttons and waited for a response as he retreated to the living room of the apartment. Finally, a voice came on the line.

"911. What is your emergency?"

"Yes, my name is Vin Stacey. I think my friend is dead. Her name is Taylor Jansen. I came to her apartment because I couldn't reach her for several days. She's lying in her bed. But she isn't moving and she…doesn't look right. Also there's a smell."

That was the moment when the reality of the situation hit him—that vivacious, enthusiastic Taylor was lying dead less than thirty feet from him. He bent over and threw up.

*

Jessie sat in the back seat for what she hoped was the final time. The U.S. Marshal vehicle pulled into the LAPD Central Station parking structure and parked in a visitor spot. Standing there waiting was her boss, Captain Roy Decker.

He didn't look much different than the last time she saw him. Almost sixty, though he appeared much older, Decker was tall and skinny with a mostly bald head, deep creases in his face, a sharp nose, and small, penetrating eyes. He was talking to a uniformed officer but was clearly there to meet her.

"Wow," she said sarcastically to the Marshals in the front seat. "I feel like a woman in the eighteenth century being formally handed off from her father to her husband."

The Marshal in the passenger seat scowled back at her. His name was Patrick Murphy, though everyone called him Murph. Short and trim, with tightly cropped light brown hair, he projected a no-nonsense sensibility, though that turned out to be a bit of ruse.

"That scenario would require a husband who wanted to take you in, which I find highly unlikely," said the man who had coordinated much of her security while she on the run from multiple serial killers.

Only the slightest hint of a grin at the edges of his mouth hinted that he was joking.

“You are, as always, a prince among men, Murph,” she said, faux-politely. “I don’t know how I’m going to muddle through without your charming personage at my side.”

“Me either,” he muttered.

“Nor without your conversational charisma, Marshal Toomey,” she said to the driver, a massive man with a shaved head and a blank expression.

Toomey, who rarely spoke, nodded silently.

Captain Decker, who had finished talking to the officer, looked at the three of them impatiently, waiting for them to get out of the car.

“I guess this is it,” Jessie said, opening the door and getting out with more energy than she felt. “How’s it going, Captain?”

“More complicated today than yesterday,” he said, “now that I’ve got you back on my hands.”

“But I swear, Captain, Murph here has collected a hefty dowry to go along with me. I promise not to be a burden and to always earn my wifely keep.”

“What?” he asked, perplexed.

“Oh, Pa,” she said, turning back to Murph. “Do I have to leave the farm? I’ll miss you and Mother ever so much.”

“What the hell is going on?” Decker demanded.

Murph forced his face into a mask of seriousness and turned to the confused cop who had walked over to the passenger window.

“Captain Decker,” he said formally, handing over clipboard with a sheet of paper on it. “The protection duty of the

U.S. Marshal Service is no longer required. I hereby officially relinquish custody of Jessie Hunt to the Los Angeles Police Department."

"Custody?" Jessie repeated testily. Murph, ignoring her, continued.

"Any additional security measures are now the obligation of your department. Signing this document acknowledges such."

Decker took the clipboard and signed the paper without reading it. Then he handed it back and looked at Jessie.

"Good news, Hunt," he said gruffly, without any of the enthusiasm that usually accompanied good news. "The detectives trying to track down Bolton Crutchfield found video footage of someone matching his description crossing the Mexican border yesterday. You may finally be free of the guy."

"Facial recognition confirmed it?" she asked skeptically, losing the fake voice for the first time.

"No," he admitted. "He kept his head down the entire time he walked across the bridge. But he matches the physical description almost perfectly and the very fact that he took care never to be cleanly captured in video suggests he knew what he was doing."

"That *is* good news," she said, deciding not to comment beyond that.

She agreed that she was likely no longer in Crutchfield's crosshairs, but not because of some sketchy surveillance video that seemed far too convenient. Of course, she didn't feel like she could tell Decker the real reason was her hunch that the killer

had a soft spot for her.

"You ready to get back to work?" he asked, satisfied that he had addressed any lingering concerns she might have.

"In just a minute, Captain," she said. "I just need a quick word with the marshals."

"Make it fast," Decker said as he walked several steps away. "You've got a busy day of sitting behind a desk ahead of you."

"Yes sir," she said before leaning down to the driver's window.

"I think I'll miss you most of all, Scarecrow," she said to Toomey, who'd been her primary assigned marshal for the last two months. He nodded back. Apparently no words were necessary. Then she walked around to the passenger side and looked at Murphy guiltily.

"All joking aside, I just wanted to say how much I appreciate everything you've done for me. You put yourselves on the line to keep me safe and I'll never forget it."

He was still on crutches, though the casts on his legs had been removed last week, replaced by soft boots. That was around the same time he was permitted to remove the sling around his arm.

All those injuries were a result of being hit by the car Xander Thurman was driving when he ambushed him and Jessie in an alley. He'd broken both legs and his clavicle. So officially, he was on leave from the service for another four months. He'd only come this morning to see her off.

"Don't start getting emotional on me now," he protested. "We've got this 'hard-bitten, reluctant allies' thing down cold.

You're going to mess it up."

"How's Emerson's family doing?" she asked quietly.

Troy Emerson was the marshal her father had shot in the head that terrible night. Jessie hadn't even known his first name until after he died, nor that he was recently married with a four-month-old son. She hadn't been able to go to the funeral because of her injuries but had subsequently reached out to Emerson's widow. She hadn't heard back.

"Kelly's getting there," Murph assured her. "She got your message. I know she wants to get back to you but she just needs more time."

"I understand. To be honest, I'd understand if she never wanted to speak to me."

"Hey, don't take all this on yourself," he replied, almost angrily. "It's not your fault your dad was a psycho. And Troy knew the risks when he got into this job. We all did. You can feel sympathy. But don't feel guilty."

Jessie nodded, unable to think of a suitable response.

"I'd give you a hug," Murph said. "But it would make me wince, and not for emotional reasons. So let's just pretend we did, okay?"

"Whatever you say, Marshal Murphy," she said.

"Don't start getting formal on me now," he insisted as he delicately eased himself back into the passenger seat of the car. "You can still call me Murph. It's not like I'm going to stop calling you by your nickname."

"What's that?" she asked.

"The pain in my ass."

She couldn't help but laugh at that.

"Goodbye, Murph," she said. "Give Toomey a kiss for me."

"I'd do that even without being asked," he shouted as Toomey hit the accelerator and the tires squealed on the garage floor.

Jessie turned around to find Decker staring at her impatiently.

"You done?" he asked sharply. "Or should I take in a showing of *The Notebook* while you all work out your emotions some more?"

"It's good to be back, Captain," she sighed.

