

BLAKE PIERCE



the  
perfect  
affair

a jessie hunt psychological suspense—book 7

**Blake Pierce**  
**The Perfect Affair**

Серия «A Jessie Hunt Psychological  
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*The Perfect Affair (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller—Book  
Seven):*

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**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 AFFAIR is book #7 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.

A porn star is found dead, and the LAPD doesn't think much of it. But FBI agent Jessie Hunt, 29, senses something much more sinister at

play, something that may just reach into the upper echelons of power and society.

A fast-paced psychological suspense thriller with unforgettable characters and heart-pounding suspense, **THE PERFECT AFFAIR** is book #7 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night.

Book #8 in the Jessie Hunt series will be available soon.

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# **Blake Pierce**

## **The Perfect Affair (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller—Book Seven)**

**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 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 four 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 seven books (and counting).

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

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# CHAPTER ONE

Shots rang out, startling Jessie from her sleep.

Half-awake, she rolled out of bed, grabbed her gun off the side table, and scurried over to the bedroom door. The shots sounded like they had come from the living room. She glanced at the clock: 1:08 a.m.

She set aside how someone could have breached her apartment building's tight security measures to focus on the task at hand. There was a threat on the other side of that door. Not only was she in danger but so was Hannah, who slept in the extra bedroom on the other side of the living room.

Jessie took a long, slow, deep breath before opening the door and peering out. She saw a dim glow in the room before a second round of gunfire made her retrench behind the wall. Had the attacker seen her? She was just preparing to crawl into the living room when she heard a voice.

“You’re surrounded, Johnny. Come out with your hands up,” a stern male voice instructed.

Suddenly a foreboding musical score kicked in.

“You’ll never take me alive!” shouted someone with a distinctly gangster-ish accent.

Jessie allowed herself to breathe normally for the first time in thirty seconds. Lowering her gun, she stood up and stepped into the living room, where she could see the television was on, airing

some old black-and-white crime movie.

She grabbed the remote from the coffee table and turned off the TV. Her heart was still pounding as she made her way across the living room, dodging the clothes, shoes, and magazines on the floor, until she got to the open door of Hannah's bedroom.

She poked her head in, where she saw her seventeen-year-old half-sister, Hannah Dorsey, curled up asleep on the bed. The girl had kicked off the covers and was hugging herself as she shivered slightly.

Jessie tiptoed over, grabbed the comforter, and gently draped it back over Hannah, who was mumbling to herself unintelligibly. The criminal profiler stood over her, trying to discern any words. But after a few seconds, she decided it was fruitless and gave up.

She tiptoed back to the doorway, gave one glance back, and then shut the door. She sighed deeply. Despite her repeated pleas not to, this was the third time in the last week that Hannah had left the television on before going to bed. Luckily, it was the first time Jessie had been woken up by the sound of gunfire coming from it.

Part of her wanted to shake the girl awake and drag her out to turn the thing off herself. But, as she'd recently learned from the online parenting newsletter she now subscribed to, teenagers apparently needed lots of extra sleep for their growing minds and bodies. Besides, interrupting Hannah's slumber to prove a point would backfire on her tomorrow in an extra helping of sullenness.

As she crossed the living room to go back to bed, she

wondered where the online newsletter was that talked about how almost-thirty-year-old female professionals also needed decent sleep every now and then. She was just smiling to herself when she tripped on a shoe Hannah had left in the middle of the room and stumbled to the floor, slamming her left knee on the hardwood.

She forced herself to stifle the curse word she wanted to yell. Instead she groaned silently as she pulled herself up and limped back to bed. With her knee aching, her heart still palpitating, and her mind racing, she resigned herself to another half-sleepless night, all courtesy of the teenager she'd agreed to let live with her.

*I think I got better sleep when I was being hunted by a serial killer.*

The gallows humor made her chuckle to herself but didn't make her any sleepier.

\*

"I didn't do it," Hannah insisted angrily.

Jessie sat across the breakfast table from her, stunned. She couldn't believe the girl was denying it.

"Hannah, there are only two people living here. I went to bed before you did. When I said goodnight, you were watching TV. When I was woken up in the middle of the night, it was on. You don't have to work for the LAPD to know who's responsible for that."

Hannah stared at her, her green eyes full of conviction.

“Jessie, I don’t want to be disrespectful. But you admitted that you’ve had trouble sleeping lately. And at your age, memory starts to falter a little. Is it possible that you’re forgetting something *you* actually did, and are blaming it on me because you’re buying into the stereotype of the lazy, forgetful teenager?”

Jessie stared back, dumbfounded at Hannah’s boldness. It was a stunning move, to lie about something so obvious, for no discernible reason.

“You know I track serial killers for a living, right?” she reminded her. “I’m not exactly susceptible to gaslighting from you.”

Hannah took the last bite of her toast and stood up, her sandy-blond hair falling in her face as she stretched to her full, gangly height of five foot nine, only an inch shorter than Jessie.

“Don’t we have to get to that therapist appointment this morning?” she asked, ignoring Jessie’s comment completely. “I thought it was at nine. It’s eight thirty-two right now.”

She headed back to her bedroom to finish getting dressed, leaving her plate and empty cup on the table. Jessie fought the urge to call after her and tell her to toss the stuff in the dishwasher.

She reminded herself of the personal limitations she’d established when Hannah first came to live with her two months ago. She was not, and would not try to be, the girl’s parent. Her job was to provide a safe environment for the half-sister she’d

never known to recover after a series of traumatizing incidents. Her job was to help Hannah heal and reintegrate into a world that seemed fraught with dangers all around her. Her job was to be a source of support and security. Jessie knew all that instinctively and intellectually, and yet she couldn't help but wonder why the hell the kid couldn't put a frickin' dish away.

As she cleaned up, she told herself for the thousandth time that this was all normal, that Hannah was acting out as a way of asserting control over her own life, something she'd sorely lacked lately, that it wasn't personal and it wouldn't last forever.

She told herself all of these things. But deep down, she wasn't sure she believed any of them. Some part of her worried that there was something darker going on inside Hannah. And she feared that it might be irreversible.

## CHAPTER TWO

Jessie was getting antsy.

She knew Hannah's session with Dr. Lemmon would end any second. Would the girl come out of the office crying, like she had on the last visit? Or stone-faced, like after the previous two?

If anyone could reach Hannah, Jessie had to believe it was Dr. Janice Lemmon. Despite her unassuming look, the woman was not to be trifled with. Her small frame, tight blonde perm, and thick glasses made the sixty-something behavioral therapist look more like someone's grandma than one of the most well-regarded experts on aberrant behavior on the West Coast. But underneath that ordinary facade was a woman so highly respected that she still occasionally consulted for the LAPD, the FBI, and other organizations that she never spoke of. She also happened to be Jessie's therapist.

At first, Jessie was concerned that having her treat Hannah as well might be a conflict of interest. But after some discussion, they agreed that there were only a few doctors who were qualified to treat a girl who'd been through Hannah's experiences. And since Dr. Lemmon was already intimately familiar with some of Hannah's family history, she was a logical choice.

After all, it was Dr. Lemmon who had helped Jessie deal with the reality that her father was the notorious serial killer Xander Thurman. It was Dr. Lemmon who talked her through

the nightmares and anxiety she suffered as a result of watching her father kill her mother when she was six years old. It was Dr. Lemmon who got her to open up about being left alone by him to die in a snowy cabin, trapped for three days next to the rotting corpse of the woman she had called mommy. It was Dr. Lemmon who helped give her the confidence that she could stand up to her father when he reentered her life twenty-three years later, bent on either converting her into a murderer who would join him or killing her if she wouldn't.

She was the only credible choice of therapists to work with her half-sister, who shared the very same father and equally brutal nightmares. Only a few months ago, Thurman had kidnapped Hannah and her adoptive parents and made the girl watch as he slaughtered them. He'd almost killed Jessie in front of her too. Only their collective quick thinking and grit had turned the tables and left him dead.

But even after that, Hannah's trauma didn't end. Only months after the death of her adoptive parents, an entirely different serial killer named Bolton Crutchfield, an acolyte of her father with a fixation on Jessie, had killed her foster parents in front of her and abducted her. He held her in an isolated basement for a week, trying to indoctrinate her, to mold her into a killer like Thurman and himself.

She survived that horror as well, rescued by Jessie and a clever double-cross of her own. Bolton Crutchfield had been gunned down. And though he was no longer a physical threat, Jessie

wasn't as confident that he hadn't wormed his way into Hannah's head, corrupting her with his sick faith, defined by nihilism and blood.

