



BLAKE PIERCE

the
perfect
look

a jessie hunt psychological suspense--book 6

A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller

Blake Pierce

The perfect look

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Pierce B.

The perfect look / B. Pierce — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd», — (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller)

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“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 LOOK is book #6 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 man winds up dead in a hotel room in LA after a night with a prostitute, no one thinks much of it – until what seems like an isolated case turns into a pattern. It soon becomes clear that a prostitute has turned serial killer—and that criminal profiler and FBI agent Jessie Hunt, 29, may be the only one who can stop her. A fast-paced psychological suspense thriller with unforgettable characters and heart-pounding suspense, THE PERFECT LOOK is book #6 in a riveting new series that will leave you turning pages late into the night. Book #7 in the Jessie Hunt series will be available soon.

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Blake Pierce

The Perfect Look (A Jessie Hunt Psychological Suspense Thriller—Book Six)

Blake Pierce

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 ; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; 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 to learn more and stay in touch.

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CHAPTER ONE

Gordon Maines looked at himself in the hotel bathroom mirror and couldn't help admire what he saw staring back at him.

For a third-term city councilman considering a run for mayor, he exuded the confidence of a man who regularly bent the system to his will rather than the other way around. Beyond that, he just looked good.

He was approaching fifty, but thanks to a comprehensive regimen of skin care (with a small Botox assist), he told himself that he could still pass for forty. His wavy hair was still more pepper than salt. His skin was tan but not in an unhealthy-looking way. He still looked fairly dashing in a suit, though he wasn't wearing one now.

In fact, all he had on at the moment was a white undershirt and a pair of boxer briefs. And soon those would be gone too. As he popped the little blue pill into his mouth and took a swig of brandy, he considered what was waiting for him in the other room.

This was far from the first time he'd done this, but the woman he'd brought up to room 1441 of the Bonaventure Hotel may have been the most impressive yet. The purple dress she wore was sophisticated and stylish, but form-fitting enough to suggest at the bounty hidden underneath. Part of him wondered what she was doing in this line of work. She was gorgeous enough to be a model or actress, or at the very least a porn star.

But Gordon didn't spend too much time worrying about the girl's long-term employment prospects. Right now she was here and she would do whatever he wanted, even if he had to pull money from the slush fund he kept on the side, the one he used so his wife wouldn't stumble across his various peccadilloes.

He stepped out into the well-appointed room with its latte-tinted walls adorned in modern art, thick carpeting, and marble-topped dressers, and was surprised to find the bed unoccupied. For a second, thinking she'd absconded with the first half of her payment, he started for the door.

"Where you headed, big boy?" a voice purred from the corner of the room.

He glanced in that direction and saw her, the girl who'd demanded they not use names, sitting in a high-backed chair in the corner near the window, wearing only a black bustier and hipster panties. Her proportions were almost Barbie-like, something he intended to investigate in greater detail soon.

Her long blonde hair cascaded down, approaching her elbows. Her skin wasn't nearly as tan as the average California girl, giving her a delicacy and sophistication that seemed somehow exotic in this land of sun and surf. Her eyes were a bright blue, reminiscent of the Caribbean waters where he'd spent his honeymoon.

Gordon immediately shook that thought from his head and focused on the creature in front of him.

"I'm headed in your direction," he answered, certain he sounded suave.

"Before you do, I poured you another drink," she said, nodding at the counter above the mini-bar as she took a sip from a glass of her own. "I decided not to wait."

"Rude," he said, pretending to be offended as he grabbed the glass.

"Hopefully I can make it up to you," she said, her tone lilting with playfulness.

"I'm sure I can think of something," he replied before taking a swig. "Mmm, is that brandy?"

"You mentioned that it was your favorite when we were downstairs," she said.

"Wow, you paid attention," he marveled, before taking another glug. "Most girls in your line of work don't pay attention to anything other than the cash."

"Are you saying I'm not the first gal you've been with?" she faux pouted, sticking out her lower lip with such ferocity that he could barely contain himself.

This girl is good.

He reminded himself to add a little something extra if the rest of her efforts delivered on the performance so far.

“Why don’t you take off your shirt and stay awhile?” she suggested, standing up and letting him drink her in fully.

“Don’t mind if I do,” he murmured, pulling his shirt up more clumsily than he would have liked.

In fact, as he lifted it over his head, he lost his balance and stumbled slightly. Luckily he landed on the bed, where he managed to finally wrangle the shirt off, even if he felt his hair getting messed up in the process. He was irked at his lack of smoothness but reminded himself that the blonde girl didn’t really care.

She was standing over him now, a hint of a smile on her face. Maybe she found his awkwardness endearing.

“Clumsy much?” she cooed as she walked over to the chair he’d rested his slacks on, sliding on what looked like plastic gloves as she went. He watched her move but found himself struggling slightly to focus.

She pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and slowly flipped through it, pulling out all his cards and dropping them in a small plastic bag. He tried to prop himself up on his elbows to get a better view but his arms weren’t responding to orders from his brain.

“Heyyy...” he tried to say, though his tongue felt unwieldy in his mouth.

The girl glanced over at him and smiled sweetly.

“Feeling relaxed?” she asked as she walked back over to her purse and dropped the plastic bag in it.

Somewhere in the back of his brain, it occurred to Gordon that the girl might be trying to rob him. He also thought she might have slipped something into his drink. It was time to put a stop to this.

With all the strength he could muster, Gordon pushed himself up into a sitting position. His head lolled lazily atop his neck as he tried to fix his gaze on her.

“You...stop,” he tried to shout, though it came out as more of a mumble. It felt like he had a pile of marbles in his mouth.

As she walked over to him, he began to see double, then triple, unable to discern which girl was the real one.

“You’re cute,” the middle image said as she pushed him back down on the bed. “Shall we begin?”

She climbed on top of him and straddled him. Gordon’s body was heavy and numb and he could barely feel her weight. He saw that she still wore the plastic gloves.

In his increasingly hazy mind, an alert sounded. This was more than just a drugging and robbery. Something about the casual, unhurried way the woman was moving suggested she wasn’t just out for his money and possessions. She was enjoying herself. The way she shimmied up his torso reminded him of a snake slithering slowly up the branch of a tree.

“What...doing?” he managed to garble.

She seemed to understand him perfectly.

“I’m delivering on a promise,” she relied breezily, as if she were answering a question about the weather.

Gordon stared into her blue eyes and saw that all the earlier playfulness had disappeared from them. Now they were icy and focused. He knew he was in trouble. The realization sent a sudden surge of adrenaline through his system, which he used to push himself up from the bed.

He expected to pop up and have the woman fall off him to the floor. But he had barely risen six inches when she pushed him back down, using only an index finger to the chest to force him back into his original position. Then she leaned down so that their faces were only inches apart. Her hair fell into his eyes but there was nothing he could do about it.

“This is it for you, Gordon,” she whispered in his ear. “Any final words?”

His eyes, the only part of him he still seemed able to control, opened wide.

“Arghh...” he sputtered.

“Never mind,” she said brusquely, cutting him off. “I don’t really care.”

Gordon watched as she sat up straight again and wrapped her hands around his neck. He couldn’t actually feel her squeezing his throat but knew she must be because breathing suddenly became challenging. His eyes started to bulge and felt like they might pop out of his skull. He desperately tried to gasp for air but couldn’t seem to gather any into his chest. His vision blurred. His tongue darted around as if searching for any oxygen it could draw in. But nothing worked.

The last thing he saw before his vision went dark was the woman above him, staring at him intently as she strangled him. She was still smiling.

CHAPTER TWO

Jessie Hunt sat nervously in the booth at Nickel Diner on South Main Street, only two blocks from LAPD Central Community Station.

Though the person she was meeting would not care at all about her appearance, she wanted to make a good impression. In general, she deemed herself fit to be seen. Her green eyes were clear and her shoulder-length brown hair looked shinier than usual. She'd made sure to put on her most professional blouse and slacks before work today, along with flats that didn't accentuate her already regal five-foot-ten frame. She doubted anyone looking at her today would mistake her for a model, as sometimes happened. But just weeks from her thirtieth birthday, she knew she could still turn heads when it served her purposes.

All things considered, she thought she was doing pretty well. After all, it was just seven days ago that she'd been drugged by a murder suspect and had her stomach pumped. In the time since, after she was released from the hospital, she'd been mostly holed up at her apartment, under the care and protection of Detective Ryan Hernandez.

Ryan had insisted on staying with her until she'd regained her strength. So, for the last week, he'd been sleeping on the pull-out sofa in the living room and making most of her meals. Jessie had deliberately chosen to simply accept the help and not read too much into the actions of the man who was her sometime case partner and sometimes more.