He started walking inside and waved for her to follow him. She ignored the twinge in her leg and back and jogged after him. She was only just catching up when he launched into his plan for her.

"So don't expect any fieldwork for a while," he said gruffly. "I wasn't kidding about keeping you on a desk. You're rusty and I can see you desperately trying not to limp on that right leg as you walk. Until I think you're solid again, you should get used the bullpen's fluorescent lights."

"Don't you think I'd get back in the swing of things quicker if I just dived in?" Jessie asked, trying not to sound pleading. She had to take two steps to every one of his to keep up as he barreled down the hall.

"Funny, that's almost exactly what your buddy Hernandez said when he came back last week. I put him on desk duty too. And guess what? He's still there."

“I didn’t know Hernandez was back,” she said.

“I thought you two were bosom buddies,” he said as they rounded the corner.

Jessie glanced over at him sideways, trying to determine if her boss was suggesting anything. But he seemed to be sincere.

“We’re friends,” she acknowledged. “But I think with the injuries he suffered and his divorce, he wanted a little time to himself.”

“Really?” Decker said. “You could have fooled me.”

She didn’t know what to make of that comment but didn’t have time to ask before they arrived at the station bullpen, a large room with filled with a mishmash of desks pushed together, all populated by various detectives representing different LAPD divisions. At the far end of the bullpen, with the other Homicide Special Section detectives, was Ryan Hernandez.

For a man who’d been stabbed twice only two months earlier by her father (it seemed that every injured person she knew these days got their wounds at the hands of her father), Hernandez looked pretty good.

His left forearm wasn’t even bandaged anymore. The other wound had been to the left side of his abdomen. But considering that he was standing upright and laughing, she figured it couldn’t be bothering him that much.

As Decker led her over, she found herself perplexed by how annoyed she was at Hernandez joking around. She should be happy that he wasn’t depressed in the aftermath of having his

marriage fall apart *and* nearly being killed. But if he was doing so well, why hadn't he reached out more than two perfunctory times in the last couple of months?

She'd made much more of an effort to check in and rarely heard back. She'd assumed it was because he was struggling and had given him space to regroup. But based on how he looked now, everything seemed to be peachy.

"Nice to see the Homicide Special Section is in such good spirits on this fine morning," Decker bellowed, startling the five men and one woman who comprised the unit. Detective Alan Trembley, looking as scattershot as usual, even dropped his bagel.

Homicide Special Section was a division assigned to high-profile cases, often ones with intense media scrutiny. That meant lots of homicides with multiple victims and serial killers. It was prestigious assignment and Hernandez was considered the cream of the crop.

"Look who's back," Detective Callum Reid said enthusiastically. "I didn't know you were returning today. Now we've finally got some class back in the joint."

"You know," Jessie said, deciding to embrace the vibe of the group, "you could be classy too, Reid, if you didn't let one rip every ten seconds. It's not a high bar."

Everyone busted out laughing.

"It's funny because it's true," Trembley said happily, his unkempt blond curls bouncing as he laughed. He pushed up his

glasses, which perpetually slid down his nose.

"How you feeling, Jessie?" Hernandez said when the noise had died down.

"I'm getting by," she answered, trying not to sound cold. "You look like you're on the mend."

"Getting there," he said. "I've still got a few aches and pains. But as I keep telling the Captain here, if he'd let me in the game I could make a real difference. I'm tired of riding the bench, Coach."

"That never gets old, Hernandez," Decker said grumpily, clearly tired of the team analogy. "Hunt, I'll give you a few minutes to get resettled. Then we'll go over your case load. I have a bunch of unsolved homicide files that could use a fresh eye. Maybe a profiler's perspective will shake things up. I expect the rest of you to give me case updates in my office in five minutes. It looks like you have the spare time."

He headed for his office grumbling to himself. The rest of the team assembled their files as Hernandez plopped down across from Jessie.

"You don't have anything to report?" she asked.

"I don't have any cases of my own yet. I've been backing these guys up on everything. Maybe now that you're back, we can tag team Decker and get him to send us out on something. The two of us together make up one almost totally healthy person."

"I'm glad that you're in such good spirits," Jessie said, desperately trying to stop herself from saying more but failing to

do so. “I wish you’d have let me know you were all good earlier. I steered clear because I thought you were working stuff out.”

Hernandez’s smile faded as he took in what she said. He seemed to be weighing how to respond. As she waited for his reply and despite her annoyance, Jessie couldn’t help but admit the guy had maintained himself pretty well while recovering from a grievous injury and a divorce.

He looked put together. Not a strand of his short black hair was out of place. His brown eyes were clear and focused. And somehow, despite his injuries, he’d managed to keep in shape. He might have lost five pounds off his usual six-foot, two-hundred-pound frame, probably related to difficulty eating right after getting his stomach sliced open. But at thirty-one, he still had the toned look of a man who worked out often.

“Yeah, about that,” he started to say, snapping her back into the moment. “I wanted to call, but the thing is, some stuff has been going on and I wasn’t sure how to talk about it.”

“What kind of stuff?” she asked nervously. She didn’t like where this was headed.

Hernandez looked down, as if deciding how best to broach what was clearly a touchy subject. After a full five seconds he looked back up at her. Just as he was opening his mouth, Decker burst out of his office.

“We’ve got a gang-involved shooting in Westlake North,” he shouted. “The scene is still active. We already have four fatalities and an unknown number of injuries. I need SWAT, HSS, and

gang units en route now. This is all hands on deck, people!”

CHAPTER THREE

Immediately, everyone began tearing around the bullpen. Many headed for the tactical gear center, where they grabbed heavier artillery and bulletproof vests. Jessie and Hernandez looked at each other, unsure what to do. He started to get out of his seat when Decker shut him down.

"Don't even think about it, Hernandez. You're not getting anywhere near this thing."

Hernandez slumped back down in his chair. They watched the action around the station with jealous interest. After a few minutes, things quieted down and then remaining staff went back to work. Seemingly only moments ago, the bullpen had been bustling with activity, filled with well over fifty people. Now it was a ghost town. Including Jessie and Hernandez, there were fewer than ten left.

Suddenly Jessie heard a loud thud. She looked over to see that Captain Decker had dropped a half dozen thick files on her desk.

"These are the cases I want you to review," he said. "I had hoped to go over them with you but obviously I'm going to be busy for the next few hours."

"Any updates on the shooting?" she asked him.

"The shooting has stopped. Everyone scattered once our cars arrived. We're up to six fatalities, all from rival gangs. Another dozen or so are injured. We've got about thirty officers and

a dozen detectives canvassing the area. And that doesn't even include SWAT."

"What about me?" Hernandez asked. "How can I help, Captain?"