Jessie stood up, in part to stretch but also because she could feel herself sinking into mental quicksand. She looked at herself in the waiting room mirror. She had to admit that, despite spending the last two months as the unexpected guardian of a troubled teenager, she was still presentable.

Her green eyes were bright and clear. Her shoulder-length brown hair was clean, conditioned, and loose, unburdened by her standard work ponytail. A long stretch of not fearing she was being hunted by a serial killer had allowed her to resume a semi-normal workout routine, giving her five-foot-ten-inch frame a strength and solidity it had lost for a while.

Most impressive of all, none of her recent cases had involved shootouts, knife attacks, or anything approaching personal injury. As a result, she hadn't added any new scars to her massive collection, which included a puncture wound in the abdomen, angry lines along both arms and legs, and a long, pinkish moon-shaped scar that ran five inches horizontally along her collarbone from the base of her neck to her right shoulder.

She touched that one unconsciously, wondering if the time might soon be approaching when someone would see it, along with all the others. She could sense that she and Ryan were getting close to the point where they would be able to study each other's physical imperfections up close.

Detective Ryan Hernandez was, in addition to being a colleague she worked cases with regularly, her boyfriend. It felt weird to use the term but there was no way around it. They'd been going out semi-regularly for almost as long as Hannah had been living with her. And though they hadn't taken that final physical step, both of them knew it was close. The anticipation and awkwardness made for an interesting work environment.

Jessie was jolted out of her thoughts by the opening door. Out stepped Hannah, looking neither upset nor closed off. She looked oddly...normal, which, considering everything she'd been through, seemed odd in and of itself.

Dr. Lemmon followed her out and caught Jessie's eye.

"Hannah," she said. "I want to talk to Jessie for a few minutes. Do you mind waiting here briefly?"

"Not at all," Hannah replied, sitting down. "You two come on out when you're done deciding just how crazy I am. I'll just be alerting the state to your massive HIPAA violations."

"Sounds good," Dr. Lemmon said warmly, not taking the bait. "Come on in, Jessie."

Jessie settled into the same loveseat she used for her own sessions and Dr. Lemmon sat down in the chair across from her.

"I want to keep this brief," Dr. Lemmon said. "Despite her sarcasm, I don't think it helps for Hannah to worry that I'm sharing details of what she says with you, even though I assured her I wouldn't."

"Wouldn't or couldn't?" Jessie pressed.

“She’s still under eighteen so technically, as her guardian, you could insist. But I think that would undermine the trust I’m trying to develop with her. It’s taken a while to get her to open up in any real way. I don’t want to put that at risk.”

“Understood,” Jessie said. “So why am I in here at all?”

“Because I’m worried. Without getting into specifics, I’ll just say that apart from one session where she displayed a bit of emotion at what she’s been through, Hannah’s been largely... unruffled. In retrospect, after having gotten to know her, I suspect that single display of emotion may have been for my benefit. Hannah seems to have disassociated herself from the events that transpired, as if she was an observer of them, rather than a participant.”

“That doesn’t seem surprising,” Jessie said. “In fact, it feels uncomfortably familiar to me.”

“As well it should,” Dr. Lemmon agreed. “You went through a period like that yourself. It’s a fairly common way for the brain to make sense of personal trauma. Compartmentalizing or disconnecting from traumatic events isn’t unusual. What worries me is that Hannah doesn’t seem to be doing that as a way to protect herself from the pain of what happened to her. She seems to have simply erased the pain from her system, almost like a hard drive that’s been wiped. It’s as if she doesn’t view what she suffered through as suffering so much as simply things that happened. She’s narcotized herself from viewing them as things that have anything to do with herself or her family.”

“And I’m guessing that’s not super healthy?” Jessie mullied as she shifted nervously in her seat.

“I’m loath to put a judgment on it,” Dr. Lemmon said in her usual measured style. “It seems to be working for her. My concern is where it can lead. People who aren’t able to tap into their own emotional pain occasionally escalate to a point where they can’t recognize anyone else’s pain, emotional or physical. Their ability to feel empathy disintegrates. That can often lead to socially unacceptable behavior.”

“What you’re describing sounds like sociopathy,” Jessie pointed out.

“Yes,” Dr. Lemmon agreed. “Sociopaths do exhibit some of those hallmarks. I wouldn’t formally diagnose Hannah as such based on our limited time together. Much of this could simply be attributed to deep-seated PTSD. All the same, have you noticed any behavior that might dovetail with what I’ve described?”

Jessie thought about the last few months, starting with the inexplicable, pointless lie about the television this morning. She recalled how Hannah had complained when Jessie insisted on taking a sick stray kitten they’d found hiding under an alley dumpster to a vet. She remembered how the girl would go silent for hours, no matter what Jessie did to draw her out. She thought about the time she took Hannah to the gym and how her half-sister had started punching the heavy bag without any gloves, pummeling the thing until her hands were raw and bleeding.

All those behaviors seemed to match Dr. Lemmon’s

description. But they could all just as easily be interpreted as a young woman working out her inner pain. None of it meant she was a budding sociopath. She didn't want to get anywhere near that label, not even with Dr. Lemmon.

"No," she lied.

The therapist looked at her, obviously unconvinced. But she didn't press, moving on to another priority.

"What about school?" she asked.

"She started up last week. I placed her in that therapeutic high school you recommended."

"Yes, she and I discussed it briefly," Dr. Lemmon acknowledged. "She didn't sound overly impressed. Is that your sense as well?"

"I believe the way she put it was 'how long do I have to hang out with these drug addicts and suicides-in-waiting before I can go back to a real school?'"

Lemmon nodded, clearly not surprised.

"I see," she said. "She was slightly less forthright with me. I understand her frustration. But I think we need to keep her in a secure, highly supervised environment for at least a month before we consider transitioning her back into a traditional high school."

"I get that. But I know she's frustrated. She was supposed to graduate this year. But with all the time she's missed, even at a traditional high school, she's going to have to go to summer school. She isn't psyched to finish up with, as she called them, 'the burnouts and halfwits.'"

“One step at a time,” Dr. Lemmon said, unflustered. “Let’s move on. How are you doing?”

Jessie laughed despite herself. Where to begin? Before she could, Dr. Lemmon continued.

“We obviously don’t have time for a full session right now. But how are you managing? You’re suddenly responsible for a minor, you’re navigating a new relationship with a co-worker, your job requires you to get in the heads of brutal murderers, and you’re dealing with the emotional fallout of ending the lives of two serial killers, one of whom was your father. That’s a lot to juggle.”

Jessie forced a smile.

“When you put it like that, it does sound like a lot.”

Dr. Lemmon didn’t smile back.

“I’m serious, Jessie. You need to stay aware of your own mental health. This isn’t just a dangerous time for Hannah. The risk of you backsliding is significant as well. Don’t be cavalier about that.”

Jessie dropped the smile but kept the stiff upper lip.

“I’m aware of the risks, Doc. And I’m doing the best I can to take care of myself. But it’s not like I can take a spa day. The world keeps coming at me. And if I stop moving, I’m going to get run over.”

“I’m not sure that’s true, Jessie,” Dr. Lemmon said softly. “Sometimes if you stop moving, the world circles back around and you can hop back on. You are a person of value but don’t be arrogant. You’re not so indispensable in this world that you can’t

hit pause every now and then.”

Jessie nodded aggressively, sarcastically.

“Noted,” she said, pretending to take notes. “Don’t be arrogant. Not indispensable.”

Dr. Lemmon pursed her lips, coming as close to annoyed as she was likely to ever reveal. Jessie tried to push past it.

“How’s Garland doing?” she asked teasingly.

“I’m sorry?” Dr. Lemmon said.

“You know, Garland Moses, profiling consultant for the LAPD, helped me find and rescue Hannah, older, scruffy-looking in a charming, devil-may-care sort of way.”

“I’m familiar with Mr. Moses, Jessie. I’m just not sure why you’re asking me about him.”

“No reason,” Jessie said, sensing she’d hit a nerve. “He just mentioned you a while back and something about his tone gave me the impression that you two were chummy. So I was wondering how he was doing?”

“I think that will complete our time today,” Dr. Lemmon said brusquely.

“Wow,” Jessie said, smiling for real now. “You really shut that down fast, Doc.”

Dr. Lemmon stood up and motioned for them to head to the exit. Jessie decided to ease up. As they reached the door, she turned back to the therapist and asked the question that had been eating at her for the last few minutes.

“Seriously, Doc, if Hannah is heading down a road where she

has trouble feeling empathy for other people, is there any way to reverse that?”