Typically after extended medical time off, Jessie would have gone into work along with Ryan first thing to have her sign-off meeting with LAPD Captain Roy Decker. But today was unusual. She had decided to have a little meeting of her own, before the captain started placing rules and limits on her once she started work again.

While Jessie Hunt was a criminal profiling consultant for the Los Angeles Police Department and not an actual police officer, Captain Decker was still her immediate supervisor, and violating his orders could have serious repercussions. But if she just happened to meet with someone and have an informal discussion about an ongoing investigation *before* getting Decker's orders, well, that could hardly be held against her.

It was for that reason that she sat in the crowded diner at 7:30 a.m. waiting for the arrival of a man she'd only spoken to occasionally and almost always while battling nerves. She nibbled on her toast and sipped her second cup of coffee, well aware that she probably should have stopped after one. He walked in just as she put the mug down on the table.

Garland Moses glanced around the diner, spotted Jessie, and headed toward her. At seventy-one years old, with leathery skin, unkempt white hair, and bifocals that looked about to topple off the front of his nose, he didn't draw the attention of any of the customers he passed. None of them had any idea that they were in the presence of perhaps the most celebrated criminal profiler of the last quarter century.

Jessie couldn't blame them. The man seemed to cultivate an air of slovenliness. He shuffled toward her, seemingly oblivious to the shirttails sticking out above his rumpled corduroys and the stains on his oversized maroon sweater vest. His gray sports jacket, which hung off him like he was a coat rack, looked like it might swallow him whole.

But if one paid closer attention, other things became clear. Behind the thick glasses, his sharp eyes darted around quickly, taking in his surroundings in an instant. Though his hair was disheveled, he was crisply shaved without a stray piece of stubble. His teeth were still sparkling white and in perfect condition. His fingernails were neatly trimmed and the shoelaces on his well-worn loafers were tied in tight double bows. Garland Moses projected the slapdash look of a Columbo-style senior citizen. But as Jessie knew well, it was all an act.

Moses had been solving some of the hardest murder cases in the country for over forty years. He did it first as part of the FBI's celebrated Behavioral Sciences Division based out of Quantico, Virginia. Then, in the late 1990s, after twenty years of seeing the worst humanity had to offer, he retired to sunny Southern California.

But within months of his arrival, he was courted by the LAPD to serve as a profiling consultant. He agreed, with several conditions. First, he wouldn't be a formal employee so he wasn't subject to the rules and regulations of the department and could come and go as he pleased. Second, he got to pick his own cases. And most importantly to him, he didn't have to adhere to any dress code.

The department eagerly agreed. And despite his outwardly gruff demeanor or, as one officer called him, "a taciturn, short-tempered asshole," they never regretted it. Enconced in his isolated, broom-closet-sized office on the station's second floor, Moses went about his work, where he could be counted on to solve at least three or four high-profile cases a year, typically ones that stumped everyone else.

For reasons Jessie had never understood, Garland Moses seemed to like her, or at least not outwardly object to her existence, which was pretty much the same thing for him. He'd even given her occasional advice on a few of her cases from time to time.

And though he'd never acknowledged it, she had learned that his recommendation had been instrumental in getting her admission into the vaunted, ten-week FBI Academy, which she'd completed just last year.

The highly selective program brought in the cream of the crop from local police departments to train them in the latest FBI investigative techniques. It was usually only available to seasoned detectives with decorated records. But Jessie, a relative rookie, had somehow been admitted. While there, she not only got to learn from instructors at the world-famous Behavioral Sciences unit, she also underwent intense physical training that included weapons instruction and self-defense classes.

Without question, her success at solving multiple high-profile murder cases, not to mention foiling an attempt on her own life by her ex-husband, had played a role in her admission. But of greater significance was almost certainly the good word put in on her behalf by multiple high-level L.A. law enforcement officials, Moses among them.

As he sat down across from her, Jessie felt certain that he could already sense the purpose for her appeal to meet with him early in the morning outside of work. Despite her nervousness, it was almost a relief. If he could already guess what she wanted, she could dispense with all the niceties, persuasion, and flattery her imminent request would typically require. He was here after all. That meant he was at least mildly interested.

"Good morning, Mr. Moses," she said as he settled in across from her.

"Garland," he replied in his signature raspy growl as he waved at the waitress for a coffee. "This better be good, Hunt. You were very cryptic on the phone. I don't like upsetting my morning routine. And you've definitely upset it."

"I'm pretty sure you'll find the shakeup worthwhile," she assured him before deciding to simply launch in. "I need your help."

"I figured. No one asks to meet with me to discuss china patterns, much to my chagrin," he said, straight-faced.

Jessie decided to take his crack as a good sign and played along.

"I'm happy to do that later, Garland, if you've got a hankering. But for now, my interest is less in tableware and more focused on serial-killing child abductors."

The server, who had just walked over with her coffee pot, gave Jessie a stunned stare. A cherubic forty-something blonde with "Pam" on her name tag, she quickly recovered, glancing away and filling up Garland's mug.

"I'm listening," Garland said after the server left, "as apparently was Pam."

Jessie decided not to ask how he knew the woman's name when he'd never looked up at her. Instead she launched into her pitch.

"I'm sure you're aware that Bolton Crutchfield is still on the loose and that just last week, he kidnapped a seventeen-year-old girl named Hannah Dorsey."

"I am," he said, offering nothing further.

He didn't need to. One didn't have to be a celebrated criminal profiler to know about the monstrous history of Bolton Crutchfield, who had murdered dozens of people in brutally elaborate ways and who had recently escaped from a psychiatric prison.

"Okay," she continued. "You may also know that I have a bit of history with Crutchfield—that I interviewed him over a dozen times when he was held at the NRD psych prison, where he told me that my good ol' pops, the serial killer, Xander Thurman, was his mentor and that they'd been in communication."

"I knew that too. I also know that, despite his admiration for your father, when it came time to choose between you, he warned you about the threat from your father, potentially saving your life. That must complicate your feelings toward him."

Jessie took a long sip of her coffee as she pondered how to respond.

"It did," she finally conceded, "especially since he made it clear that he intended to leave me alone from now on and pursue other interests."

"A détente of sorts."

Pam tentatively returned to take Garland's order.

"I'll have what she's having," he said, nodding at Jessie's toast. Pam looked disappointed but said nothing and retreated to the kitchen.

"Right," Jessie said. "Of course, I was reluctant to take the word of a vicious killer that he was going to live and let live. And then he took the girl."

"That bothered you," Garland noted, stating what he knew to be obvious.

"It did," Jessie said. "This was a girl I found being held by my father in a home with her adoptive parents. He was torturing her. She barely survived, as did I. The people who raised her didn't. So when, only weeks later, Crutchfield kidnapped her and killed her foster parents, it felt..."

"Personal," Garland completed her thought.

"Exactly," Jessie said. "And now, after a week of forced leave, a week in which Hannah has been in Crutchfield's clutches, I'm returning to work today."

"But there's a problem," Garland said leadingly, hinting that Jessie should cut to the chase. So she did.

"There is. The FBI has been assigned the case. I know that when I walk through the police station doors, I will be expressly prohibited from participating because of...my personal connection. But, knowing my own nature after nearly thirty years on this planet, there is no way I'm going to be able to just put it out of my head and go about my normal business. So I thought I'd enlist the assistance of someone who isn't beholden to the regulations that are about to be handed down to me."

"And yet," Garland said as his toast arrived. "I get the distinct feeling that I'm not your first choice for this task."

Jessie had no idea how he could have known that but didn't try to deny it.

"That's true. I wouldn't normally ask a celebrated profiler emeritus to do me a solid if I could avoid it. I particularly don't like asking them to do the dirty work of trying to discreetly suss out what's going on in someone else's investigation. But unfortunately, my first choice is unavailable."

"Who is that?" Garland asked.

"Katherine Gentry. She used to head up security at the NRD prison. We became friends during my many visits. But once Crutchfield escaped and multiple guards were murdered, she was fired. Since then, she's become a private investigator. Kat's new to the gig but she's good at it. I used her for something recently."

“But...” Garland pressed.

“But she’s in the middle of another case that involves a lot of out-of-town surveillance so she doesn’t really have the time. Besides, I thought this might be a little too raw for her, considering her connection to Crutchfield. I think she might be too close to it.”

I see,” he said, with a mischievous tone. “So you’re concerned that a person might not be able to objectively assess the situation because of her personal connection to it. Does that description apply to anyone else you know?”