"You can follow up on your colleagues' cases until they get back. I'm sure they'll be very appreciative. I've got to get back to this gang thing now."

He hurried back to his office, leaving the two of them alone except for the mounds of paperwork.

"I think he's being mean on purpose," Hernandez muttered.

"Did you want to finish what you were saying before?" Jessie asked him, wondering if she was pushing too hard.

"Not now," he replied, losing the lightness in his voice. "Maybe later, when we're out of the office and everything isn't so…heightened."

Jessie nodded in agreement, though she was disappointed. Rather than pout or stay in that unpleasant head space, she turned her attention to the case files in front of her.

Maybe focusing on the minutiae of some murders will clear my head.

She chuckled silently at her own gallows humor as she opened the first file.

It worked. She became so immersed in the details of the cases that almost an hour passed without her noticing the time. It wasn't until Hernandez tapped her on the shoulder that she looked up and realized it was mid-morning.

“I think I might have found us a case,” he said, holding up a piece of paper provocatively.

“I thought we weren’t supposed to be hunting for new cases,” she replied.

“We’re not,” he admitted. “But there’s no one else here to take it and I think it’s the sort of thing Decker might actually let us take on.”

He held out the paper. Not as reluctantly as she probably should have, Jessie took it. It didn’t take her long to realize why they might have a shot at convincing Decker to let them take it.

The case seemed pretty straightforward. A thirty-year-old woman was found dead in her Hollywood apartment. The young man who first reported finding her was initially held on suspicion when a neighbor reported seeing him enter the apartment through a window. But he asserted he was a co-worker who was checking on her after not hearing from her for two days. There were no obvious signs of violence and the initial impression on the scene was that this was likely a suicide.

“It seems like they have things pretty well in hand. I’m not sure what we can offer….”

“I hear a silent ‘but’ in there,” Hernandez noted, smiling.

Jessie didn’t want to give him the satisfaction but found herself grinning slightly too.

“But… there is a reference to older bruising on her wrists and neck, which might suggest previous abuse. That’s probably worth checking out. And according to her co-worker, she worked as a

personal trainer at a high-end fitness club, where she specialized in high-profile clients. It's possible some of them will make a stink if they think LAPD isn't putting enough resources into the case."

"Exactly," Hernandez said excitedly. "That's our 'in,' Jessie. If I know Decker, he's not going to risk alienating the hoi polloi if he can avoid it. Assigning a detective from HSS and a celebrated forensic profiler to the case short-circuits that criticism. Plus, it seems pretty ideal for easing us back into the field. There's no sign of violence. If it was murder, we're probably talking poisoning or something along those lines. It seems like a largely stabbing-free case."

"He was pretty adamant that we stick to desks for a while," Jessie reminded him.

"I think he'll go for it," Hernandez insisted. "Besides, he's so distracted with the gang shooting, he might say yes just to get rid of us. Let's at least try."

"I'll go with you," Jessie said. "But I'm not making the pitch. If he cuts anyone's head off, it's going to be yours."

"Coward," he teased.

*

Jessie had to admit that Ryan Hernandez was good.

He barely had to say more than the words "wealthy clients," "Hollywood," and "likely suicide" before Decker was ushering

them out the door to pursue the case. Those buzzwords hit all their boss's weak spots: his fear of bad publicity, his ongoing goal not to alienate his supervisors, and his deep desire not to have Detective Hernandez pester him relentlessly.

His only rule was simple.

"If it starts to look like this *is* a murder and the perpetrator used any kind of force, call me for backup."

Now, as Hernandez drove them to Hollywood, he looked almost giddy with excitement. So did his foot.

"Careful on the gas there, Earnhardt," she warned. "I don't want to get in an accident on the way to the scene."

She said nothing about their discussion from earlier, deciding to let him bring it up when he was ready. It didn't take long. After the initial rush of being in a car on the way to crime scene faded, he glanced in her direction.

"So here's the deal," he started, his words tumbling out much faster than normal. "I should have reached out to you more often after everything went down. I mean, I did at first obviously. But you were badly hurt and not very chatty, which I completely understand."

"Do you?" Jessie asked skeptically.

"Of course," he said as he exited the 101 freeway at Vine Street. "You had to kill your own father. Even if he was a psycho, he was your dad. But I wasn't sure how to broach that with you. And there was the fact that your psycho dad stabbed me. That wasn't your fault but I was worried you would think I blamed

you. So I was thinking all those things while having my stomach leak blood periodically and being heavily doped up on pain medication *and* trying keep food down. And right when I thought I was ready to discuss all that in an adult way, my wife formally served me with divorce papers. It was already going to happen. But there was something about getting those legal documents, especially while I was still in the hospital—it kind of wrecked me. I went down this black hole. I didn't want to eat. I didn't want to rehab. I didn't want to talk to anyone, which is exactly what I *should* have been doing."

"I can recommend someone if…"Jessie started to offer.

"Thank you but I'm all set actually," he interrupted. "Decker finally ordered me to see someone—said I was in danger of not coming back at all if I didn't get my shit together. So I did. And it helped. But by then, it had been about six weeks since the attack and it felt weird to just call you out of the blue. And to be honest, I wasn't 100% sure I was okay…psychologically, and I didn't want to lose it while talking to you seriously for the first time after we both almost died. So I pushed it off some more. And then there's the other thing."

"What other thing?"

"You know, our whole 'friendly co-workers but also friends who sometimes get awkward because maybe there's something there' thing? I'm not imagining that, right?"

Jessie took a long beat before responding. Answering this honestly would change things. But he was laying it all out there.

It felt gutless not to do the same.

"No, you're not imagining that."

He laughed uncomfortably, which turned into a full-on, eye-watering cough.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm just…I was nervous to mention that last part."

They sat in silence for a minute as he navigated the traffic on Sunset Boulevard, trying to find a spot to park.

"So that's the deal?" she finally said.

"That's the deal," he confirmed as he pulled into a spot.

"You know," she said gently. "You are nowhere near as cool as I first thought you were."

"It's all a front," he said, half-joking but clearly only half.

"I kind of like it. It makes you more…approachable."

"Thanks, I guess."

"Well, we should probably talk about this a little more," she replied.

"I think that would be the mature thing to do," he agreed. "You do mean after we check out the dead body upstairs, right?"

"Yes, Ryan. Dead body first. Awkward conversation later."

CHAPTER FOUR

It was like a light turned on in Jessie's head.

The second she shut the car door and looked at the building that currently housed a dead woman, her mind cleared. All thoughts of serial killer fathers, orphaned half-sisters, and semi-romantic possibilities faded into the background.