Dr. Lemmon paused and looked her squarely in the eye.

“Jessie, I’ve spent thirty-five years of my life trying to answer questions like that. The best answer I can give you is: I hope so.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Lizzie Polacnyk got home seriously late.

She'd expected to be back from her study group session at California State University—Northridge by 7 p.m. But they had a big Psychology 101 exam tomorrow and everyone was quizzing each other relentlessly. When they called it quits for the night, it was after nine.

By the time she opened the apartment front door, it was almost 9:45. She tried to keep quiet, remembering that Michaela had a 6 a.m. call time both earlier this morning and tomorrow and was probably fast asleep by now.

She tiptoed down the hallway to her bedroom and was surprised to see a dim light leaking out from under Michaela's door. It wasn't like her to stay up late when she had to be up by 5 a.m. She wondered if her longtime friend and more recent roommate had simply been so tired that she fell asleep with the light on. She decided to peek in and turn it off if need be.

When she cracked open the door slightly, she saw Michaela lying on her back without the covers on. Her pillow partially obscured her face. She only had the reading lamp on so it was hard to be sure but it looked like she hadn't even changed out of her outfit from the day, a cheerleading uniform.

Lizzie was about to close the door when she noticed something odd. The skirt was riding down near Michaela's thighs so that her

crotch was exposed. That seemed inappropriate, no matter how exhausted she was.

Lizzie debated whether to throw a sheet over her friend. Considering what Michaela did for a living, it seemed like forced modesty. Besides, it wasn't like anyone else was going to walk in on her. Still, Lizzie felt her Catholic girls school upbringing kicking in and knew it would gnaw at her all night if she did nothing.

So she gently pushed the door open and stepped inside, quietly walking over to the side of the bed. She got halfway there when she stopped cold. Now with an unobstructed view, she saw the gaping holes in Michaela's chest and stomach.

A thick, wet pool of blood had oozed out of the sliced up uniform and surrounded her entire torso, slowly seeping into the bed sheets. Michaela's eyes were clenched tight, as if keeping them closed could have protected her from whatever happened.

Lizzie stood there for several seconds, unsure how to react. She felt like she should scream but her throat had suddenly gone dry. Her stomach gurgled and she briefly feared she might throw up.

Feeling like she was in a strange dream, she turned and walked out of the bedroom and back into the kitchen, where she poured herself a glass of water. When she was confident that she would be able to speak, she called 911.



The date was going well.

In the back of her mind, Jessie started to wonder if tonight might be the night. She was almost reluctant to wish for it. Her relationship with Ryan was the most stable thing in her life right now and she was hesitant to do anything to complicate it.

She'd spent most of the evening at the charmingly cheesy Italian restaurant complaining about how things were going with Hannah. She recounted the basics of her conversation with Dr. Lemmon and lamented the lack of forward progress they were making in helping her half-sister adjust to her new normal. It was only when Ryan excused himself to go to the restroom and she looked around the restaurant that Jessie realized just how self-centered she'd been.

The place, a legendary if cheesy San Fernando Valley haunt called Miceli's, was darkly lit and romantic. The vibe was heightened by the fact that Ryan had somehow secured the one table on the second floor, in what amounted to an indoor balcony overlooking the rest of the restaurant. But until now, she'd been mostly oblivious.

She'd also barely registered until he left that he'd hardly spoken all night. Instead he sat patiently as she prattled on about her domestic troubles, barely letting him get in a word. In fact, now that she thought about it, she didn't recall asking him a single

question all evening.

As the guilt washed over her, she saw him leave the restroom on the floor below and deftly navigate his way through the maze of tables to the stairs. As he did, she noticed something else—almost every woman who could get away with it cast a glance his way. Who could blame them?

The man was hard to ignore. Six feet tall and two hundred pounds of what looked like marble, with unassuming, short black hair and welcoming brown eyes, he walked with the quiet confidence of a man who didn't need to impress anyone.

And if these women knew what he did for a living, they'd be even more intrigued. As the lead detective for a special unit of the LAPD called Homicide Special Section—HSS for short—his cases all had high profiles or intense media scrutiny, often involving multiple victims and serial killers.

And he was here with her. It had taken a while to get to this point. He was in the final stages of a divorce after six years of marriage. Jessie had been single a little longer. Her marriage had ended more dramatically, when her now ex-husband attempted to frame her for killing his mistress. When she'd uncovered his plan, he tried to kill her. He was currently incarcerated in a prison in Orange County.

Ryan sat down across from her and she reached for his hand. "I'm sorry," she said. "I've been totally dominating the conversation. How are you?"

"I'm okay," he said. "That drug kingpin assassination wrapped

up today.”

“You never called me in to help,” she noted, pretending to be hurt.

“It was pretty cut and dried. We didn’t really need the services of any fancy profiler for that one.”

“Who cares?” Jessie protested. “Call me in anyway. At least then we can spend a little time together, even if I might have to bail at some point.”

“How romantic,” he said. “Nothing like making googly eyes over a dead body.”

“We do what we’ve got to do,” she said, shrugging. “Besides, for my last case I was assigned to work with Trembley, who—no offense— isn’t exactly my dream partner.”

“Hey,” Ryan mock-protested. “Detective Alan Trembley is a solid professional and you should be honored to work with him on any case you’re assigned.”

“He’s quite boring.”

“I resent that on his behalf,” he said, trying to scowl. “Besides, not having you with me allows me to plan your birthday without you hovering.”

“You’re planning something for me?” Jessie asked, genuinely surprised. “I didn’t even know you knew when it was.”

“I’m a detective, Jessie. That’s kind of in my wheelhouse. I wouldn’t even mention it except that I need you to make sure your schedule is clear on Thursday evening. Cool?”

“Cool,” she agreed, blushing slightly.

He smiled back and she felt a rush of warmth come over her. Someone going to the trouble to learn her birthday and organize something for it would normally have made Jessie illogically anxious. But somehow, because it was Ryan, she felt comfortable with the idea, even excited.

She wondered if he might be planning an early gift of an intimate nature for her tonight. She was about to hint at the idea when his phone rang. She didn't recognize the ringtone. Whoever it was caused Ryan to frown. He mouthed *sorry* as he picked up.

"Detective Hernandez," he said.

Jessie watched as Ryan listened to the voice on the other end of the line. The frown on his face became more pronounced with each passing moment. After waiting silently for about thirty seconds, he finally responded.

"But Valley Division's already there. Won't it be too late?"

He was quiet as the other person responded. After another twenty seconds, he spoke again.

"I understand. I'm on it."

Then he hung up. He stared at the phone for a moment as if it might speak directly to him. When he looked up, his eyes were steely.

"I hate to do this but we have to skip dessert. I have to check out a crime scene and if we don't leave now, it might be too late."

Jessie had rarely seen Ryan look so uneasy. He waved at the server to get her attention, handing her a pile of bills from his wallet when she hurried over.

“Too late?” Jessie asked. “What does that mean?”

Ryan stood up and indicated that she should do the same. He was already headed for the stairs when he replied.

“I’ll explain on the way.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

Jessie forced herself to wait.

Whatever this was about, it had Ryan on edge and she didn't want to make it worse. She sat quietly in the passenger seat, allowing him to reveal what was going on when he felt comfortable.

"Are you sure you're okay coming?" he asked again.

"Yes," she assured him. "I texted Hannah that a case came up and that she shouldn't expect me back before she goes to bed. We're good."

"You could have rideshared from the restaurant," he reminded her.

"I wanted to come, Ryan," she insisted, again biting her tongue despite the desire to ask additional questions.

He continued west on Ventura Boulevard deeper into the Valley. After another ten seconds of silence, he finally began to speak.

"So here's the deal. I have a contact in the department who will occasionally alert me to cases I should be aware of."

"Could you be a little *more* cryptic?" Jessie asked, unable to contain herself.

"I actually don't have much more than that to share," he said, ignoring her snark. "About four years ago, I got a call from a burner phone. The voice was digitally manipulated. The caller

suggested that the prime suspect in the murder of a wealthy businessman was being set up and that I should look at political motivations for the killing.”

“This call just came out of the blue?” she asked.

“Yep. I was a junior grade detective without much to lose so I followed it up. The case was about to be closed. But I started asking questions and pretty quickly, the whole thing unraveled. It turned out that the businessman was a major supporter and fundraiser for a local city councilman. Once he died, the councilman’s funding dried up. His challenger was able to overwhelm him financially and won the seat. In the end, we realized the challenger for the seat had hired someone to take out the businessman for exactly that reason, to kneecap the incumbent’s primary source of financial support. He also had the original suspect framed so it would look like a random robbery gone wrong.”