Jessie looked at him, well aware of the point he was making. Of course, if he knew just how personal this case was for her, he would likely be even more concerned. Then a thought occurred to her, one that might make him reevaluate how he looked at the circumstances.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’m not objective, more than you know. You see, Garland, what only a half dozen people in the world know is that Hannah Dorsey’s father was Xander Thurman. She’s my half-sister, something I discovered less than a month ago. So I’m definitely not objective about this.”

Garland, who was about to take a sip of coffee, paused briefly. Apparently he still had the capacity to be surprised.

“That is a complication,” he acknowledged.

“Yes,” she said, leaning forward intently. “And I’m pretty confident that Crutchfield took her in order to mold her into a serial killer like my father and himself. That was what my dad was after with me. When I rejected him, he tried to kill me. I think Crutchfield is trying to pick up where Thurman left off.”

“What makes you think this?” Garland asked.

“He wrote me a postcard that basically laid it out. And then he left a message in blood on the foster family’s wall that reiterated the point. He’s not being subtle about it.”

“He does seem to be rubbing it in,” Garland conceded.

“Right,” Jessie said, sensing that he was warming to her plea. “So I willingly admit that I’m not exactly level-headed about this. And I get why Captain Decker would refuse to allow me near the case. But like I said, I know myself. And there’s no way I can just pretend a serial killer’s not out there trying to turn my half-sister into his own personal Mini-Me. So I figured I’d turn to someone who could be more rational to keep tabs on the case and give me updates. Otherwise I’m going to go crazy. And it needs to be someone who can access the info but isn’t bound by all the LAPD prohibitions.”

Garland leaned back in the booth and pushed his glasses up away from his nose. He seemed lost in thought.

“Garland,” she said, her voice a hushed whisper. “Bolton Crutchfield is trying create a monster just like him and he’s doing it to a traumatized girl. That’s bad enough, even if she wasn’t my only living relative, a sister I’ve barely gotten to know. But he’s doing it intentionally to toy with me, another in his endless sadistic games. I understand what’s going on. I’m clear-headed about this. But if you think that understanding the situation means I’m going be able to steer clear because of a directive from my supervisor, you’re sorely mistaken. If you say no, I’m going to pursue this myself, regardless of the consequences. I’m asking for your help, partly because you’re better at this than me. But partly to save me from myself. I don’t want to be dramatic and say my future is in your hands... But my future is in your hands. What do you say?”

Garland sat silently for a moment. Then he leaned in, about to answer. Suddenly Jessie’s cell phone rang. She glanced down. It was Ryan. She sent it to voicemail and looked back up at the old man in front of her. Then she felt a buzz. Looking down, she saw a text from Ryan that said simply “911—pick up.” A second later the phone rang again. She picked up.

“I’m in the middle of something,” she said.

“There’s been a homicide at the Bonaventure Hotel,” Ryan said, “Decker assigned us. He said he’s postponing our meeting with him and he wants us there ASAP. I’m driving over now to pick you up. I’ll be out front in two minutes.”

He hung up before she could reply. She looked over at Garland.

“I just got called to a murder scene. Detective Hernandez is on his way here to get me. I need a decision. What do you say, Garland?”

CHAPTER THREE

Jessie gripped the car's grab handle for dear life.

Ryan had turned on the siren and was tearing through the downtown streets, making sharp, sudden turns. Apparently the media had already been tipped off about a dead body in the fancy hotel and was forming a crowd outside. He wanted to get there before the scene got too chaotic.

Jessie was silently grateful that she'd stuck to toast for breakfast as she was tossed around in the car. Despite being discombobulated, one thing stuck with her. Garland Moses had said yes.

That meant that, if she could force herself to make the most of his involvement, she didn't have to spend every spare moment freaking out over Hannah's disappearance. There was now someone looking into it whom she trusted to make some headway, someone who would actually update her on the status of the case. To remain sane, she had to allow that to play out and not fixate on it every second.

Just as important, if she was going to be of any use in this Bonaventure case, or any future one, she had to have a clear head. She owed it to whoever the murder victim was in that hotel room to provide her most cogent, uncluttered analysis. As if he were reading her mind, Ryan spoke up.

"This wasn't my idea."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I thought we should ease back into work with at least a day or two of boring paperwork catch-up. But Captain Decker insisted on sending you out."

"That doesn't sound like him," she pointed out.

"Normally, no," he agreed. "But he was pretty explicit about wanting to assign you a case immediately to keep you occupied. He doesn't want you anywhere near the Dorsey case and he figured the best way to prevent that is to keep you busy."

"He said that?" Jessie asked.

"Pretty much. In fact, I think he wanted me to convey that to you, kind of like a warning."

"Okay, noted," Jessie said, debating briefly whether to tell Ryan about her meeting with Garland Moses.

Ryan knew that Hannah was her half-sister but not much more. Furthermore, she hadn't informed him of whom she had met with or why. He seemed to assume she was meeting with Kat Gentry and she hadn't corrected his impression. She was concerned that the more he knew about her efforts to learn about Hannah's case, the more vulnerable position he would be in professionally. She didn't want him to have to lie on her behalf to the boss if the issue came up.

Then again, not telling him felt like a personal betrayal of sorts. She glanced over at Ryan Hernandez, two years her senior, and quietly asked herself what she owed him. After all, while he was a detective and she was a profiler, they worked most cases together and were informal partners, even if it wasn't official.

Beyond that, over the last few years, their relationship had evolved from purely professional to professionally friendly, to genuine friendship, and now to something else. Ryan's wife had filed for divorce a few months ago after six years of marriage and, after some awkward verbal dancing, Ryan had recently confessed to Jessie that he was interested in her as more than just a partner.

She had felt the same way for some time but never acted on it. She'd found him attractive ever since she'd first encountered him, giving a guest lecture at a class she attended. That was even before she learned of his impressive pedigree as a detective with an elite unit of LAPD's robbery-homicide division called Homicide Special Section, or HSS. HSS dealt with homicide cases that had high profiles or intense media scrutiny, often involving multiple victims or serial killers.

All that only enhanced the already dashing figure he cut. Ryan was six feet tall and two hundred pounds of street-hardened muscle. And yet, underneath his short black hair, his brown eyes exuded unexpected warmth.

Now, with only their own mountains of personal baggage to prevent them from taking the next step, they were feeling each other out. There had been one kiss but nothing more. To be honest, Jessie wasn't sure if either of them was ready for more.

"Tell me about the case," she said, deciding to hold off on telling him about the Garland Moses meeting, at least for now.

"I don't know much yet," Ryan said. "The body was discovered by housekeeping in the last hour—a male, forty-something, naked. Wallet was empty—no identification, credit cards, or cash. Initial cause of death seems to be strangulation."

"Can't they ID him by checking who booked the room?"

"That's a little weird too. Apparently the card that was used to hold the room is registered to a shell company. And the name on the register is John Smith. I'm sure it will get unraveled but right now we're dealing with a John Doe."

They arrived at the massive Bonaventure Hotel, with its multiple towers and famous exterior elevators, the ones made memorable in the movie *In the Line of Fire*. Ryan flashed his badge to get past the police barricade and pulled up near the loading dock entrance.

A uniformed officer met them and led them to the freight elevator and from there, to the massive central lobby. As they walked through it to get to the main bank of elevators, Jessie couldn't help but be overwhelmed by the size and number of atriums and crisscrossing hallways and stairwells. It was as if the place had been specifically designed to confuse.

She trailed behind Ryan and the officer, taking her time, allowing the complications of the morning to fall away as she focused in on the task at hand. Her job was to profile this crime, to determine potential perpetrators. And that meant staying aware of the surroundings in which the crime had taken place—not just the room but the hotel as well. It was possible that something that happened out here may have impacted the events in that room. She couldn't ignore anything.

They passed a group of tourists excitedly heading for an exit in attire that suggested they were going to a famous amusement park. Just beyond them, in a circular, open bar called the Lobby Court, several men in suits were getting an early start on their drinking. A few burly men in identical blue blazers wandered around, wearing earpieces, clearly security. Jessie couldn't decide whether they were intended to be genuinely discreet or just to give that surface impression.

As they reached the elevators, one of the blazer guys joined them and silently waited for one to arrive.

"How's your morning going?" Jessie asked him chipperly, unable to treat the guy with the solemnity he was clearly after.

He nodded but said nothing.

"You finishing your shift or starting it?" she pressed as her tone became more severe, annoyed at his lack of responsiveness.

He looked at her, then at Ryan, who stared at him coldly, and reluctantly replied.

"I started at six. We got the call from housekeeping at seven," addressing the topic she was clearly hinting at.

"Why did housekeeping go in the room so early?" Jessie asked. "Was there a cleaning request on the doorknob?"

"She said there was a smell coming from the room."