She and Ryan stood on the sidewalk near the corner of Sunset and Vine, taking in the area. This was the heart of Hollywood and Jessie had been here many times. But that was always to go to dinner, a concert, or to see a movie or live show. She'd never really focused on it as a place where regular people worked, lived, and apparently died.

For the first time she noticed that among the office towers, restaurants, and theaters many of the buildings were just like the mixed-use ones in her neighborhood, with retail businesses on the ground floor and apartments or condos on the ones above.

Just up the street, she saw a ten-story apartment complex with a Trader Joe's below it. Just across the street was a Solstice Fitness Center at the base of a building easily twenty stories tall. She wondered if residents got complimentary memberships but doubted it. That place was unbelievably pricey.

It looked like the victim's complex was slightly less upscale. It had several restaurants and a yoga studio on the first floor. But there was also a Walgreens and a Bed, Bath & Beyond. As

they walked along the sidewalk to the main entrance, they had to sidestep a line of homeless people camped out along the wall of the building. Most weren't awake yet, though one older woman was sitting cross-legged, muttering to herself.

They passed her without comment and arrived at the entrance to the building. Compared to Jessie's building, the security here was a joke. There was a glass vestibule entrance that required an access card and another to summon the elevator. But when Jessie and Ryan were approaching the entrance, a resident held the door open for them and swiped the elevator sensor without asking them a thing. Jessie noticed fixed cameras in the vestibule and on the elevator but they looked cheap. Ryan pushed the button for the eighth floor and within seconds they were stepping out, never having been challenged.

"That was easy," Ryan said as they walked down the exterior hall in the direction of the police tape and several officers milling about.

"Way too easy," Jessie noted. "I realize I'm a crazy person when it comes to personal security. But this place is pretty pathetic, especially considering the neighborhood."

"It's a lot safer than it was twenty years ago," Ryan reminded her.

"True. But just because you don't have hookers and drug dealers in plain sight on every corner doesn't mean it's Disneyland now."

Ryan didn't respond as they had reached the victim's

apartment. He flashed his detective's badge and she showed her LAPD profiler ID.

"Detectives from Hollywood Division have already come and gone," a perplexed officer said.

"We're just following up for Homicide Special Section," Ryan lied. "It's mostly a favor for our captain. We'd appreciate if you'd have someone walk us through the scene, even if they have to repeat stuff."

"No problem," he replied. "Officer Wayne is primary on the scene. I'll get him."

As he radioed to the other officer, Jessie took in her surroundings. The front door was open now, as was a window adjacent to it. She wondered if it had been that way before. It was hard to imagine a single woman in the heart of Hollywood would leave a window open when it was accessible by an exterior hallway. It was almost an invitation to trouble.

The victim's unit was at the far end of the floor from the elevators, which was shaped like a blocky letter "C." That meant her apartment was visible to people across the open expanse between the halls. She was curious as to whether anyone had canvassed those units yet.

Just then, an older uniformed officer stepped out of the apartment to greet them. He was heavyset and balding, with stray hairs that had adhered to his sweaty scalp. He looked to be in his early forties and had that "seen it all" vibe that could be a help or a hindrance depending on his attitude.

“Officer John Wayne,” he said extending his hand to Ryan. “I’ve already heard every joke you want to say, so you can skip it. What can I do for you?”

“You’re the spitting image,” Ryan couldn’t help but say.

Jessie punched him in the arm before returning her attention to the cop, who looked unfazed.

“Sorry, Officer Wayne,” she said. “Thanks for taking the time. We know the Hollywood detectives have already worked the scene. But we were hoping you could show us around anyway. This case has hallmarks that match something we’re working on and we want to rule it out as connected.”

“Of course, come on in,” he said, stepping back inside and handing them plastic shoe covers as they prepared to enter.

They put them on, along with gloves, and walked in.

“Some of her possessions have already been booked as evidence,” Wayne said. “But we can give you an itemized list.”

“Anything jump out at you?” Ryan asked.

“A few things,” the officer replied. “No sign of forced entry. There was money in her purse. Her phone was on the bedside table.”

“If you don’t mind,” Jessie asked, “before you give us the rest of the rundown, I’d like to take a moment to evaluate the site without any preconceptions.”

Officer Wayne nodded. Jessie took a long deep breath, allowed her body to relax and began to profile the victim. The living room was sparsely decorated with furniture that looked to

have been purchased from IKEA. There was limited artwork and no visible photos. The only personal touch was a framed NASM personal training certification on the wall.

She walked into the almost untouched kitchen. There were no dirty dishes in the sink nor clean ones on the drying rack. One clean, folded dish towel rested on the counter. Next to it were several pill containers, each marked with days of the week, each painstakingly laid out in order. Jessie didn't touch them but from what she could tell, the pills inside looked like supplements and multivitamins. She noticed that neither the pills for Monday nor Tuesday had been taken. This was Wednesday morning.

She looked around the rest of the kitchen. The paper towel roll was almost full. Opening the cabinets revealed dozens of cans of beans and ground turkey, lots of protein bars and multiple vats of whey protein powder.

The refrigerator was half empty but the contents included two gallon-sized jugs of milk, several containers of Greek yogurt and a massive plastic bag of spinach. The freezer was a mix of frozen blueberries, strawberries and acai and a Tupperware container of what looked like chicken noodle soup. Taped to the outside of it was a Post-it that read "from Mom, 11/2018." That was well over a year ago.

The three of them wandered down the hall toward the bedroom where the body was waiting. The smell of rotting flesh enveloped Jessie's nostrils. She allowed herself a moment to accept it, then made a pit stop in the bathroom, which wasn't as

tidy as the rest of the house. It was clear the resident spent much more time in here.

"What was the victim's name?" she asked. It had been on the document Ryan had given her at the station but she had purposely avoided noting it until now.

"Taylor Jansen," Officer Wayne said. "She was…"

"Sorry, Officer," she interrupted. "I don't want to be rude but please hold off on any other details just a bit longer."

She looked closely at Taylor's dresser. For as much as she didn't seem to care about keeping her kitchen stocked, the opposite was true of the bathroom. The counter was littered with makeup including an open eye shadow case and multiple lipsticks. Two hairbrushes and one comb were shoved in a corner next to a small vial of perfume.

The medicine cabinet was full of over the counter medication like Advil, Benadryl, and Pepto-Bismol, but there were no bottles of prescription drugs. The shower had several quarter-filled bottles of shampoo and conditioner, some facial cleanser, a leg razor, shaving cream, and a bar of conditioning soap.

Jessie stepped out of the bathroom and the strong smell, which had been temporarily masked by the scents in the bathroom, hit her again. She glanced back down the hallway, noting again the complete lack of anything personal on the walls.

"Before we go into the bedroom," she said, turning to Wayne, "let me know how much of this I have right. Taylor Jansen is single, white, attractive and in her late twenties to early thirties.