“How did your contact know all that?”

“I have no idea. I’m not even sure the source knew the extent of the thing. I got the sense that the person, who I started calling Chatty Cathy, knew something was off, even if the details were hazy.”

“Is the source a woman?”

“No way to tell,” Ryan admitted. “But for the purpose of giving them a name, let’s say yes. Anyway, I started to get additional calls after that. Not often, maybe twice a year. They were always from burners using digital voice masking. And they

almost always involved cases that seemed open and shut, but upon further investigation, were more complicated.”

“So Chatty Cathy is some sort of guardian against injustice?”

“Maybe,” Ryan said, not sounding as confident. “Or it could be something else. I’ve noticed that in most of these cases, the real story is messy and makes people in positions of power look bad. A lot of times, I think our higher-ups would rather go for the easy answer than get into the muck of uncovering crimes that might implicate folks with influence. By calling me, Chatty Cathy gets to raise the alarm about questionable cases without getting herself dirty or putting her career at risk. The goal may be noble but I think there’s some self-interest involved too.”

“So what about this case made her reach out?”

“I don’t know,” Ryan said as he turned right off Ventura Boulevard onto Coldwater Canyon Avenue. “She never tells me why a case is sketchy, just that it is. All I know is that a woman was murdered in the thirteen thousand block of Bessemer Street in Van Nuys. She was stabbed multiple times in the torso. The preliminary theory is that it was a robbery gone wrong; that the burglar didn’t think anyone was home and attacked the resident upon finding her.”

“Do they have a suspect?”

“They don’t,” Ryan said. “But according to Chatty Cathy, things are moving fast. The nine-one-one call only came in about a half hour ago and the coroner is already on scene, preparing to remove the body.”

“The detectives are okay with that?” Jessie asked, incredulous.

“My understanding is that they aren’t even there yet. The senior uniformed officer gave the order.”

“What?” Jessie said, dumbfounded. “That’ll compromise the crime scene. Can we stop that?”

“That’s why I said we had to leave right away,” Ryan replied. “Chatty Cathy said the coroner was trying to slow down the process but that we have about ten minutes before they have no choice but to bag the body.”

“How far away are we?” Jessie asked.

“Not far,” Ryan said as he turned onto a residential street doused in flashing lights. “It’s that building halfway up the block.”

They parked a few doors down and got out. Hurrying over, Jessie couldn’t help but notice that despite the lights, there weren’t as many vehicles as she would have expected. There was the coroner’s van, an ambulance, and two squad cars. Usually a murder scene would have at least double that many black-and-whites.

As they approached the building, the lone uniformed officer outside gave them a wary look. Ryan flashed his badge.

“What’s the story, Officer?” he asked.

Considering the time constraints, Jessie was surprised that Ryan was stopping at all. The young African-American officer, who couldn’t have been more than twenty-five, had a nervous expression and the name tag Burnside.

“Sir,” he answered, his voice cracking slightly, “we’ve got a Caucasian female, seventeen, multiple stab wounds to her chest and abdomen. She was found in her bed by her roommate.”

“Are the Valley Bureau detectives on scene yet?” Ryan asked.

“No sir.”

“Who’s in charge then?”

“That would be my boss, Sergeant Costabile from Van Nuys Station,” the officer answered as he pointed back to the right. “He’s inside. It’s apartment 116.”

“Thanks,” Ryan said briskly, grimacing slightly as he walked by with Jessie right behind.

“Do you know Costabile?” Jessie asked as she hurried to match his pace.

“Only by reputation,” Ryan said. “Hank Costabile’s not just old school, he’s ancient. And from what I hear, he’s a pit bull.”

“Pit bulls are actually agreeable by nature,” Jessie said a little indignantly.

“Point taken,” Ryan said. “But you know what I’m saying. He’s known to be...difficult. This could get ugly so be prepared.”

“What does that mean?” Jessie demanded.

But before he could answer they had reached the door. A burly officer named Lester stood just outside the taped off unit. He looked as wary as the cop outside but less nervous. Jessie observed that Ryan didn’t show his badge to this guy.

“This area is off limits,” Officer Lester said brusquely. “Police business. The officer outside should have told you.”

“Oh yeah?” Ryan whispered in a curious, very undetectivelike tone. “What happened? You can tell me.”

“I’m not at liberty to say,” Lester snapped. “Are you a resident of this building, sir? Because we can’t have civilians just wandering through a crime scene.”

“Oh no, we wouldn’t want that,” Ryan agreed smarmily. “That’d be almost as bad as removing a dead body before the assigned detectives got a chance to evaluate the scene. Am I right?”

The officer narrowed his eyes at the question, now fully aware that something unusual was going on.

“Who are you, sir?” he asked, his brusqueness now laced with a hint of apprehension.

“I’m sure as hell not a Valley Bureau detective,” Ryan said, his voice booming.

“Sir...” the officer began, clearly flummoxed.

“It’s okay, Lester,” said a bald, barrel-chested officer who walked up behind him. “Don’t you know who that is? It’s the famed detective Ryan Hernandez from Central Station. You can let him in. But be sure to get his autograph before he leaves.”

“Sergeant Costabile, I assume?” Ryan asked, his eyebrows raised.

“That’s right,” Costabile said with a sneering grin. “To what do we owe the honor of your presence, Detective? Showing your long-legged, pretty lady friend how the other half lives out here in the Valley?”

“My ‘long-legged, pretty lady friend’ is actually criminal profiler Jessie Hunt. You know, she’s the one who catches serial killers almost as often as you catch venereal diseases.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence in which Jessie thought Costabile might simply pull out his gun and shoot Ryan. The man’s nasty grin faded so that it was now a nasty scowl. After what felt like an eternity, the sergeant gave a loud, forced guffaw.

“I guess I deserved that,” he said, glancing over at Jessie, not sounding even mildly chastened. “It was rude of me to be so dismissive of you, Ms. Hunt. Your reputation precedes you. I can only imagine what law enforcement lottery allowed us to be graced with your singular genius this evening. Pray tell, what brings you here?”

Jessie wanted desperately to respond to the mockery with some of her own but didn’t want to upset whatever plan Ryan clearly had in mind. So she choked down her disdain.

“I’m afraid I can’t be completely forthcoming,” she said apologetically. “But I’ll let Detective Hernandez share what he’s able to.”

“Thanks, Ms. Hunt,” Ryan said, smoothly taking the baton. “We just happened to be in the area wrapping up an interview when we got the alert about this case. It sounded like it might be part of a pattern we’re investigating and we thought we’d check it out firsthand.”

“You think this is related to a case you’re working?” Costabile asked disbelievingly.

“It’s possible,” Ryan said. “We’d have to look at the body to draw any firm conclusions. Of course, we don’t want to step on the toes of the detectives already assigned. Who might that be?”

Costabile stared at Ryan, taking note of his challenging tone. It was clear that Ryan knew there were no detectives on the scene yet. Costabile appeared to be debating whether to answer the spoken question seriously or address the one below the surface about what exactly was going on here.

“Detective Strode should be here momentarily,” he finally said in a disturbingly polite tone. “But we were prepping the body to be viewed down at the coroner’s. Everything looks pretty open and shut. We didn’t want to waste department resources unnecessarily.”

“Sure, sure. I get it,” Ryan replied, using the same official but not genuine politeness as Costabile. “All the same, maybe we take a look here so as to not compromise the scene. *We are* talking about a teenage girl stabbed in her own bed...how many times?”

Costabile’s face turned red and it looked like it was taking an enormous effort for him to keep his composure.

“Nine...that we’re aware of.”

“Nine times?” Ryan repeated. “That seems like a lot. Doesn’t that seem like a lot to you, Ms. Hunt?”

“It seems like a lot,” Jessie agreed.

“Yeah, a lot,” Ryan added for emphasis. “So maybe we dot the ‘i’s’ and cross the ‘t’s’ on this one before tossing the girl into a

plastic bag and driving her over a bunch of pothole-strewn Valley streets? You know, just to be thorough.”

He smiled sweetly as if he'd merely been discussing the weather. Costabile did not smile back.

“Are you taking over this investigation, Detective?” the sergeant asked flatly, not commenting on the pothole dig.

“Not at this point, Sergeant. Like I said, we just want to see if the killing fits our pattern. You're not denying us access to the body, are you?”