Jessie looked over at Ryan, who had a resigned expression.

"Sounds like a fun way to start the morning," she said, reading his mind.

The elevator arrived and they stepped inside. The guard accompanied them to the fourteenth floor. As they shot up in the air, Jessie couldn't help but marvel at the view. The elevator faced the

Hollywood Hills, and on this fairly clear morning, the white Hollywood sign gleamed back at them, seemingly close enough to touch. Griffith Park Observatory was nestled nearby at the top of a hill in the park. Various studio soundstages peppered the expanse in between, as did thousands of vehicles on the traffic-choked streets.

A soft ding brought her back into the moment and Jessie stepped out, following the guard and Ryan to the end of the hallway. They were only halfway there when Jessie got a whiff of what must have captured the maid's attention.

It was the smell of putrid, bacteria-laced gases in the victim's body building up and leaking out, often with equally foul-smelling fluids. While it was always unpleasant, Jessie had gotten somewhat used to it. She doubted a housekeeper would be as familiar or as comfortable with it.

An officer waiting outside the door recognized Ryan and handed him and Jessie plastic slippers as he lifted the police tape so they could enter. To her admittedly petty satisfaction, the officer refused to allow the hotel security guard entry.

Once inside, she stood by the door and took in the scene. There were several CSU techs taking photos and fingerprinting the room. Multiple small indentations in the carpeting had been noted and marked with evidence numbers.

The body lay on the bed, naked, bloated, and uncovered. The initial description of the victim seemed accurate. He appeared to be in his forties. As Jessie got closer, it was clear that he had indeed been strangled. Blueish-purple finger marks covered his neck, though notably, there were no indentations or cuts that might suggest nails digging in.

The man was in decent shape if you ignored the bloating. He was clearly well off, with recently manicured fingernails, a hair transplant that had been painstakingly done to give him a smattering of gray amidst his black hair, and some craftsman-like Botox injections near the eyes, mouth, and forehead.

His socks, now straining at the excess fluid building up at his ankles, clung mournfully to his feet. His shoes rested by the side of the bed. His clothes—comprised of an expensive-looking suit, boxers, and a T-shirt, were folded neatly over a desk chair.

There were no other obvious personal materials in the room—no luggage bag, no extra clothes, no watch or glasses by the bedside. She glanced in the bathroom and saw the same thing there—no toiletries, no used towels, nothing to suggest that he'd spent much time in the room at all.

"Cell phone?" Ryan asked the officer standing in the corner.

"We found it in the trash can," the CSU investigator told him. "It was smashed but the tech team thinks it's salvageable. The SIM card was still inside. It's being transported to the lab now."

"Wallet?" Ryan wondered.

"It was on the floor by the bed," the investigator said. "But it had been picked clean. Almost everything potentially identifiable was gone—no credit cards or driver's license. There were a few photos of kids. I guess they could eventually be used to establish identity. But I suspect the cell phone will yield results quicker."

Jessie stepped closer to the body, making sure to avoid all the evidence markers on the carpet.

"No obvious defensive wounds," she noted. "No scratches on his hands. No bruising on his fingers."

"Hard to imagine he'd just lie there and take a choking, unless it was part of a sex game. Of course, we've seen that before," Ryan said, referring to a complicated case involving S&M that they'd solved recently.

"Or he could have been drugged," Jessie countered, pointing at the empty glass lying on the desk near another evidence marker. "If something was slipped in his drink, he might not have been able to put up a fight."

"So I guess we're ruling out suicide," Ryan said as he moved closer to the body.

"If he did this himself, that would be a pretty impressive accomplishment," Jessie said.

She watched as Ryan's expression changed from amusement to curiosity.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I think I recognize this guy."

"Really?" Jessie said. "Who is he?"

"I'm not sure. I think he might be a local politician, maybe on the city council?"

"We should check his photo against local pols and other officials," Jessie suggested.

"Right," he agreed. "If that bears out, then we can't rule out a political motivation."

"True. It could be that someone was unhappy with a vote he'd recently cast or was about to. Of course, one would think that just showing him photos of himself drugged and naked in a hotel room would have been equally effective."

"Good point," Ryan acceded. "Maybe it was intended as a message to someone else."

"Also a possibility," Jessie said as she looked around the room for something she might be missing. "But I would have thought that as far as messages go, two bullets to the back of the head would have been more impactful. I think we need to find out who this guy is before we can draw any real conclusions."

Ryan nodded his agreement.

"Why don't we go down to the front desk," he said. "Let's see what they can tell us about John Smith."

*

The desk agent who had checked in "John Smith" of City Logistics had ended his shift at six a.m. and had to be called back in. While they waited for him to arrive, Ryan instructed the security office to pull up all video footage from the time of check-in and any key card swipes of the dead man's hotel room door.

Jessie sat in the lobby with Ryan and waited, watching the ebb and flow of the hotel routine. Some folks were checking out. But most were either tourists milling about or people in business attire headed out for what looked to be "titans of industry"-type stuff.

She knew the desk agent had arrived the second he walked in. Dressed in blue jeans and a casual shirt, the twenty-something, acne-faced kid looked like he'd been woken from a deep slumber and barely had time to throw on clothes, much less brush his hair. He also had another characteristic that seemed to envelop him like an invisible coat: fear.

Jessie tapped Ryan and pointed at the guy. They got up and reached him just as he approached the desk. He waved down a manager, who motioned for him to go to the end of the counter away from the guests.

"Thanks for coming in, Liam," the manager said.

"No problem, Chester," the kid said, though he looked put out. "You said it was urgent. What's this all about?"

"Some folks have a few questions for you," Chester said, following Jessie's instructions not to be specific about the reason Liam was being called in.

"Who has questions?" Liam asked.

"We do," Ryan said from behind him, startling the young guy and making him jump a little.

"Who are you?" Liam asked, trying to sound tough and failing.

"My name is Ryan Hernandez. I'm an LAPD detective. This is Jessie Hunt. She's a criminal profiler for the department. Why don't we go somewhere private where we can talk freely?"

For half a second, Liam looked like he might run for it. Then he seemed to get his bearings.

"Yeah, okay, I guess."

"There's a small conference room at the end of that hall," Chester the manager said. "It should afford you some privacy."

When they got into the conference room with the door closed and everyone had taken their seats, Liam seemed to tense up again. It might have been having two law enforcement officials staring at him, or not knowing why he was being questioned, or the strange white noise being pumped into the otherwise silent room. Jessie suspected it was a combination of all of it. Whatever the reason, Liam couldn't contain himself.

"Is this about the beer cases?" he blurted out. "Because I was told it was extra stock and would be thrown out so it was no big deal if I took them."

"No, Liam," Ryan said. "It's not about cases of beer. It's about a murder."

CHAPTER FOUR

Liam's jaw dropped open so far that Jessie worried it might unhinge from his face.

"What?" he asked when he was finally able to speak again.

"A guest was murdered here last night," Ryan said. "And it appears that you checked him in, though there's some confusion about that. We were hoping you could clear it up."

Liam gulped hard before responding.

"Of course," he said, apparently happy that he was no longer under suspicion about the beer.

"Yesterday evening at nine thirty-seven, you checked in a man identified only as John Smith. The card associated with the transaction was listed under a company called City Logistics, which appears to be a shell company."

"What does that mean?" Liam asked.

"It means," Ryan said, "that the company is owned by another company which is owned by another company, all with multiple people listed as executives, each of whom seem to be lawyers known for setting up shell companies."

"I don't get it," Liam said, looking genuinely confused.

"Liam," Jessie said, speaking for the first time, "this means that the person who gave you the credit card didn't want his real name connected with booking the room, so he used this company card with the complicated history. That's probably why he signed in as 'John Smith.' And since the card was never charged, I'm assuming he paid for the room in cash, correct?"

"That sounds like someone who checked in last night," Liam conceded.

"But here's what I don't get," Jessie pressed. "Even if he paid in cash, the card would have been charged for incidentals like the small bottle of brandy from the mini-bar. How did that get paid for?"

"If we're thinking of the same guy," Liam said timidly, "it might be because he slipped me two hundred dollars and said any incidental charges for the room should be taken out of that. He also said that I could keep whatever was left over."

"How much was left over?" Jessie asked.

"A hundred eighty-four dollars."

Ryan and Jessie exchanged glances.

"That's a lot of money, Liam," Jessie said. "Why would John Smith leave you such a massive tip? And remember, right now you're just a potential witness. But if your answers end up being less than truthful, we might have to bump you up to suspect."

Liam didn't look like he wanted any part of that.