She works close by and travels often. She has few friends. She's extremely detail-oriented. And she has enough money to be living somewhere much nicer than this."

Wayne's eyes went wide briefly before he responded.

"She was thirty exactly," he said. "Birthday was last month. She is white and looks to have been very pretty. She does work close by, at a gym less than a full block from here. We're reconfirming her relationship status. But her co-worker, the one who found her, says she wasn't currently involved. He's downstairs in a black and white giving his statement again if you want to talk to him. I can't speak to the travel and financials but maybe he can."

"We'd love to talk to him as soon as we're done here," Ryan said before turning to Jessie. "You ready to go in?"

She nodded. It wasn't lost on her that with a few exceptions, her description of Taylor Jansen could have been of herself too. She would turn thirty in a few weeks. Her downtown apartment was as Spartan as this one and not because she hadn't had time to decorate it. She could count her good friends on a couple of fingers. And setting aside her recent marriage to a man who had tried to kill her, she was not, despite her conversation with Ryan, currently involved. If she died tomorrow, would another profiler's thumbnail analysis of her be any different than the woman behind that bedroom door?

"You want any?" Wayne asked as he applied some eucalyptus-scented cream just below his nostrils. It helped fight the nasty

smells that were about to grow stronger.

"No thanks," Jessie said. "As bad as it is, I need all my senses at full strength when I go to a scene. Blocking out one smell might mask another important one."

"It's your stomach," Wayne said, shrugging as he opened the door.

Almost immediately, Jessie regretted her decision.

CHAPTER FIVE

The stench was overwhelming. The woman must have been dead for last two, maybe three days. She was lying on the bed with the covers off, wearing workout pants and a sports bra. There were no obvious signs of a struggle in how she was positioned or in the room generally. Nothing looked to have been knocked to the floor. Nothing was broken. Her clothing didn't appear to have been disturbed. She had no obvious cuts or marks.

Of course, that didn't prove anything. If this was foul play, the perpetrator would have had lots of time to clean up the room and Taylor before leaving. Fingerprints on items in the room, including the body, might offer some help on that front. But at least visibly, nothing had been disturbed.

Jessie walked over to get a closer look at the victim. The team from the medical examiner's office, who had been about to put her in a body bag, took a respectful step back.

Taylor Jansen's face was blue and puffy. Her eyes were closed. The abdomen she'd clearly worked so hard to keep tight and flat was now distended—a result of the gases that had built up inside her after death. Even in this condition, Jessie could tell that she had been beautiful.

"Has anyone touched her?" Ryan asked.

"Other than to get prints, no," Wayne assured them.

"She looks like she died taking a nap," Ryan noted. "No

wonder the initial call was suicide. Maybe not all those pills in the cases in the kitchen were vitamins. I'm very curious to see the toxicology report."

Jessie leaned in close and noted the dull bruises on Taylor's wrists and neck. Because of the skin discoloration and bloating, it was hard to tell how old they were. But if she had to guess, they'd been there well before two days ago.

"Was that window near the front door always open?" Jessie asked. "Or did someone do it after she was found?"

"According to her co-worker, it was slightly open when he arrived. He said he knocked on the door and tried to open it. But it was locked so he used the window to get in."

Jessie nodded, turning away from Taylor's body and walking over to her closet. She pushed open the sliding door and glanced inside. It looked like three-quarters of her wardrobe was comprised exclusively of workout gear and lingerie. She turned back to Ryan and Officer Wayne.

"We definitely need to talk to her co-worker," she said.

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Vin Stacey looked miserable sitting in the back of the patrol car parked outside the complex.

"Is he being held?" Jessie asked the bored-looking officer standing beside the car.

"No. We just asked him to stick around until you all could

come down and talk to him."

"Does he know he doesn't have to wait in the car? Because he looks like he thinks he's being detained."

"We didn't specifically clarify the nature of our request," the officer admitted sheepishly. "We just asked him to wait in the vehicle for additional questioning."

"So he thinks he's under arrest?" Jessie said incredulously.

"I don't know what impression he has, ma'am. We just made the request."

Jessie looked over at Ryan, who didn't seem anywhere near as irate as she felt.

"You cool with this?" she demanded.

"No," he said. "But I can't deny I've used the tactic before. It's a way of keeping someone around without having to formally arrest him."

"But I thought he wasn't a suspect anymore," Jessie countered.

"Everyone's a suspect. You know that."

"Okay," Jessie conceded. "But meanwhile, he's sitting there with the whole world walking by, thinking he's been arrested for something."

"I guess we should clear that up then," Ryan said flatly.

Jessie frowned at him before opening the back door.

"Mr. Stacey?" she asked, losing the edge she'd just had. Her voice was all honey now.

"Yes," he answered shakily.

"Why don't you come on out of the vehicle? I'm sorry you had

to wait so long. My colleague and I were upstairs investigating. We were hoping to ask some follow-up questions, if you don't mind."

"I've answered everybody's questions," he pleaded. "I don't know why I'm in trouble."

"You're not in trouble, Mr. Stacey," she promised. "Come on out. My name is Jessie Hunt. I'm a criminal profiler for the LAPD. This is Detective Ryan Hernandez. I see a coffee shop on the corner there. Let us buy you a cup and we can talk. How would that be?"

He nodded and eased himself out of the vehicle. It was only then that Jessie realized just how massive he was. Standing at his full height, he was easily six foot two. Jessie guessed that he was 220 pounds. He was wearing a form-fitting long-sleeved workout shirt that hugged his prominent abs. His biceps looked like they might rip through the fabric at any moment.

Despite his imposing manner, she sensed gentleness in his bearing. Glancing more closely at him, she noticed that he wore a tight necklace with a rainbow charm and his fingernails were painted a sparkly purple.

"So I'm guessing you're a trainer at Taylor's gym too?" she said, trying to lighten the mood slightly as they walked to the coffee shop.

He nodded but didn't respond. Ryan followed a step behind, clearly sensing that his presence might inhibit her attempts to cultivate a connection with Stacey. As they walked, Jessie noticed

the man rubbing his wrists gingerly.

"You okay?" she asked.

"I still can't believe it. I feel like my insides have been scooped out. Waiting there, just knowing that a person who had such a lively spirit was now just this cold, lifeless object only feet away from me. It hurts just to think about it. And your people only made it worse."

"That was unfortunate," Jessie acknowledged.

"Did you know that the officers put me in handcuffs when they got to Taylor's place?" he pressed. "I was just sitting out there, waiting for them. And one of them cuffed me while the other had his hand on his gun holster the whole time. I was the one who called 911!"