That question led to another uncomfortable silence. Jessie watched another officer named Webb wander over from inside the apartment and take up a position right behind Costabile. His right hand was resting uncomfortably close to his gun holster. She glanced back and saw that Officer Lester had now stepped inside the police tape and was standing behind them, assuming the same posture with his hand in the same position.

Costabile looked down at his shoes and kept his gaze there for several seconds. Ryan stared at the top of the man's head, his eyes unblinking. Jessie was afraid to breathe. Finally, Costabile looked up. A vein on his forehead bulged. His eyes were angry slits. Slowly, he opened them and his body seemed to relax slightly.

“Come on in,” he said, waving his hand in an exaggerated welcome.

Ryan stepped forward and Jessie followed. As she moved into the apartment, she reminded herself it was okay to breathe again.

# CHAPTER FIVE

It was hard to stay focused.

With so much testosterone bouncing around the apartment, Jessie was still slightly apprehensive that a shootout might break out any moment.

She tried to force the simmering animosity out of her brain as she walked through the place. She needed to have a clear head from this point forward. The coroner might focus on the state of the body and the crime scene folks might look for blood spatter or fingerprints. But she needed to be aware of everything that contributed to the psychological makeup of the victim. Even the smallest detail could lead to the killer.

The apartment was fairly unremarkable. It was clear to her from the décor that both residents were female even though the gender of the victim's roommate hadn't been mentioned. One of them was clearly way more personally conservative than the other. The wall art was a confusing amalgam of watercolors and religious iconography next to Gustav Klimt prints and incendiary Mapplethorpe photos.

As she walked down the hall, Jessie got the distinct sense that the more outré roommate was also the one with more money. Her style seemed far more dominant. When they passed the smaller bedroom, she glanced in and saw a cross on the wall above the dresser.

*So the one who could afford the bigger bedroom died.*

Sure enough, they continued on to the larger bedroom at the end of the hall, from where she could hear voices.

“You up for this, criminal profiler lady?” Costabile asked derisively.

“She’s been...” Ryan started to say but she cut him off.

“I’m good,” she answered.

She didn’t need him standing up for her professional virtue. And she definitely didn’t want another tough guy competition when she was trying to concentrate. Ignoring whatever stare-down was going on behind her, she took a deep breath and stepped into the bedroom.

Before even looking at the body, she allowed her eyes to scan the room. There were more of the bold decorating choices on the walls and a disco ball lamp beside the bed. A chair in the corner was on its side and magazines were scattered on the floor, hinting at a struggle. The desk was mostly empty, though there was a clean, rectangular spot surrounded by a layer of dust, a sure sign that a laptop had recently been there.

“TV is still here,” Ryan noted. “So is the gaming console. Seems like an odd decision for a thief to leave that stuff.”

“Laptop is gone though,” Jessie noted. “Anyone find a cell phone?”

“Not yet,” Officer Webb said.

“Did you get her number from the roommate so we can try to track it?” she asked, trying not to let her impatience show.

“The roommate has been a little on the hysterical side,” Costabile said. “We’ve had trouble getting much of anything out of her other than her name, Elizabeth Polacnyk. The EMTs have her in the ambulance outside. They were going to sedate her.”

“Okay,” Jessie said. “But don’t let her leave until we’ve had a chance to speak to her.”

Costabile still looked put out but nodded for Officer Lester, who was still near the front door, to convey the demand. As he did, Jessie finally turned her attention to the girl on the bed. She was already in the body bag, though it hadn’t been zipped up. The sight of it was infuriating to Jessie.

“Did anyone take photos before her body was disturbed?” Ryan asked, speaking aloud the question in Jessie’s head.

A crime scene tech raised his hand.

“I managed to snap a few just before she was loaded in the bag,” he said.

The deputy medical examiner on the case walked over.

“Hi. I’m Maggie Caldwell. We tried to hold off on bagging,” she said apologetically. “But we were instructed otherwise.”

The accusation hung in the air, unspoken.

“Like I said,” Costabile said defensively, “seemed like an open-and-shut case; didn’t want to waste resources.”

Jessie tried to keep her voice even as she replied.

“I’m sure you have decades of experience on the job, Sergeant,” she said. “But are you in the habit of making the command decision to disturb a murder scene before the

detectives arrive, regardless of what resources it requires?”

“Valley Bureau isn’t as flush as you Downtown types,” he barked. “We don’t have the luxury of lingering lovingly over every dead runaway we find.”

As Jessie’s temper flared, she found her voice getting calmer and slower.

“I wasn’t aware that police procedure in this part of town now placed budget savings over crime-solving. I’d love to see where that line is in the new regulations. Additionally, I didn’t realize that the murders of teen runaways weren’t worth investigating. Did I miss that day at LAPD regulations school?”

“Are you questioning my professionalism?” Costabile asked, taking a step toward her.

“I’m just asking questions, Sergeant,” she answered, not backing up. “If your conscience is suggesting something deeper, that’s for you to work out. I would note that if this girl is a teen runaway, she’s doing pretty well. It’s clear that she’s got a well-paying job that allows her to live in a sizable apartment, buy art, and, based on her nails and hair, get expensive salon care. Are you sure you’re not making assumptions about her background?”

Costabile looked like he didn’t know which challenging question to address first. After a moment of frustrated huffing, he responded.

“The girl was found in a cheerleader uniform with the skirt down. Feels pretty trashy to me. My guess is she’s a working girl.”

“No chance that the skirt was pulled down by her assailant?”

Jessie mused. “Your officer said she was seventeen. No chance she’s a high school cheerleader? No chance she’s an actress in costume? We’re sure she’s a trash whore? You seem to be making a lot of assumptions for an experienced law enforcement professional, Sergeant.”

Costabile took another step forward. He was now face to face with her. Jessie worried that Ryan might try to intervene but he held back. She suspected he knew what she was doing. Costabile spoke at her under his breath.

“So you’re gonna come in here with your hipster, hot-to-trot profiling rep and call me out as bad at my job? That’s where we’re at now?”

He was almost growling but Jessie didn’t care.

“If the shoe fits,” she whispered. “Also, if you think you can intimidate me with your man boobs and garlic breath, you’re mistaken. I’ve gone toe to toe with guys who kept human body parts as souvenirs, so your cheap bullying tactics don’t impress me. Now get the hell out of my face.”

Costabile’s nostrils flared. The blood vessel on his forehead looked like it might pop at any second. Jessie watched him closely. Part of her wanted to knee him in the crotch. But her analytical side was still testing him, trying to determine exactly what was going on here and why procedure wasn’t being followed. Something was very off. If he got angry enough, maybe the guy would inadvertently reveal something.

The two of them glared at each other. Costabile was hunkered

and wheezy; Jessie silent and taut. She was happy to stay like that all evening if it broke him. After a good five seconds, he exhaled, intentionally breathing on her. He plastered a forced smile onto his face and took a step back.

“I have to say, Ms. Hunt, you are an even bigger bitch than I’d heard you were.”

“What’s her name?” Jessie demanded almost before he could finish his insult.

“What?” he said, startled by her sudden response.

“The girl,” she pressed, nodding at the bed. “Do you even know her name?”

“Her name is Michaela Penn,” Officer Lester said, rescuing his superior from potential embarrassment. “We’re still digging up info but it looks like she went to a local Catholic girls high school. She became an emancipated minor almost two years ago and graduated early. She was waitressing part-time at Jerry’s Deli in Studio City.”

“Thanks, Officer,” Jessie said, before adding one more line for Sergeant Costabile’s benefit. “Sounds real trashy.”

She turned and really looked at Michaela closely for the first time since entering the room. The first thing that jumped out at her was just how young the girl looked. She may have been seventeen, but with her short, dark hair and pale, now-bluish skin, she looked closer to fifteen.

She glanced up at a photo of the girl on the dresser and tried to reconcile it with the lifeless form on the bed. The Michaela in the

picture was beautiful in a delicately pixie-ish way. She reminded Jessie of a girl from those Japanese anime cartoons.

Her deep blue eyes were huge but unemotional, as if she'd learned to hide her emotions long ago. Only the slight half-smirk at the edges of her lips hinted at what might be hidden beneath. She gave off the vibe of an unlit firework, like she was just biding her time, ready to explode at any moment.

"Can you unzip the bag?" Ryan asked as she moved over next to Jessie. As they waited he muttered under his breath. "I hope permanently alienating the most connected uniformed officer in the Valley was worth whatever you were trying to uncover by insulting him. Because he's never going to let this go."

"Jury's still out," she murmured back.

The cops had moved away but Maggie Caldwell, the deputy medical examiner, remained close by after she unzipped the bag.