"Listen," he said, barely able to get the words out fast enough. "The guy never said anything obvious. But he hinted that he might have a friend visit him that evening and the less of a paper trail there was, the better it would be for him. He wanted to keep things off the books, you know?"

"And you were okay with that?" Ryan pushed.

"It was two hundred dollars, man. Times are tight. Even if he had gotten five mini-brandy bottles, I'm still bringing home north of a hundred bucks for doing nothing. Am I supposed to be the moral judge of whether some dude can use this hotel to meet up with his mistress? Worst-case scenario, he rips the room up and I have the corporate card on file in case of emergencies. I figured it was a no-lose situation."

"Unless he ends up naked and dead on the bed," Ryan noted. "That ends up being a loss for everybody, including you, Liam. Regardless of the whole beer case thing, I'd say you're going to need to dust off your resume."

A knock on the door prevented Liam from responding. It was Chester the manager. Ryan motioned for him to open the door.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said. "But security has pulled up the footage you were interested in."

“Perfect timing,” Ryan said. “I think we’re done here for now, right, Liam?”

Liam nodded, looking despondent. As Ryan and Jessie left the room, he tried to follow but the manager held up his hand for him to stay.

“I’d like you to stick around a bit longer, Liam,” he said. “We have a few things to discuss.”

*

Jessie put Liam’s problems out of her head as she stood in the security office, leaning in behind the young woman operating the system so she could get a better look at the monitor. Ryan and another hotel manager stood next to her.

Just as Liam had described, the man booking the room handed him a card and a wad of cash. He was alone. As he waited for Liam to complete the transaction, he glanced around and seemed to nod at somebody off camera.

“Can you get a look at who he was motioning to?” Jessie asked the technician.

“I already tried,” the woman, whose name was Natasha, said. “I looked at every camera shot in the area he was focused on. No one seemed to respond physically. In fact, no one seemed to even be looking in his direction.”

Jessie found that intriguing but she said nothing for now. The man had clearly been nodding at someone. But that someone was aware enough to avoid being captured on camera.

Who would know those kinds of details?

“You have the hallway footage for the fourteenth floor?” she prompted.

Natasha pulled it up. The timestamp read 10:01 p.m. as the man walked down the hallway and entered the room. Jessie heard Ryan inhale sharply and looked over. He leaned in and whispered in her ear.

“Seeing the way the guy walked jogged something in memory. I just realized who he is. He *is* a politician. I’ll fill you in when there aren’t so many ears around.”

Jessie nodded, curious. Natasha fast-forwarded through the footage of the hallway, stopping periodically when someone walked by. No one approached the man’s room. But at 10:14, exactly thirteen minutes after the man had gone into his room, the elevator opened and a woman stepped out.

She was a statuesque blonde, with hair that cascaded down to the middle of her back. She wore huge sunglasses that obscured her features and a cinched trench coat with a high collar. She wandered down the hall, glancing at the room numbers before coming to a stop at the man’s door. She knocked. It opened only seconds later and she stepped inside.

Nothing happened for the next thirty-one minutes. But at 10:45, the woman exited the room and returned the way she’d come. This time she was walking toward the camera so Jessie could get a better view of her.

She still wore the sunglasses and coat. But even with them, Jessie could tell that the woman was well put together. Her cheekbones appeared sculpted by an artist. Her skin, even on this small monitor, looked flawless. And it was clear that underneath that jacket she had the kind of figure that could easily make a wealthy, horny man put his political future at risk.

Jessie noticed something else too. The woman seemed to be...strolling toward the elevators. There was nothing hurried about her demeanor. It was quite possible that only minutes earlier she had drugged and strangled a man to death. And yet nothing about the way she carried herself suggested any worry or anxiety. She looked confident.

And that’s when Jessie became certain that they were dealing with something more than just a crime of passion or a robbery gone wrong. If it had been a physical encounter that went south, she would have looked much more harried and rushed. If it was a simple robbery, she could have been in and out of the room in less than ten minutes.

But she'd stayed a half hour. She'd lingered. She'd smashed his phone and taken all his cards, cash, and ID, even though she had to be well aware that his identity would be quickly uncovered. She'd even left family photos in the wallet.

Even more notably, she had apparently left no prints on anything in the room; not the glass, not any surface in the room, not the man's neck. This was the work of a woman who had carefully planned what she would do, who had taken her time, who had enjoyed herself.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jessie couldn't get the image out of her head.

As Ryan drove them to their next stop, she kept thinking back to the final footage that Natasha the security tech had shown them. Now that they knew what the woman looked like, she was able to scan through video from earlier in the night.

There was no recording of the woman arriving or leaving the hotel. But there was footage of her settling in at the Lobby Court—the very bar Jessie had noticed the men in suits drinking at earlier that morning.

She had arrived a little after nine p.m. and waited for fifteen minutes, sipping a drink she'd purchased with cash and drinking with leather gloves on. The thing that jumped out at Jessie was how relaxed she looked. She didn't have the bearing of someone who would murder a man less than two hours later.

Eventually her "date" arrived. He walked straight up to her as if they knew each other but strangely greeted her as if it was the first time they'd met. He ordered a drink of his own and sat down beside her. They talked for a half hour as he ordered two more drinks and she continued to nurse her first.

Around 9:50, he paid his bill and got up. Cameras tracked him to the bathroom and then the front desk. The woman stayed at bar a little longer to finish her drink, and then walked out of frame, not to be seen again until she got out of the elevator to go to his room.

"What are you thinking?" Ryan asked, interrupting her silent meditation.

"I'm thinking that we're dealing with someone who enjoyed what she did. And that makes me worry that she might do it again."

"Legitimate concern," he agreed. "Can I tell you what I'm worried about?"

"Please," Jessie said.

"I'm worried that this guy's wife is going to lose it when we tell her what happened."

Ryan was referring to the inevitable unpleasantness they were about to face. After they'd left the security office he'd told her who the dead man was: Gordon Maines.

When Ryan had called his suspicion in to the ME, they confirmed it for him. The victim was indeed Gordon Maines, a councilman representing Los Angeles's fourth district, an area that included Hancock Park and Los Feliz.

Ryan had finally remembered him because of his jaunty walking style. It was the same style he'd had when he'd come to the station once several years ago to dress down Captain Decker for not giving him enough officers for security at a neighborhood parade.

"'Jerk' is the kindest word I can think of to describe the guy," Ryan had said.

Jessie hoped he'd use more diplomatic language when they arrived at Maines's Hancock Park home to deliver the bad news to his wife, Margo. As he navigated the mid-morning traffic, Jessie's thoughts returned, despite her best efforts, to Hannah.

She wondered if Garland Moses was having any success determining how the investigation was going. Did the FBI have any leads on Bolton Crutchfield's possible whereabouts? Was Hannah safe? She was tempted to text him to ask and actually pulled out her phone before reminding herself it was a terrible idea.

First, it had only been a couple of hours since she'd met with him. Garland Moses might be the most decorated profiler in the country, but even he wasn't a superhero. Besides, if he had information, he would surely let her know. Radio silence likely meant there was nothing worth sharing.

Second, they'd agreed to only communicate verbally. Even though Captain Decker hadn't yet formally forbidden her from getting involved in the case, it was only a matter of time. Any record

that showed she'd tried to get around that directive could put her career at risk and, as Garland had said, mess up her "sweet gig."

Still, it gnawed at her. Here she was, investigating the death of a man who clearly had several skeletons in his closet. Meanwhile, an innocent young girl was being held captive by a serial killer, simply because she shared the same DNA as another serial killer.

The frustration rose in her chest and it was all she could do to swallow it back down.

Garland Moses better find something soon. Because I don't know how much longer I can hold this in before it boils over.

*

When they pulled up to Gordon Maines's mansion in Hancock Park, Jessie wasn't surprised.

She already knew they were dealing with a man who was willing to book a \$400 hotel room to cheat on his wife; a man who apparently had a credit card associated with a bogus company, a likely sign that his finances were sketchy too. And he apparently lived in a home no civil servant could afford unless he inherited it.

As they walked up the steps to the front door, Jessie reminded herself not to take her distaste for the victim out on his wife, who might think her husband hung the moon and was about to learn otherwise. Ryan rang the bell and they waited, both apprehensive about what was to come.

The door was opened by a petite, trim woman in her late forties. She was dressed in a tan business suit and her blonde hair was tied up in a bun. Despite her professional appearance, Jessie could tell she was in bad shape.

She had shadows under her eyes that couldn't be masked, even with heavy makeup, despite a valiant attempt. The eyes themselves were red, a sign of anything from lack of sleep to crying to drug use. None of the choices indicated anything good. She had a long run in her right stocking, which she apparently hadn't noticed, suggesting her thoughts were elsewhere.