"I'm really sorry about that, Mr. Stacey," she soothed. "Unfortunately, when officers first arrive on the scene, they have to take precautions that might seem excessive after the fact."

"They kept me cuffed for a half hour, long after they got my ID, checked to see if I had a record, which I don't, and confirmed that I worked with Taylor. This was all while she lying dead her bed. I think we both know that if *you* had called 911 and been waiting there, they would have treated you differently."

"Right," she said, nodding sympathetically as they entered the coffee shop. She looked at the officer who had been trailing for him and indicated for him to stay outside.

"So you worked with her, you said. You were both trainers?" she continued, trying to move on from Stacey's indignation.

“Yeah—at Solstice.”

“The gym right across from her apartment?” Jessie asked, remembering the fitness club she’d seen when they arrived.

“Nice commute, right?” he said.

They ordered coffees and sat down at a nearby table. Ryan joined them but didn’t speak.

“So before we get into how you found her, Mr. Stacey…”

“Call me Vin,” he said.

“Okay, Vin,” she obliged. “Before that, I want you to tell us about Taylor. What was she like? Friendly? Quiet? Easygoing? Intense?”

“I wouldn’t call her easygoing. She was polite but professional with the other trainers and staff. She was warmer with her clients but there was still a very businesslike vibe. That was her thing. Some clients like their trainer to be a chatty best friend. That’s kind of my thing. Others want someone who is no nonsense and will help them achieve their goals. She was the go-to person for that.”

“What kind of clients did she mostly have?” Ryan asked, speaking for the first time.

Vin looked at Jessie hesitantly, as if he needed her approval to respond. She nodded reassuringly and he went on.

“She had all kinds. But I’d say that over half were married women in their thirties and forties. Lots of wealthy stay-at-home wives trying to lose the baby weight or keep firm enough to prevent their husbands from leaving them for their secretaries.”

“That was her bread and butter?” Ryan said.

“Yeah. She was really great at empowering those women and making them feel as if they were in control of their own destinies. I’m a single, gay black man and sometimes she made me want to marry a middle-aged white guy just so I could take charge of my life.”

“So were you close?” Jessie asked.

“Not that close,” he said. “We’d get coffee—here sometimes actually, or go for a drink. I walked her home a couple of times late at night. But I wouldn’t say were friends—more casual work friendly. I think she liked me because I was one of the few men in that club who didn’t hit on her all the time.”

“Were any of them especially aggressive?” Ryan asked.

“I’m not sure I’m the best judge of what women consider aggressive these days,” he admitted. “All I can say is that she never seemed intimidated by any of them. She had no problem shutting a guy down hard if he got out of line.”

“Do you know her relationship status?” Jessie asked. “You told the officers upstairs that she wasn’t involved.”

“I said I didn’t *think* she was currently involved. I know she was dating some guy a few months ago. But after it ended she got really secretive about her romantic life. And it wasn’t my place to push so I can’t claim to be an expert.”

“Vin,” Jessie asked, deciding to cut to the question she knew they’d be tangling with the rest of the day, “do you think Taylor might have killed herself?”

He responded immediately and with an intensity they hadn't yet seen from him.

"No way. Taylor just wasn't that kind of person. She was driven, focused. She was one of those people who had concrete goals. She wanted to start her own gym. She never would have short-circuited herself. She was what I like to call a marrow sucker."

"What does that mean?" Jessie asked.

"She sucked the marrow out of life. She never would have ended hers."

They all sat quietly for a moment before Ryan returned to a less philosophical topic.

"Do you know the name of her ex?" he asked.

"No. But I think one of the female trainers at the club might. I remember that she said she saw him drop Taylor off once and recognized him."

As Vin answered, Jessie's eyes went to the coffee shop entrance, where a clearly homeless man walked in. He had a long beard and shoes with soles that were so loose they flopped every time he lifted a foot.

That wasn't what caught her attention though. Something red was dripping from the man's left hand and his right hand was hidden under his jacket. He was muttering to himself as he moved among the other customers, seemingly bumping into some of them intentionally.

"What's that trainer's name?" Ryan asked. His back was to the

door and he hadn't noticed the man yet.

"Chianti."

"Are you serious?" Ryan asked, laughing involuntarily and spitting up a bit of his coffee.

"I don't know if that's her birth name," Vin said, smiling for the first time. "But at the gym she goes by Chianti Rossellini. It's not my place to judge."

"Why do I think that's not actually your philosophy, Vin?" Jessie said archly as she kept half an eye on the homeless man.

Vin raised his eyebrows provocatively.

"I hate to break this up this gossip session…" Ryan said.

"You can do whatever you want, brown eyes," Vin interrupted, batting his own.

Ryan didn't respond to that, instead plowing ahead.

"But we need to ask you about when you found Taylor. You told the officers the window was open?"

Vin's face immediately fell.

"Just a little bit, yes. I knocked first and checked the door, which was locked. But when she didn't respond I opened the window wider and climbed in. I guess I could have called 911 first. But I thought if she was hurt and needed help, I shouldn't just stand there waiting around."

"You don't have to justify yourself, Vin," Jessie said. "You were worried about a friend. I'm sure the evidence will support that."

"Thank you," Vin said, his voice cracking slightly.

Jessie would have had a stronger emotional reaction to him if she wasn't so fixated on the homeless man with the small stream of blood dripping from his arm. He was now rocking back and forth from heel to toe and his right hand was moving under his jacket, which appeared to be damp with a thick liquid. It looked like he was hitting himself in the hip. His lips were still moving but whatever he was muttering was now inaudible, though the middle-aged woman in line ahead of him kept glancing back nervously.

"Hey, Ryan," she said nonchalantly, "Take a casual look over your left shoulder at the bearded guy in line."

Ryan glanced over, as did Vin.

"The one who can't stop moving his body or his lips?" Ryan asked.

"Yep," Jessie confirmed. "He's bleeding from his left arm and I think he's holding something with his right hand under the jacket."

"What do you think it is?"

"I'm not sure. But I noticed a dark, wet stain in the hip area of the jacket. So I'm assuming it's whatever made his other hand bleed. Also, he seems pretty agitated. He was bumping into other customers and not on accident."

"It could be something," Ryan said quietly. "Or he could be like half the folks we passed on the street on the way over here."

"That's true," Jessie agreed, "though the whole 'blood' thing adds a little drama. Also, all the baristas look terrified and I bet

they have homeless folks come in here all the time."

"Fair point," Ryan said, wincing slightly as he stood up. "I think I might get in line for a refill. Jessie, maybe you could quietly grab that officer from outside and ask him to come in as a precaution?"