"Sorry," she said quietly. "I didn't want to touch the body but Costabile was adamant that we move quickly. If you'd arrived five minutes later, she'd have been packed up in the van."

"Any idea what the rush was?" Ryan asked her.

"No," Caldwell said nervously. "But I don't think it was all his idea. He was on the phone with someone who seemed to be giving him instructions. It was after he hung up that he really tried to push things along."

Jessie moved closer to the girl. Her cheerleading uniform, red, with white script and black trim, was nondescript. The writing said only "Central H.S." The skirt was pulled down to her thighs.

“Lester said she already graduated, right?” Ryan recalled. “So why the uniform?”

“I’ve lived in this area for twenty years and I don’t recognize that school or those colors,” Caldwell said. “I don’t think it’s real.”

“Maybe it was a costume,” Jessie suggested. “Waitressing and acting are hardly mutually exclusive.”

“Possible,” Ryan agreed. “I hate to say it, but Costabile could be right too. It could be an outfit she wore for...a client. That wouldn’t be unheard of around here.”

Jessie nodded, voicing her own theory.

“Whatever she was doing, unless she had a trust fund, it was more than just waitressing. This place is nice. The art isn’t cheap and it’s clear that she had a comprehensive skin and hair regimen that involved professional assistance. She wasn’t struggling. Do we know if she was sexually assaulted?” she asked Caldwell.

“Too early to tell. We’ll know more tomorrow.”

“We should definitely talk to the roommate soon,” Ryan said. “Maybe she can let us know if Michaela had received any threats recently.”

Jessie nodded in agreement as she looked more closely at the knife puncture wounds. There were five in the chest and another four in the abdomen.

“Did anyone find the murder weapon?” she asked.

“There’s a butcher knife missing from the kitchen set,” Officer Lester, who had overheard the question, volunteered. “But we haven’t been able to locate it.”

“That’s weird,” Ryan noted.

“What?” Lester asked.

“Well, if this was a robbery gone wrong, you’d expect the perpetrator to be surprised to find Michaela in her room. The general disarray in this room suggests a struggle. But if the perp didn’t know she was here, how did he get the knife? It’s hard to believe he ran back to the kitchen to get it and then came back to the bedroom again.”

“Maybe he knocked her out and then got the knife?” Lester offered.

“But if he knocked her out and this was a robbery, why not just take the stuff and go?” Jessie wondered. “There wouldn’t be any resistance at that point. To go grab a knife, return to the bedroom, and stab an unconscious girl nine times. That doesn’t sound like typical robber behavior. That’s cold-blooded. And yet...”

“What?” Lester prodded.

“A laptop was taken,” she said, nodding at the empty desk. “And we don’t have her phone here. So she *was* robbed. The question is: was that an afterthought? Was it staged or were those things taken for a specific reason? Whatever the case, it’s hardly open and shut.”

That last comment made Costabile, who’d been standing quietly in the corner for the last few minutes, perk up.

“I thought you were done casting aspersions for a few minutes,” he said acidly. “But I guess it was too much to hope for.”

Jessie was about to retort when Ryan stepped in.

“We’ll let it lie for now,” he said. “After all, we still need to talk to the roommate. Come on, Jessie.”

They started for the door. But Ryan stopped just as they were leaving. Leaning in so that only she and Costabile could hear him, he muttered one last thing to the man.

“But I have to tell you, Sergeant, if you think we’re done asking why you’re handling this case in such rushed, slipshod fashion, you are sadly mistaken. I don’t know what you’re hiding, but this case stinks. If you think you can keep a lid on it, you’re kidding yourself.”

Costabile didn’t reply. But he did give Ryan a big, toothy, malevolent grin that suggested he felt otherwise.

## CHAPTER SIX

For a second, Jessie thought Michaela's roommate was dead too.

Despite the EMTs' assurances to the contrary, she was unresponsive when they opened the ambulance door and tried to get her attention. Even after they called her by what the EMT said was her preferred name, Lizzie, she didn't stir. It was only when Ryan pulled off the thermal blanket she was wrapped in that she gave them the time of day.

"What?" she demanded in a tired, surly voice.

The girl looked to be in her late teens. Even if she hadn't seen Lizzie's room, Jessie would have guessed she was a more restrained personality than her roommate. Her brown hair was tied back tight and her makeup was subdued to the point of unnoticeable. She was dressed conservatively in a zippered CSUN sweatshirt and pants. She wore a crucifix necklace.

Jessie frowned at Ryan, not pleased with his tactics. But he shrugged as if to say he was done being patient.

"Lizzie," Jessie began, using her most sympathetic voice, "we're investigating what happened and we need to ask you a few questions."

"They gave me something," Lizzie said. "I'm feeling a little loopy."

"We understand," Jessie assured as she helped the girl up to a

seated position. “And we’re going to have you go to the hospital to get checked out momentarily. But we need to get some basics from you first, okay?”

“I guess.”

“How did you know Michaela?” Jessie asked.

“We went to high school together,” Lizzie said, speaking slowly as she focused on each word. “She left early but we stayed in touch. When I graduated we decided to become roomies. She was a good roomie.”

Jessie glanced over at Ryan. The girl was really zonked out. Getting much out of her would be hard. He raised his eyebrows in frustration. Jessie tried again.

“Lizzie, did Michaela have family in the area?”

With much effort, Lizzie shook her head.

“What about a boyfriend or someone she recently broke up with?”

“No boyfriend,” Lizzie answered lazily.

“Maybe a co-worker she had problems with?”

Lizzie’s eyes, which had been glazed over, briefly focused.

“Mick was a waitress,” she said adamantly.

“Okay,” Jessie replied, surprised by the intensity of the response. “Did she have any issues with anyone at work?”

“She was a waitress,” Lizzie repeated vehemently.

Jessie gave up and turned back to Ryan.

“I think we’re going to have to wait to talk to her. This is pointless.”

“That would be my preference anyway,” said the EMT, who had been standing nearby. “After what she’s been through, and with the medication she’s on, I’d really like to get her looked at.”

“Go ahead,” Ryan told him. “We’ll come by to talk to her tomorrow.”

They watched as Lizzie was strapped into a stretcher and the ambulance doors closed. As the vehicle pulled away into the dark night, something occurred to Jessie.

“The Valley detective still hasn’t showed up.”

“I’m actually not sure we want to be here when he does,” Ryan noted. “I don’t want him peppering us with questions about the ‘investigation pattern’ we’re pursuing.”

“You don’t want to ask him why he showed up so late?” Jessie asked, surprised.

“I do. But I have a feeling we’d hit the same brick wall that we got with Costabile. We need to know more before we start coming at these guys.”

“I get that,” she said. “But just to be clear, we’re in agreement that something seriously shady is going on here, right? I mean, that Costabile guy seems more like a mob capo than a police sergeant. Or maybe he’s the Don Corleone of Valley Bureau.”

Ryan looked over at her, clearly uncomfortable with her words, though he didn’t try to argue. She decided to let him off the hook and continued speaking before he could answer.

“I don’t think we’re likely to get anything useful tonight.” She sighed.

“No. We may have to pick this up tomorrow morning. By then, Lizzie will be coherent. Caldwell might have something definitive on a potential sexual assault and we can see if someone tried to pawn Michaela’s laptop or phone.”

“Okay,” Jessie said reluctantly. “One thing we know for sure. Your Chatty Cathy was right. Something definitely isn’t right with this case.”

\*

Hannah was awake when Jessie got home.

The girl barely looked up from the movie she was watching when she walked in. It was almost 1 a.m. and tomorrow was a school day but Jessie didn’t have the energy to fight.

“It’s been a long night,” she said. “I’m going to bed. Can you please turn the volume down and try to get some sleep soon so you can function tomorrow?”

Hannah turned the volume down a few notches but otherwise didn’t acknowledge her half-sister’s words. Jessie stood in her bedroom doorway for a moment, debating whether to try again. But ultimately she decided it wasn’t worth it and simply closed the door.

She slept restlessly that night. That wasn’t unusual. For the last few years, she could count on near-nightly nightmares centered on one of the men who had posed a threat to her very life. They were usually a mix of her ex-husband, her father, and Bolton

Crutchfield.

But tonight, like so many recent nights, her dreams centered on Hannah. Her mind was filled with a swirl of disconnected images, some of the girl in peril at the hands of a masked assailant, others in which she walked nonchalantly into danger.