"Can I help you?" she asked, her voice scratchy.

"Hi, are you Margo Maines?" Jessie asked gently.

"Yes," she said warily. "What's this about?"

Jessie looked at Ryan, who appeared ready to deliver the news they knew would break her. She'd seen him do it many times before and saw the same reaction now, a stiffening of his spine, as if preparing himself to accept the emotional blowback he was about to get. Suddenly, a wave of empathy rushed over her at the thought of how many times he'd been in this situation in his career. She felt a powerful urge to shield him from it this time and stepped forward slightly.

"We're from the Los Angeles Police Department," she said before he could get a word out. "I'm Jessie Hunt and this is Detective Ryan Hernandez. I'm afraid we have some bad news for you, Mrs. Maines."

Margaret Maines, or "Margo" as she was called in her husband's bio on the city website, seemed to know what was coming. She lowered her head as she reached out and gripped the doorframe. Ryan inched forward slightly just in case she collapsed.

Luckily, it wasn't necessary. She looked back up at them with a resolve that Jessie admired, though it appeared fragile.

"Let's go inside," Mrs. Maines said. "I think I'd like to sit down before you tell me anything else."

Jessie and Ryan followed her into the living room, where she sat on the loveseat and motioned for them to take the adjoining couch. Once they were all settled, she looked at them both and nodded.

"Go ahead," she said resignedly.

Jessie continued, not looking at Ryan to see if he was okay with her taking point.

“I’m afraid your husband has died, Mrs. Maines. His body was found this morning at a downtown hotel. His identity was recently confirmed.”

Mrs. Maines nodded, took a deep gulp of air, and reached for a tissue. As she dabbed at her eyes, she replied.

“I knew something was wrong. He never came home last night. Sometimes he works very late. But he always calls. And he didn’t pick up any of mine. I actually thought about calling the police. But then I pictured him sleeping in his office with his phone on silent or with a dead battery. I didn’t want to overreact. I called the office this morning and they said he hadn’t come in yet. I knew something was wrong. I was this close to calling.”

“Why didn’t you?” Jessie asked, keeping her tone non-accusatory.

“Gordon was very particular. He hated bad press. I could hear his voice in my head saying, ‘If you call the police, it’ll end up in the papers. It’ll be on the news. My opponent in the next election will turn it into something nefarious no matter how innocent. There’s no room for public relations mistakes in modern politics.’ He was very big on avoiding bad press. Now I wonder if I could have prevented this by calling.”

Jessie thought it was ironic that a guy who was concerned about PR was apparently carrying on some kind of tryst and bankrolling it with what appeared to be a slush fund. But she kept that to herself.

“Don’t blame yourself, Mrs. Maines,” Ryan said. “From what we can tell so far, it looks like your husband died last night. No call you could have made would have saved him.”

She seemed to take some small solace from that, sighing deeply with something approximating relief. She appeared to be debating whether to ask her next question but finally just spit it out.

“How did it happen?”

Jessie, feeling only slightly cowardly, determined that Ryan’s years of experience on the job might come in handy for this one and decided to let him answer.

“Maybe we save the details for another time, Mrs. Maines,” he suggested gently.

The broken look on the woman’s face was quickly replaced with a combination of irritation and resolution.

“Tell me the truth, Detective. It’s clearly not just natural causes. I’m going to find out sooner or later. And I’d rather hear it first in the privacy of my own home than in some cold morgue surrounded by a group of strangers. I’ll take two strangers over ten any day.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “You’re correct. It wasn’t natural causes. I’m afraid he was strangled to death. The circumstances surrounding his murder are somewhat... salacious. Shall I go on?”

“Please,” Mrs. Maines insisted, her voice flat.

“It appears that he was at the hotel for a rendezvous with an as-yet-unknown woman. We don’t know her motive. We just know that he was likely drugged, then robbed and strangled.”

Jessie watched as the woman’s face hardened. She felt a twinge of anxiety as she wondered whether Margo Maines was going to blow up or break down. It turned out to be neither.

“I’m quite confident it was a drugging and robbery,” she insisted crisply as she sat up straight. “There is no way Gordon would have gone willingly to a hotel room with some woman unless his clarity had been altered.”

Jessie remembered the footage of the bar, in which Gordon had happily flirted for a half hour before going to book a hotel room, all without being slipped a thing. She wondered if she should burst his wife’s bubble of certainty but decided that wasn’t her job.

Another moment of moral cowardice.

“In any case,” Ryan said in a “moving on” voice, clearly not wanting to challenge her either, “even though we have confirmation it’s him, we’ll need someone to come down to the medical examiner’s office to formally identify the body. If you’d rather one of his staffers do that, we can accommodate your wishes.”

“No, I’ll do it,” she said.

“Thank you,” Ryan said. “There is one other thing. We don’t have many leads on the woman we suspect of killing your husband. But she did take all of his credit cards and identification.”

“What about his watch?” Mrs. Maines interrupted.

“What watch?” Ryan asked.

“He had a Rolex watch with his initials inscribed on the back.”

“We didn’t find it at the scene,” Ryan said. “But we’ll add it to the list of missing items.”

“I gave him that watch for our tenth anniversary,” she said, her thoughts clearly drifting back to that moment.

Jessie had an idea but decided to put a button in it for now. Reluctantly, Ryan pulled Maines back into the present.

“We’ll do our best to recover it, ma’am,” he assured her. “But regarding the credit cards, rather than cancelling them, we were hoping to track them in the hopes that we could catch her in the act of using one. She might also try to forge any number of documents using his ID. Would you give us permission to review his transactions and financial data to see if there are any anomalies?”

Mrs. Maines cast a skeptical eye at him, clearly aware that his request likely had an ulterior motive.

“That seems broad,” she noted.

“It is,” he admitted. “We want to cast as wide a net as possible so we don’t miss anything. We can get a court order if need be. But that takes time and I worry she might slip through our fingers in the interim. But if you sign the releases now, we can get started immediately.”

Mrs. Maines still looked somewhat unconvinced. But the way Ryan had framed it, saying no would look like she was hampering the investigation of her husband’s murder. After a moment it became clear that she’d decided that whatever skeletons she suspected he was hiding would ultimately have to take a backseat to catching his killer.

“Give me the papers,” she said roughly.

Ryan, who already had the envelope waiting, handed them over. Jessie saw him fighting the urge to smile and had to fight her own urge to kick him.

He was lucky that Margo Maines didn’t know his expressions as well as she did. New widows don’t usually appreciate self-satisfied smirks.

CHAPTER SIX

Jessie was getting frustrated with Ryan.

They were back at the station, sitting at their desks, rifling through confusing financial documents while they waited for the tech team to untangle the origins of “City Logistics” and where it got its resources. Captain Decker was at a meeting at headquarters, meaning Jessie had still managed to avoid the sit-down where he would inevitably warn her away from Hannah’s case.

In the meantime, Ryan had floated the idea that Margo Maines was faking—that she had uncovered her husband’s dalliance and hired a hit woman to take him out, either for revenge, the life insurance, or both. In fact, he seemed fixated on it.

“She just didn’t seem credible to me,” he insisted. “I don’t buy her claim that Gordon had to be drugged to go up to a hotel room with another woman. You saw that footage from the bar. He was all in. Margo had to at least have a hint about his lecherousness.”

“I’m sure she did,” Jessie agreed, despite her agitation. “But that doesn’t mean she took a hit out on him. Maybe she just wasn’t comfortable acknowledging to two people she’d just met that she’d been looking the other way when it came to his bad behavior. Wives have been known to do that.”

Jessie kept her voice steady so he wouldn’t pick up on how raw this discussion still was for her. Her own ex-husband, Kyle, had cheated on her for months. And though the signs were all around her, Jessie had somehow managed to miss them.

In her more honest moments, she acknowledged that she might have intentionally ignored them because confronting them would have blown up her marriage and her life. Of course, that happened anyway when Kyle murdered his mistress, framed Jessie for it, and then tried to kill her too. But that wasn’t the point here.

“Maybe she wasn’t comfortable revealing she knew he cheated because she was embarrassed,” Ryan conceded. “Or maybe she knew that admitting it would give her a motive.”

Jessie didn’t want to dismiss his theory. It wasn’t crazy. And he’d been at this a lot longer than she had. But he seemed to be ignoring some other relevant details.

“Let me ask you this,” she offered. “If this was a paid hit, why not go with the double tap to the head? It’s much quicker and more surefire.”

“Maybe Margo Maines knew the details would eventually come out. Her husband would be shamed and she’d be the martyred wife. She’d get sympathy galore and no suspicion.”