Jessie nodded and stood up herself, trying to hide the twinge of pain she felt in both her back and her leg after having been immobile for several minutes. As she moved to the shop entrance, she glanced back over her shoulder and saw that Ryan had taken up a position right behind the mumbling man. She pushed open the front door and waved to the uniformed officer she'd chastised earlier.

"I think we may have a situation in here," she said. "The bearded man standing in front of Detective Hernandez might have a weapon under his jacket. We're not sure but we could use some backup just in case."

She had barely finished her sentence when a loud scream erupted from inside. She turned around to see the middle-aged woman in line clutching her right shoulder with her left hand. Behind her, Ryan was struggling to rip a hunting knife out of the hands of the mumbling man. But despite his size advantage, it was a losing battle.

The other man had a frenzied anger about him and Ryan clearly wasn't at full strength. Within moments, the man had freed himself. Ryan lost his balance and fell to the floor as the man regrouped and lunged at him.

Jessie hurried back inside, unbuttoning her gun holster as she moved toward them. She was just removing her weapon when there was a flash of movement in front of her. It was Vin Stacey, who leapt at the mumbling man, smashing his forearm into the man's jaw and sending him careening back against the counter.

The knife flew out of the dazed man's hand and slid across the floor. Vin stood over him, ready to proceed if necessary. It wasn't. A moment later, the officer was on the man, turning him onto his stomach and cuffing him. Jessie reholstered her gun and knelt down beside Ryan.

"You okay?" she asked urgently.

"Yeah. I'll recover, although I'm not sure my pride will."

Vin walked over and extended his hand.

"Want a little help, brown eyes?" he asked, batting his eyes flirtatiously.

CHAPTER SIX

Jessie's confidence was shaken.

As she and Ryan waited in the lobby of Solstice Health & Fitness while the general manager found Chianti, she kept flashing back to that three-second window before Vin had knocked the homeless man to the ground.

In that brief stretch of time, Ryan had fallen, a man had tried to kill him and Jessie had failed to act quickly enough to prevent it. If not for the quick action of a human tank with fast feet and a bit of a crush, Detective Ryan Hernandez might be dead right now.

Before taking the woman the homeless guy had stabbed to the hospital, one of the EMTs had looked Ryan over and given him the all clear. But Jessie couldn't help but wonder if either of them was really ready to be back in the field yet.

Her internal debate was interrupted when the general manager motioned for them to come onto the fitness floor. As they did, she forced those concerns from her mind, trying to stay focused on the case at hand. As they walked over, Jessie glanced around the gym, trying not to let the pounding house music give her a headache.

The main room was massive, with a seemingly endless array of cardio machines. Off to the left was the weight "room" which was so vast she couldn't even see where it ended. To the right

were two dozen mats intended for stretching and, right now at least, for chatting while scrolling through phones.

The GM, a bushy-mustached man named Frank Stroup, stood waiting beside a skinny but ripped blonde woman in her late twenties wearing what Jessie considered far too much makeup for the gym. Her teeth were unnaturally bright and her breasts were squeezed together by a sports bra that looked several sizes too small.

"Detectives," the GM said, forgetting that only one of them had that title, "this is Chianti Rossellini. I'll leave you to your questions. Please let me know if I can be of any more help."

Jessie nodded politely. He hadn't been of much help at all actually. Other than giving the basics on Taylor's employment history, he seemed to know little about her life. The facility may have been huge but Jessie thought it odd that the guy didn't have more to say about a trainer that Vin suggested worked with some of their wealthiest members. They had intentionally avoided mentioning her death to him. But even so, Jessie would have expected him to at least be curious about why she'd been out for the last two days.

As he walked off, Chianti stared at them with a mix of apprehension and curiosity. She seemed to think she was in trouble for something. But her body language suggested she wasn't sure for what.

"Ms. Rossellini," Ryan began, managing not to start giggling mid-sentence, "how well do you know Taylor Jansen?"

"You can call me Chianti," she replied, unaware just how challenging that might be. "I know her some. I mean, we work at the same gym. We interact most days. But I wouldn't say we're friends or anything. Taylor is very focused on her clients and doesn't spend much time on chitchat. What's this about anyway? Has she done something wrong?"

"These are just routine questions. No need for you to concern yourself beyond that," Jessie said, not ready to reveal the truth until it served their purposes. "What can you tell us about her ex-boyfriend, the one who sometimes dropped her off here?"

"Oh, that would be Gavin. Gavin Peck."

"Tell us about Gavin, Chianti," Jessie said conversationally.

"Okay," she said, losing the uneasiness almost immediately. "Gavin is a piece of work. He's built, for sure. I think he's even won a few weight-lifting competitions. And he's—what's the nice way to say it—volatile."

"What do you mean?" Ryan pressed.

"He's just super-intense. I used to work out at the gym he goes to and he was always amped up—really high energy. Taylor is high energy too. But in a more controlled way. He tends to fly off the handle."

"Did he ever fly off the handle with Taylor?" Jessie probed.

"I only saw them together a couple of times and he was never like that with her. But I don't think he took the breakup very well."

"Why do you say that?" Ryan asked, giving Chianti his best

“I’m really interested in what you have to say” look. She almost melted right in front of him.

“I heard that he came around a couple of times and security had to ask him to leave,” she said, blushing slightly. “I don’t know if that’s true. But it sounds like Gavin. He’s got a stalkerish vibe. Plus, he might have reason to be jealous.”

“Of what?” Jessie wanted to know.

“Not to speak out of school or anything, but Taylor can be kind of flirtatious with her clients.”

Just then, a pale, paunchy thirty-something guy in a sleeveless gray shirt walked by.

“Hi, Chianti,” he said shyly.

“Hey, Brett, we still on for your 11 a.m. session?” she asked, flashing those extra bright teeth.

“Of course.”

“Excellent, sweetie. We’ll keep those biceps buff, okay? See you soon.”

When he left, the smile evaporated and she immediately returned her attention to Jessie.

“Where were we?” she asked.

“You were saying Taylor can be flirtatious,” Jessie reminded her with a straight face.

“Right.”

“Really?” Jessie pushed. “We heard she’s very professional.”

“On the workout floor, sure. But I heard her on the phone, making appointments for private training sessions. Management

officially frowns on that so she kept it on the down low. But her tone on those calls was definitely less…professional."

"Do you think she offers more than just training sessions?" Jessie asked leadingly.

"I couldn't say," Chianti replied, shrugging. "I mean, who knows whether she she's promiscuous or just a tease. Either way, the managers turned a blind eye because so many of her clients are big spenders. They didn't want to risk losing memberships, you know? But sometimes she didn't come in for days and no one said a word. If I did that, I'd be dumped fast. In fact, I haven't seen her in a while. I figured this was just another one of those times. But now you've got me worried. Is she okay?"