But the dream that troubled her the most was the last one, in which Hannah sat at a table, smiling casually as an unidentifiable waiter served her a plate filled with dismembered body parts. She was just lifting a forkful of human flesh to her mouth when Jessie startled awake, drenched in sweat and breathing heavily.

The first rays of morning sun streamed in through a crack in the curtains. She sat up, swung her legs over the side of the bed, and rested her head in her hands. Her skull was pounding and she felt vaguely nauseated. As she reached for ibuprofen and a bottle of Pepto-Bismol, she tried not to read too much into the dreams.

She knew from experience that they weren't so much a predictor as a manifestation of her fears. She was having these dreams because she feared for Hannah's future, not because of anything she was destined to become.

At least that's what she told herself.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Despite her exhaustion, Jessie was excited to get to the station.

She managed to get Hannah out the door only ten minutes late this morning and figured that if she hit only light traffic, she could still arrive at work before it got too busy. She wanted some quiet time to focus on the Michaela Penn case, which felt more wrong every time she thought about it.

Why did the officers on scene want to wrap things up so fast? Why hadn't the detective arrived more quickly—if he arrived at all? What made Chatty Cathy call Ryan in the first place? Jessie's gut screamed that this was more than just a standard robbery gone wrong. Nine stab wounds felt very personal.

And yet, as she'd been reminded repeatedly at the ten-week FBI Academy training session she'd attended, her gut was no substitute for evidence. Just because a person or scenario seemed suspicious, that wasn't proof of anything on its own. For Jessie, who had excelled at almost every test they threw at her at Quantico, taking that lesson to heart had been the most challenging.

When she arrived at her desk at 7:33 a.m., the station bullpen was still sparsely populated. She knew she had about a half hour until that changed so she dived right in. First she called the Valley Bureau Coroner's Office to get any results they might have. Maggie Caldwell wasn't in. But according to Jimmy, the guy on

call, she'd instructed him to pass along any updates if someone from Central Station called. At least Caldwell didn't seem to be part of whatever slow walk operation Sergeant Costabile was running.

According to Jimmy, Michaela had been sexually assaulted before she died. But apparently the assailant had used a condom and then doused her in some sort of disinfectant that prevented the collection of any usable DNA. They were waiting to see if more detailed testing might offer something but he wasn't optimistic.

Her next call was to the hospital to check on Lizzie. As she waited on hold for an update, her thoughts drifted back to Hannah. The similarities between her and Michaela Penn weren't lost on her. Both girls were seventeen. Both had gone to private schools in the San Fernando Valley. It looked like both of them had to grow up faster than they should have. Jessie couldn't help but wonder what other parallels they shared.

A nurse came on the line, snapping her out of her thoughts. Apparently Lizzie was still sedated. The nurse said she should be awake by mid-morning and suggested holding off on visiting until then.

After that she called Van Nuys Station and asked for Officer Burnside, who had been standing guard outside the apartment building. Out of all the cops she encountered last night, he was the one who seemed the least comfortable with the situation. She hoped she might be able to pry some details out of him. She was

told his shift had just ended—it ran from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. With a little cajoling, she was able to convince the desk sergeant to give her his cell number. Her hope that he might be awake and still driving home was rewarded when he picked up on the second ring.

“Hello?” he said tentatively.

“Officer Burnside? This is Jessie Hunt. We met last night at the Penn murder scene.”

“I know who you are,” he said, caution in his voice.

Sensing his intense wariness, she debated whether to try to set him at ease or just accept that this was going to be an uncomfortable situation. She decided that being forthright was the smarter move.

“Look, Officer, I know you’re not psyched to be getting this call. And I don’t want to put you in a difficult situation, so I’ll keep it brief.”

She paused, but when she got no response, she continued.

“I’m wondering if you’ve gotten any updates on the status of Michaela’s phone or laptop. Any pings on the phone? Any attempts to pawn it or the computer that you’re aware of?”

After a period of silence, Burnside finally responded.

“I think you’d be better off going through official channels, Ms. Hunt.”

He sounded embarrassed to say it and she decided to use that to her advantage.

“I think we both know how well that would go, Officer. I’d

be running in circles for hours. Look, I'm not asking you to tell me why that crime scene was handled so unprofessionally. I'm not asking you to explain why almost every cop there was acting like they were guilty of something. All I'm asking is if either the phone or laptop has turned up."

She waited and could almost hear Burnside's brain working in the intervening silence.

"You didn't get this from me, okay?" he insisted.

"Of course not."

"Nothing's turned up on the laptop yet. We're still waiting. The phone is still missing too. But we traced it to its last known location, a few blocks away. We found the SIM card in an alley, or at least what was left of it. It had been crushed, and from the look of it, burned."

"That seems unusually thorough for a thief, don't you think?" Jessie noted. "Almost like the robber was more interested in keeping Michaela's call data hidden than in keeping her phone."

"I don't know what to tell you, Ms. Hunt," Burnside replied.

"No, of course you don't. As long as this conversation isn't officially happening, is there anything else you want to tell me about what occurred last night?"

More silence as Burnside weighed his response.

"I don't have anything more to share about last night," he finally said. "But I will say this. Going forward you might want to let this one go, Ms. Hunt. I can tell you don't want to. And I know from your reputation that letting things go isn't really what

you do. But in this instance, you might want to reconsider.”

“Why?”

“I have to go, Ms. Hunt. But I wish you all the best. Take care of yourself.”

Before she could reply, he had hung up. She was pondering whether to call him back when she saw Garland Moses walk into the bullpen and make his way to the stairs leading to his tiny second-floor office. As usual, the legendary profiler projected the image of a rumpled, absent-minded professor, with his gray hair a mess, his glasses in danger of sliding off his nose, and his sport jacket dwarfing his wizened frame. She stood up and chased after him.

“Hey, Garland,” she said, reaching him at the bottom of the stairs and walking up with him. “You’ll never guess who I ran into yesterday.”

“You shouldn’t challenge me like that, Ms. Hunt,” he replied, winking. “I guess stuff for a living, you know.”

“Okay, then have at it,” she teased.

“I’m going to say Dr. Janice Lemmon,” he mused casually.

“How could you possibly know that?”

“That’s easy. You know I know her and seemed delighted by that information when you found that out. Also, your current gossipy, schoolgirl tone suggests that whoever it is has what you believe to be some sort of personal connection to me. That limits the options pretty dramatically. Therefore, Dr. Lemmon.”

“That’s pretty impressive,” she admitted.

“Also, she called me and warned me you were fishing for info,” he said with a wink in his voice.

“I see,” Jessie said, giddy at the thought. “Do the two of you chat on the phone often?”

“I feel like I’ve been transported into a Jane Austen novel and you’re the scheming protagonist. Please tell me that you didn’t accost me merely to hone your matchmaking skills, Ms. Hunt.”

“That’s not the *only* reason, Garland. I do have a favor to ask.”

“What’s that?” he said, as they reached the top of the stairs.

“I was hoping to introduce you to my half-sister, Hannah.”

“Ah yes, the girl you saved from the serial killer.”

“The girl you helped me save,” Jessie corrected. “If not for your suggestion, I never would have found her.”

“How is she?” he asked, brushing off the compliment.

“I was hoping you could tell me. I thought we could manufacture some sort of casual encounter and you could judge for yourself.”

Garland looked at her disapprovingly as they approached his office door.

“So you want to introduce me to her under false pretenses so I can profile her because you’re worried she might be a little serial killer-ish?”

“I wouldn’t put it quite that way,” Jessie protested. But...yes.”

“I’m not totally comfortable with that,” he told her as he opened the door. “I don’t think it’s fair to the girl and I worry that it might further erode the trust the two of you already sorely

lack.”

“How do you know tha...”

“However, I have to admit I’m curious to meet this girl. She sounds like a real pistol. I’d be willing to do that. To go through what she’s suffered and still be even moderately functional? It’s quite incredible. I can’t guarantee anything beyond a chat. If you’ll accept those terms, I’ll agree to it.”

“I’ll take what I can get,” Jessie said.

“Very well then. We can talk later to set something up,” he said, then slammed the door in her face.

Under normal circumstances, Jessie would have been offended. But she decided to take the win. Garland had agreed to meet with Hannah. And once he did, Jessie was sure that he would be able to help. Even subconsciously, he’d end up profiling her. It was in his blood, just like it was in hers.

It was what they did.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

By the time Ryan arrived, Jessie had a full head of steam.

She'd spent the rest of the morning getting as much background information as she could on Michaela Penn. He had barely reached his desk before she started peppering him with details.

"Something doesn't fit with this girl," she said before he even sat down.