“That explains it from her end but not the killer’s,” Jessie countered. “The woman who killed him took her sweet time. Even if she’d been tasked to make the scene look tawdry, she could have been in and out in less than fifteen minutes. She was there twice that long. She lingered. That’s not the work of a professional. And she could have just drugged him and left it at that. A dead, naked, drugged-up politician found in a hotel room is embarrassing enough. Why the strangling too? No. This feels personal.”

Ryan sat with that for a while. The argument seemed to make an impact. Jessie’s frustration level dropped a notch.

“That’s a good point. I hadn’t thought of it from the killer’s perspective.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not the profiler,” she said, tweaking him slightly.

He flicked her off playfully. But a sudden flash in his eyes told her he had a new theory.

“What about this?” he began. “Maybe the woman *was* his mistress. It could be she didn’t know he was married or maybe he’d promised he’d leave his wife for her. Either way, by last night she’s discovered that he’s stringing her along and she’s pissed. So she decides to get a little revenge for herself. She kills him up close and personal. Then she gets everything: vengeance on the guy who used her, a chance to destroy his reputation and as a lucky strike extra, the wife loses her big-time important husband.”

“I like that idea better than the other one,” Jessie allowed.

Just then, Camille Guadino from the tech team walked over with some paperwork and a rueful smile. Fresh out of school, she was the rookie of the unit, assigned to the most mundane tasks.

“Uh-oh,” Ryan said, looking at her. “Don’t tell me you’re going to give us actual evidence we’ll have to follow up on instead of just spinning endless webs of theories.”

“Sorry, Detective, but yeah,” she said as she dropped a folder on his desk. “Real, fresh-brewed evidence coming your way.”

“What have you got, Guadino?” Jessie asked.

“It took a while but we finally figured out what City Logistics is all about.”

“Urban planning enthusiasts?” Jessie quipped.

“So close,” Guadino replied. “It’s a consulting firm that ‘offers feedback and recommendations on urban improvement issues.’”

“What the hell does that mean?” Ryan asked.

“It means it’s pretty much what you guys suspected. It’s a shell company run by a lawyer owned by a shell company also run by a lawyer who’s a partner in the same firm that represents a consulting agency that has done work for a strategist associated with—you guessed it—Gordon Maines.”

“What does all that gobbledygook mean to us?” Ryan asked.

“It means that, via multiple cutouts, Maines had access to a corporate account with over two hundred eighty grand in it. And it looks like someone at an ATM located in the Bonaventure Hotel withdrew two grand in cash from that account at the time Maines was there.”

Jessie and Ryan exchanged a look that acknowledged the theories they’d been discussing for the last ten minutes were now likely moot.

“What?” Guadino asked, sensing she was missing something. “Did I screw up somehow?”

“No, you’re good,” Jessie assured her. “Go on.”

“Okay. We’ve been tracking all of his credit cards and haven’t gotten any hits. I’m starting to doubt we will. Usually, these cards get used in the first hours after a robbery, before the victim discovers they’re gone. Or in this case, before the body is found.”

“Was that a joke?” Ryan asked. “Did you just make fun of a man’s death for cheap laughs?”

“Uhhh...” Guadino started to sputter.

“I’m just screwing with you. That was a good one. Anything else?”

“Yes,” Guadino said, dispensing with the humor and sticking to the facts. “The damage to his phone turned out to be minimal. We were able to get all his recent texts and a call log. It’s in the folder. But he didn’t make any calls or text anyone in the hour prior to withdrawing the cash.”

“Thanks, Guadino,” Jessie said. “We’ll take it from here. You can go ahead and get back to working on your stand-up routine.”

Guadino smiled sheepishly and left. When she was gone, Jessie looked over at Ryan.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” she asked.

“That you could really go for a pastrami on rye right about now?”

“That too,” she said, happy to embrace his attempts at levity, “but also that this woman isn’t looking like a mistress at all. It sounds like Gordon was paying for his evening. I think we’re dealing with a pro.”

“I agree,” he said. “That would explain her hanging out at a fancy hotel bar.”

“Women sometimes hang out at bars, Ryan,” Jessie chided. “It doesn’t always mean they’re prostitutes.”

“I didn’t mean it like th—”

“I’m just screwing with you,” she said, grinning. “You’re not the only one who can play that game. It does fit the profile. But it doesn’t explain why there was no phone communication prior to their meet-up. If this was a first-time date, they’d need to nail down the particulars of when and where. But there’s none of that.”

“Right,” Ryan said. “And he didn’t look surprised to see her, which makes me think this wasn’t the first time they’d met up.”

“But if this was a regular thing, why did she wait until now to kill him? And why rob him if he was willing to pay upwards of two grand anyway?”

“Maybe she wanted to make sure he really had deep pockets and wasn’t just fronting. Of course, once she knew, one would expect her to use those cards ASAP after she left him in that room. She had to know they’d be cancelled by the morning. But there’s not a single purchase.”

“I get the sense that this woman is too smart to use those cards,” Jessie said. “She wore gloves the whole night. The scene was clean. She knew how to avoid the hotel cameras. Remember how there was no footage of her when he nodded at her in the lobby? She wouldn’t be so sloppy as to risk using the cards and getting busted after the fact.”

“Then why take them?” Ryan asked. “What’s the point?”

“Maybe to make it harder to identify him? She took his license too and that doesn’t make much sense. Or maybe just to humiliate him even more—to add insult to injury. I’m thinking that might be why she took the Rolex too. Not because it’s worth so much money but because of the inscription. It had personal meaning and value to Maines. Taking it might have been a way of taking away the power that came with his identity.”

“So you don’t think she’d pawn it?”

“I didn’t say that,” Jessie said. “A pawned watch would take a lot longer to track down than credit cards. If there was anything she might sell, that would be it. It’s a long shot but I think we should reach out to shops in the area.”

“I’ll have Dunlop look into it. He’s on good terms with almost every downtown broker. If she tried to pawn that watch anywhere east of the 405 freeway, he’ll know about it.”

“Sounds good,” Jessie said. “While you reach out to him, I need to check on something.”

“You’re not going to butt into the Crutchfield thing, are you?” he asked warily. “Just because Decker hasn’t officially warned you off it yet doesn’t mean he won’t.”

“No, Ryan,” she snapped as she stood up. “I am not going to butt into the case. Have a little faith, why don’t you?”

He raised his eyebrow skeptically as she got up and headed for the second floor. She gave him a mock offended scowl before turning toward the stairs.

I’m not butting into the case. I’m just going to ask a few questions.

She refused to address the question of whether there was any real difference.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jessie was surprised at how nervous she felt.

She rarely visited the second floor of the station, which was used mostly for storage and administrative offices. In fact, as she walked down the long hallway, she didn't pass a single soul.

She stopped at the door to the tiny office marked with the simple nameplate "G. Moses" and knocked quietly. She heard a bit of paper shuffling from the other side and then what sounded like the crack of elderly kneecaps stretching out. The noise sent a shiver down her spine. A moment later Garland Moses opened the door.

"I lost," he said in his familiar rasp when he saw her.

"Lost what?" she asked, her blood pressure suddenly rising.

"I had the over in the over/under bet on whether you would pester me for the first time before or after noon. It's eleven fifty-six a.m. so I lost. I owe myself ten bucks."

Jessie was relieved that he was only mocking her and allowed herself a moment to breathe before responding.

"Well, hopefully you pay up quick. I hear your methods of collecting late payments can be rough."

"You have no idea," Garland said, his mouth breaking into something close to a smile. "Let's just say there's forced Metamucil involved."

"Nice," Jessie said, gagging slightly. "So how much longer do I have to politely talk about your senior health routine before you fill me in on the situation?"

Garland half-smiled again. It seemed to be turning into a habit.

"Come in," he said, moving aside.

She took one step into the office before realizing she couldn't take another without bumping into his desk.

"I thought people were being sarcastic but this really did used to be a closet, didn't it?"

"I don't need a lot of room," he replied, closing the door and squeezing past her to get to the chair on the other side of his small desk. Other than that, a single chair for guests, a desk lamp, and a half-sized file cabinet, the room was empty.

"I guess when you only take on a few cases each year, you don't get drowned in paperwork."

"I liked to keep the paperwork to a minimum even back in my busier days. A cluttered desk means a cluttered mind."

"Confucius?" she asked teasingly.

"No, Moses, but not the bible one," he said. Before she could reply, he continued. "So on to your case."

"Yes?"

"I've got nothing."

"What?" she asked incredulously.

He seemed untroubled by her reaction.

"The truth is I haven't even tried yet."

"Why not?" she demanded.