Jessie glanced at Ryan, letting him know she thought the time was right. He nodded in agreement and stepped in close to Chianti.

"I'm afraid she's not," he said quietly. "Taylor is dead."

Jessie watched Chianti closely as she took in the news. The trainer's plastic smile immediately disappeared. She looked disbelieving.

"I'm sorry. What?"

"Taylor Jansen was found dead in her apartment this morning," Ryan said emotionlessly.

Chianti seemed to be processing the information, realizing only now the purpose of all the questions she'd been asked. Her face morphed pretty quickly from shock into something between worry and curiosity.

“Was she murdered? Did Gavin do it?”

There was a lack of empathy in her voice that made Jessie want to punch her. They didn’t have to be friends, but couldn’t the woman at least fake a moment of sorrow? Unfortunately, in Jessie’s experience, her reaction also didn’t suggest guilt.

The hungry, gossipy look on her face and her naked desire to know the inside details both suggested she had none of them already. While Ryan was right that everybody is a suspect, Jessie’s profiling background suggested strongly to her that Chianti wasn’t much of one.

“We don’t have information about the cause of death at this time,” Ryan said, then added reluctantly, “Did Taylor ever strike you as depressed?”

“Oh wow,” Chianti said, her eyes getting wide. “Did she kill herself?”

“Just answer the question please, Ms. Rossellini,” Jessie snapped, losing patience.

Chianti looked mildly hurt but after a moment, she answered.

“No,” she admitted, sounding let down. “Actually, she always seemed pretty even-keeled to me. I never saw her get too high or too low. I’d be really surprised it turned out she did this to herself.”

Jessie tried to hide her own disappointment as well. So far, no one they’d spoken to thought Taylor was a likely candidate to commit suicide. And yet, at least so far, they had no evidence to suggest it was anything else.

“Is there anyone you can think of besides Gavin who might have had animosity toward her—a client maybe?” she asked.

Chianti thought for a moment.

“No one jumps out at me. I didn’t pay that close attention. But her reputation was that clients were generally happy with her. Some of that was because she was a good trainer. Some of it might be for those other reasons I mentioned, not to speak ill of the dead.”

“No, of course not,” Jessie said, the disgust rising in her chest. “Maybe you can wrap up here, Detective Hernandez. I need a bit of air.”

She nodded at Chianti and left abruptly, passing Brett as she left the workout floor. He was leaning against a treadmill, waiting for his not-at-all-flirty trainer to finish talking so he could start his session with her.

Jessie stepped out of the gym, onto the grimy, traffic-choked Hollywood street, where she somehow felt less dirty than she had around Chianti.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jessie tensed up. They were getting close now and she wasn't sure how she'd react.

After leaving Hollywood, they headed back to the station. This time she had insisted on driving. Her sarcastic explanation to Ryan, who usually drove, was that this wasn't *Driving Miss Daisy* and that women were permitted to drive in these parts.

But that wasn't the real reason. She knew that if she drove, she could take a route that passed the house where her recently orphaned stepsister, Hannah Dorsey, was currently living with a foster family. Logically, she knew the chances that the girl would be outside as they drove past were remote. But she had to at least try.

As she drove, she tried to diminish her rising anxiety by actually paying attention to what Ryan was saying. He was commenting on the austere nature of Taylor's apartment.

"It makes much more sense that her place was so empty now," he noted. "If what Chianti said was true, she might have spent days at time at a client's house, whether for legitimate or sketchy reasons. She'd only need to keep the basics at her place. Maybe she just came back one day, looked around at how depressing the place was, and decided to end it."

"Maybe," Jessie considered as she turned right, now only a block from Hannah's foster home. "But she doesn't seem the

type. I mean, you never know what someone's dealing with on the inside. But no one mentioned her ever seeming depressed. I think the toxicology report will be determinative."

"In the interim, we could check with her family for a history of depression or anything else," Ryan suggested.

"It's worth a shot," Jessie said. "But while the EMT at the coffee shop was checking you out, I talked to Vin a bit more. He mentioned that she didn't have any family in the area and that they were estranged anyway. I guess that soup in the freezer from her mother was an unsuccessful peace offering. I'm not sure how much insight they'll be able to give us. I think the suicide idea is a red herring."

"How can you be so sure?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. But don't you find it suspicious that there was no note or any indication that she was depressed? Or that her window was open?"

"Maybe she liked to keep her place cool after getting home from the gym," Ryan offered. "It's a lot cheaper than using the air-conditioning."

Jessie glanced over at him and could tell that even he didn't buy the theory.

"Regardless," he continued, not acknowledging her skepticism, "Hollywood Division is sending us copies of all the evidence they collected. We can go through her client list and see if anyone pops."

"How did the Hollywood detectives feel about us bigfooting

them?" Jessie asked.

"Pretty much as resentful as you'd expect," he said. "But I was cryptic, said the case might be connected to an ongoing investigation. They didn't want to risk playing hardball if it meant interfering in something major, so they backed down. Everything should be waiting for us at the station when we get back."

"Sounds good," Jessie said, noting the tightness in her throat. She had just turned onto Hannah's street.

She slowed down to the posted speed limit, happy to use the speed bumps on the road as an excuse. The house was on the left, an unremarkable ranch style home. The front porch had a hammock that was currently unoccupied, which made perfect sense at lunchtime on a weekday. Still, she felt let down.

She didn't know what she had expected. Even if Hannah had been there, what would she have done? She was expressly prohibited from initiating any contact with the girl by Children's Family Services, Captain Decker, and, more informally, by her own therapist, Dr. Janice Lemmon.

It was a reasonable request. Only eight weeks ago, the only family the girl had ever known had been slaughtered before her eyes. That was more than enough for any seventeen-year-old to deal with. But how would she handle learning that the man who did it was her birth father? And that the woman who he had tortured within an inch of her life was her half-sister?

Of course, no one could be expected to download all that horror and still function. Was she supposed to just

compartmentalize those facts by focusing on studying for her pre-calculus test or finishing *Moby Dick*? It was crazy to want to engage her.

And yet, Jessie felt a deep yearning to do exactly that. She pushed down the desire as they passed the house. Ryan, who had no clue about its significance, or even that she had a half-sister, seemed oblivious, which she took as a sign that she was doing a solid job of faking it. As she turned onto the next street, she flashed back to her most recent therapy session with Dr. Lemmon, trying to remind herself of what the woman had said.

Janice Lemmon knew what she was talking about and was not someone to be disregarded lightly. Well into her sixties, she might not look imposing with her thick glasses and tight blonde perm. But in addition to being a highly regarded behavioral therapist, she was also a legendary criminal profiler who still occasionally consulted on cases for the LAPD, FBI and other organizations that required top secret security clearance.

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