"Good morning, Jessie," he replied. "How are you?"

"Good morning," she said, offering a brief smile acknowledging the niceties of human interaction. "How am I? I'm confused. Michaela Penn is a real contradiction. This is a girl who graduated from a prestigious Catholic girls high school a year early while on an academic scholarship. She was legally emancipated at the age of sixteen. All very impressive, right?"

"Right," Ryan agreed, clearly giving up on the pleasantries.

"But the reason her emancipation was approved was because her father, who now lives up near Lake Arrowhead, was abusive. She was able to prove to the court that she was better off on her own."

"What about her mom?"

"Her mother died of ovarian cancer when she was seven."

"No other relatives?" Ryan asked.

"Not in California."

“Where did she live then?”

“Until she graduated early, she boarded at the school. Since then, she’s bounced around among three different apartments until she settled on the place where she was found last night. None of the others were anywhere near as nice.”

“So how did she afford the new place?” Ryan wondered.

“That’s a good question. Like Lizzie said, she’s a waitress. She works at Jerry’s on Ventura Boulevard. And according to her manager, she only worked part-time. That’s not going to pay for the place she was living in, much less all the art and electronics we saw.”

“Any clues from her social media?” Ryan asked, finally firing up his computer.

“Not so far,” Jessie admitted. “I’ve looked at her Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Tumblr, and Whisper accounts, along with everything else I could find. It’s pretty standard stuff—selfies at the beach, pictures with friends at concerts, funny memes, inspirational quotes, tons of smiles; not a mean comment in her mentions. It’s almost...too normal.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s hard to explain. I know people’s social media is curated to project the best possible image. But hers is relentlessly normal—nothing controversial, nothing revealing. It’s just so impersonal. After looking at it all, I didn’t get the sense that I knew her any better than before. It felt like a puzzle with several pieces missing.”

“So there’s nothing in there that would explain why someone would stab her multiple times?” Ryan asked drily.

“No,” Jessie said, not playing along. “Nor why a bunch of cops would try to shut down the investigation before it began. By the way, I talked to Burnside earlier, the officer stationed outside the building last night. He basically begged me to drop the case. It sounded like he was genuinely concerned for me.”

“Maybe he thinks Costabile is going to try to beat you up after school.”

Before she could reply, Captain Decker poked his head out of his office and called them in.

“Hernandez, Hunt, I need to have a little chat, please.”

Jessie glanced at Ryan, who had a look of resignation on his face.

“What?” she asked.

“That’s his ‘ream you out’ voice,” he said as he got up. “I can only imagine what the Valley Bureau people told him.”

“Well, I’ve got a little reaming out of my own to do,” Jessie said, her spine stiffening as she led the way to Decker’s office.

“Great,” she heard Ryan mutter quietly behind her. She pretended not to hear him.

They entered the office to find Captain Roy Decker standing behind his desk. He looked a decade older than his sixty years, skinny, mostly bald, and sunken-faced, with more wrinkles than she could count. He was staring at his computer screen with a frown. His beady eyes were intensely focused and his long, sharp

nose seemed to point accusatorily in their direction.

“I understand you had a little excitement last night,” he said without looking up.

“We stumbled onto a case with some unusual features,” Ryan volunteered vaguely.

“Well, it seems that your involvement has piqued the interest of some of our friends in Valley Bureau,” he replied, his voice betraying nothing.

Jessie wanted desperately to respond. But from experience, she'd found it best to let Ryan feel things out first. His many years of exemplary service had garnered him some goodwill that Jessie hadn't earned yet.

“Sir,” Ryan began carefully, “I think their pique might have something to do with how they were caught flat-footed on this. They were violating protocols left and right. Hell, the body was being removed before the assigned detective had even arrived. It wasn't their finest moment.”

“They neglected to include that in the preliminary report,” Decker acknowledged. “May I ask what you were doing there in the first place? It's not exactly your jurisdiction.”

“Was in the area after dinner and heard word of a victim who had been stabbed multiple times. I'm like a moth to a flame when it comes to that sort of thing and thought Hunt's insight could be valuable so I asked her to help out.”

Decker glanced up at him. Jessie could tell he wasn't fooled by Ryan's incomplete, pronoun-averse answer. She thought this

might be the moment when he pressed them on the nature of their relationship, which they'd been keeping under wraps. But he seemed to think better of it.

"Well, according to the report, it looks pretty open and shut; robbery gone wrong. So I guess we can move on without any unneeded friction between precincts."

"Actually, Captain," Jessie said, speaking for the first time, "I'm not sure it's as simple as that."

"Of course you're not," Decker said, seeming to sink even further into himself. "Go ahead, Hunt. Ruin my day."

"I don't mean to do that, sir," she said, trying to harness all the diplomacy she could muster. "But the scene doesn't support the theory that this is just a simple robbery gone wrong. Hardly anything was stolen. The SIM card in the phone, which *was* taken, was completely destroyed. The killer went into the bedroom with the murder weapon, seemingly with intent. The victim was stabbed nine times, hardly the MO of your typical apartment thief. And even after the girl was dead, the place was left largely untouched. I'm not saying definitively that it wasn't a robbery. But open and shut? I don't think so."

She wanted to go on; to say that something about the case stunk to high heaven. But deeming that extra claim to be counterproductive, she left it there.

Decker sat down and closed his eyes. When he opened his mouth, it was twisted into a pained grimace.

"What would you have me do with this information, Ms.

Hunt?”

“Captain, I think you should allow us to pursue this case. Detective Hernandez’s role as part of HSS allows him to take over any LAPD case the unit deems within its remit. Let us see where this goes. Give us the day. If we can’t find anything worthwhile, we’ll close up shop.”

Decker sat quietly for a moment, weighing her proposition.

“Unfortunately, that’s not possible,” he said, turning to Ryan. “Detective Hernandez, I just got word that your testimony in the Barton murder case has been moved from tomorrow to today. You need to be at the courthouse at ten a.m.”

Jessie and Ryan exchanged deflated looks.

“Captain,” he pleaded, “it’s only eight thirty now. Let me start the process of taking over the case. Maybe we can conduct an interview with the roommate. At least let us get the ball rolling.”

“I can’t do all that. I’m not going to pull the Valley guys off the case. The politics of that are just too ugly. But I can offer a compromise. I’ll let Valley Bureau know that HSS wants to work in concurrence with them, to information share and pool resources. That will allow you access to witnesses and evidence.”

“But we need to access all that now, sir,” Jessie insisted, “while the trail is hot.”

“Hunt, will you please let me finish before you dictate procedure to me?”

“Sorry, Captain,” Jessie said, silently berating herself for alienating the man who could most help her out now.

“Hernandez, you put in the paperwork and note Hunt as the profiler on the case, which will permit witness interviews at the very least,” he said, then turned to Jessie. “Hunt, that should allow you to re-interview the roommate. Once the door is cracked open, Valley won’t be able to easily close it.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jessie said.

“Just don’t go overboard, Hunt,” Decker implored. “I know that’s not easy for you. But stick to interviews, work that can be justified under the ‘profiler’ job description. You’ll be solo for a while until Hernandez gets out of court. Without a cop to back you up, you need to tread more lightly. Are you familiar with that concept, Hunt?”

“Vaguely, sir,” Jessie said, smiling. “Thank you.”

“Please don’t make me regret this,” he said, almost begging.

Jessie answered as honestly as she could.

“I’ll do my best.”

## CHAPTER NINE

Jessie was waiting in her hospital room when Lizzie woke up.

The girl looked around, clearly disoriented. Jessie got up and held a cup with a straw to her lips. She sucked down the water voraciously.

“Can you talk?” Jessie asked when Lizzie was through gulping.

“Where am I?” the girl asked hoarsely. “Who are you?”

“You’re in Valley Presbyterian Hospital,” Jessie told her patiently. “I’m Jessie Hunt with the Los Angeles Police Department. We met last night, though you were pretty drugged up at the time. Do you remember last night?”

At first Lizzie just looked confused. But then the memories seemed to flood back in. In an instant she grimaced and closed her eyes tight.

“I remember enough,” she said quietly.

“Do you remember talking to me?”

“Not really.”

“Okay, then let’s start fresh. I’m sorry, but the questions I have to ask you are going to be difficult. But in order to find out what happened to Michaela...”

“Mick,” Lizzie corrected. “She went by Mick.”

“In order to find out what happened to Mick, I’m going to be blunt and I need you to be honest, okay? Don’t try to protect

her memory by keeping important details from me. Everything is going to come out eventually, so the sooner the better. Are we clear?”

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