"Think about it, Hunt," he said patiently. "I can't just walk over to the local FBI office, saunter in, and ask the assigned agents how their investigation is going, especially on the same morning the profiler most connected to Crutchfield returns to work. It will be obvious what I'm doing. They'll shut down. You'll get in trouble. And I'll lose my official status as 'grandiose emeritus.' That's no good."

"You make it sound impossible," Jessie protested. "No matter how you approach them, they'll have their guard up."

“Not necessarily, especially if I happen to be already enjoying my lunch at a joint I know they frequent. And if they join me because of the whole ‘grandiose emeritus’ thing, maybe they get to talking. Maybe they want to impress the old man and they spill a little more than they should. Maybe I seem disinterested so they tell me even more, to prove their mettle. Folks like to do that around me.”

“Because of your ‘grandiose emeritus’ status,” Jessie repeated.

“Now you’re getting it,” he said. “But no one’s going to tell me a thing if I come out and ask them directly. They’re FBI agents, not second graders.”

“So why aren’t you out having lunch?” she pressed.

“Because they don’t usually show up at this place until around one. That’s why I called the owner and told him to hold a table waiting for me at twelve forty-five—a booth in the back, with a little privacy and room for three.”

“You’ve already done that?”

“I have.”

“I’m sorry,” Jessie said, impressed. “I shouldn’t have jumped down your throat. It’s just that Hannah’s out there, with God knows what happening to her. I saw you hanging out here and it got me riled up. I shouldn’t have made assumptions.”

“I appreciate that, Hunt. And I don’t blame you. An old guy like me, you’d be forgiven for thinking I completely forgot about our little chat this morning. But can I give you a piece of advice?”

“Of course,” she said.

“You have to loosen your grip a little.”

Jessie nodded.

“That’s been challenging for me,” she admitted.

“I get it,” he replied. “I was the same way for a long time. But the thing is, with what we do, there’s always going to be some bad guy out there. There’s always going to be a victim in danger. There’s always going to be a ticking clock. But if you’ve got the accelerator pressed to a hundred all the time, you’re going to crash. It’s inevitable. And then you’re no good to anyone.”

Jessie nodded. Everything he said resonated. Before she could admit it, he continued.

“I know it’s not easy, and especially not now, when the person at risk is your own half-sister. But you have to hit the brakes sometimes. You have to find some kind of equilibrium in your life. Otherwise you will burn out. And people you could have saved will die. I’m not saying you shouldn’t work hard. And I’m not saying you shouldn’t care. But you have to find that line where you can do this job and still be a functioning human being. Otherwise you’ll be miserable. You know what I mean?”

Jessie felt like she’d never better understood anything in her life.

“I do,” she said simply.

“Good,” he replied. “Then get the hell out of my office. I need to take a little siesta before lunch.”

And with those words of wisdom still in her ears, she left him to his nap.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hannah Dorsey reminded herself that she wasn't dead yet.

It might have seemed obvious, but this time a week ago, she couldn't be so sure. And every minute that she was alive meant she had a chance. At least that's what she told herself.

She knew it was around midday because of where the glimmer of window light shined on the floor in the basement where she was being held. For a while she thought she'd been moved out of California because she'd never seen a basement here before.

But the man—he had told her to call him Bolton—had explained that the former owner was an East Coast transplant who had demanded one be built in his new Southern California home, even if it didn't really make geological sense.

Bolton had explained a lot of things to her.

In the first few hours after he'd killed her foster parents and drugged and abducted her, he didn't do much talking. That was partly because Hannah was too drowsy to understand him at first. After that, her panicked screams made talking impossible.

But after about eighteen hours, she'd shouted herself hoarse. Beyond that, she was so wiped out from fear, adrenaline overload, and confusion that listening to the man's southern-inflected accent became almost a balm. If he was talking, he wasn't killing. So she was happy for him to talk away.

She imagined he'd be coming by to chat soon. He always brought her lunch around the time the light from the small window hit the middle of the room, which she estimated to be noon. She'd figured out a few other things in the week she'd been here.

First of all, she knew it had been about a week because she was able to scratch a notch for each day into the wooden post she was chained to with the spoon he left her. In fact, she was pretty sure it was Tuesday. She also knew they were somewhere isolated. Otherwise Bolton would have gagged her or at least boarded up the small window that offered her that shred of sunlight.

He clearly wasn't worried about someone hearing her calls for help or smashing the window and seeing her down here. Besides, she hadn't heard anything like a car driving by, a plane passing overhead, or an alarm going off in the distance.

At night, through the window's smeared dirty glass, she was able to see the flashing pink and blue neon sign in the far distance for a place called Bare Essence. The style of the sign suggested to her that it was probably a strip club. But considering she wasn't an expert on places like that, the information wasn't of much use.

She was also pretty sure he didn't want her dead, at least not yet. It wasn't for a lack of willingness to kill. Back at her foster parents' house, before he drugged her but after he gagged her and tied her up, he'd carried her quietly into the living room and sat her in the corner so she could watch as he killed them.

He hadn't done it stealthily. In fact, there was casualness to him throughout the ordeal. Her foster father was asleep in the easy chair and her foster mother was seated on the adjoining loveseat watching the TV.

Since they were facing away from him, he'd simply gone into the kitchen and come out with two knives, one a smaller serrated variety and the other a large carving knife. He gave Hannah a little wink as he walked around behind the couple and sat down next to Hannah's foster mother, a bland, gray-haired but generally decent woman named Caryn.

Caryn must have assumed it was Hannah and only glanced over after the show went to commercial. When she saw the strange man with the knife smiling beside her, she opened her mouth to scream. That's when he plunged it into the side of her throat.

She made an odd wheezy, gurgling sound, as if someone had let the air out of a balloon while underwater. Her foster father, Clint, who wasn't objectionable but clearly only participated in the foster process at his wife's behest, stirred slightly but didn't wake up.

As Caryn's blood spurted across the living room, some of it spraying on Bolton, he got up and wandered over to Clint. The man didn't react so Bolton grabbed the remote control and began turning up the volume until it was so loud Clint couldn't help but awaken.

"Too loud," he muttered grumpily.

When he didn't get any response, the man rubbed his eyes and looked at the screen. It was only then that he realized his view was blocked by a shortish, pudgy man with patchy brown hair and a double chin. Bolton smiled widely, revealing front teeth desperately in need of dental work, as several of them jutted in different directions. His bright, intense brown eyes never blinked.

Then, as if a starting bell had gone off at a horse race, he leapt forward and sank the carving knife into the center of Clint's chest. Hannah couldn't see her foster father's face, only the back of him as his body stiffened briefly and then sagged back into the chair. He never made a sound.

Bolton looked over at her and shrugged as if to say, "I thought there'd be more to it."

Hannah knew she should be freaking out. And she was sure that reaction would come. But in that moment after Caryn and Clint were butchered, she didn't have much of a reaction at all. She wished she could have but it just wasn't in her, not after everything else.

Only two months earlier, she'd gone through something equally traumatic. She and her adoptive parents had been kidnapped from their San Fernando Valley home and transported to a big mansion near downtown L.A. That time the perpetrator was an older man, likely in his fifties, and he was much less playful. Later she would learn that his name was Xander Thurman and that he was a notorious serial killer.

But at the time, all she knew was that she'd been brought to this strange house by this strange man. He tied her to a chair and made her watch as he proceeded to torture her adoptive parents. He left for a while before returning to finish what he'd started. Then a woman—Hannah later discovered she was a criminal profiler named Jessie Hunt—came into the house, apparently looking for him. He surprised and attacked her, knocking her out.

While she was unconscious, he strapped her arms to a ceiling beam. When she came to, he tortured her as well. The two of them engaged in a vicious verbal back and forth that was mostly lost on Hannah. Eventually, the woman's quick thinking gave her the upper hand, which led to a ferocious fight that left the man dead and the woman in awful shape.

Hannah managed to free herself and get help. She didn't remember much of the night beyond that, other than that the EMTs had to sedate her because she started to lose it. When she woke up, she was in the hospital. After questioning by multiple detectives, she was sent briefly to a group home and then to live with Caryn and Clint.

The next several months were a blur. She tried to go to school but found focusing difficult. The county got her a tutor to home school her and that went a little better. She cut her hair pixie-short so that when she looked in the mirror, she wasn't reminded of the girl from the family photos, the photos of a family that no longer existed.

It didn't really work. Her hair was still sandy blonde, her eyes were still green, and her long legs still made her look like a baby giraffe. She was still Hannah, whatever that meant.

Somewhere in that period, a detective came to follow up on the statement she provided the day after the attack. She repeated what happened, only this time it felt like she was reporting it from a distance, like she hadn't actually been a participant in the events that destroyed her family.

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