

A LIZZY GARDNER NOVEL

OBSSESSED



T. R. RAGAN

Also by T.R. Ragan

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Dead Weight (Lizzy Gardner Series #2)
A Dark Mind (Lizzy Gardner Series #3)

Also by Theresa Ragan

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A Knight in Central Park
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An Offer He Can't Refuse
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DEDICATION

In memory of my dad, Jim Cunningham, and Mary Regan, better known as Aunt Mary. I miss you both.

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CHAPTER 1

Sitting in his Honda Civic, his gaze focused on the two-story house across the street, he listened to Dr. Blair's voice come over the airwaves, soft and soothing as she wrapped up the night's show. A tremendous urge to call her swept over him. He wanted to let her know all was clear—nobody was creeping around her house tonight. But he refrained—perhaps another time, when he wasn't so damn cold.

Whistling winds made the tree branches dance as rain splattered against his windshield. Seth had been parked in the quiet Sacramento neighborhood for over two hours. The back window wouldn't roll all the way up, so the cold flowed directly through the window and into his bones. He turned the key and put on the heat, which came out in bursts of frosty air. His joints were stiff, his knuckles puffed and swollen. He would be forty-two next week, but he might as well be sixty-two.

Seth adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose and tried to get comfortable. He scanned the neighborhood, then settled once again on Dr. Blair's house.

He'd been listening to her radio show for months now. After his wife confessed to having an affair with a coworker and then promptly begged his forgiveness, his first inclination was to put a bullet through his head. But he'd refrained. Days later, while flipping through radio stations on his way to work, he'd heard the voice of an angel. Dr. Madeline Blair was talking to another shattered man. Their situations weren't identical—this man was struggling to make it through the anniversary of his wife's death—but it was still as if Dr. Blair were speaking directly to Seth. The connection was instantaneous. She understood him. She knew what he was going through.

As far as he was concerned, Dr. Blair had saved his life.

And now it was his turn to repay the favor. Ever since Dr. Blair had told her listeners that a madman was stalking her, he'd been keeping a close eye on her property, looking for his chance to put an end to the craziness. Someone, she told her listeners, was leaving "gifts" at her house while she was at work. He wasn't sure what sorts of things were being left, but the fear he'd heard in Madeline's voice left him shaky and tense. Clearly, the items being left behind were not truffles and flowers.

Last week, the man assumed to be the stalker had called in to the show. His voice was deep and throaty, with lots of exaggerated breaths between each sentence.

A shadow drew Seth's attention to the house—nothing but wind blowing through the trees.

The first time he watched Madeline's house, he'd worried about his intentions, but after some reflection, he'd realized he only wanted to protect her and keep her safe. She had rescued him and now he would do the same for her.

Did he love her? He had no idea. Wouldn't trust himself to say. He thought he'd loved his wife and what had that gotten him? A kick in the gut when Janelle came clean about her affair. Seth all but doubled over behind the wheel now, just thinking of it.

They had been married for fourteen years. They'd met in college. Her passion was nursing and his was medicine. His dream was to become a doctor. Together, they'd studied physiology and

anatomy, biology and biochemistry. They'd spent long nights studying and making love. But it was a for naught. Despite Janelle's help, he'd failed to pass the med school entrance exams.

If not for a frontal-lobe injury caused by a skiing accident when he was a young boy, he would be certain his life would have turned out very differently. After the accident, he'd become irritable and frustrated easily, unable to concentrate due to the constant flashing of lights inside his head. The doctor told his mother she'd need to take care to monitor the effects of his injury, especially any changes in his decision-making ability. More than likely, Seth wouldn't be a danger to himself or his family, but he might have trouble gauging right from wrong.

The notion that he might not understand right from wrong worried Seth greatly. And there were some incidents that fed that worry. But thankfully the episodes, as his mother used to call them, became less frequent as he grew older.

And besides, people who *did* know right from wrong chose to do wrong all the time. Take Janelle for instance. It hurt when he thought of Janelle and what they'd once shared. Up until the day she told him about her affair, he had loved her like no other.

The man she'd hooked up with no longer worked at Sutter General, where Janelle was head nurse.

No matter.

Once she'd taken a bite of that forbidden fruit, a part of him died. Nothing would ever be the same. His heart no longer belonged to his wife. It belonged to Madeline Blair, a woman he'd never uttered two words to. Well, that wasn't exactly true. He'd called in to her show a couple of times. On one occasion, the board operator put him through. After untangling his tongue, he'd managed to ask her a question, but that was months ago and he couldn't remember what he'd said.

Dr. Blair's show dealt with everything from insomnia to relationship problems. He quickly learned it wasn't easy being a popular radio host. The job entailed long hours. Most nights her Toyota 4Runner didn't pull into the driveway until after midnight.

A movement in his rearview mirror caught his attention. This was no dancing tree branch blowing in the wind. It was a man on the sidewalk carrying an umbrella and he was coming straight for him.

Straightening in his seat, Seth let out a ponderous breath. It was too late to drive off. The man leaned over and knocked on the passenger window. He was a large fellow with a barrel chest and short silver-streaked hair.

Seth opened the window a few inches.

"My wife says you've been parked here for some time. Is there something I can help you with?"

The man's gaze swept over the interior of his car, making Seth perspire even though he had done nothing wrong. "I'm sorry," Seth blurted. "My mother passed away recently and that house right there is where we grew up. It's been an emotional time."

The man with the umbrella relaxed; his eyes softened. "Are you one of the Johnson boys?"

Forcing a smile, he continued to lie. "As a matter of fact, I am."

"I'm sorry for your loss. Sit here as long as you need to."

"Thanks, but I should get going. I'm sure my wife is worrying about me by now." He quickly pulled away from the curb. As he drove off, he could see the silver-haired man standing there watching him.

He probably should have told him the truth—he was there to protect Dr. Blair. The fear in Madeline's voice during her last show had been palpable. Her voice had quivered as she explained to her listeners that she'd called the police but was told there wasn't much they could do. Her property had not been damaged. No locks on her windows or doors had been tampered with. Until her stalker made a move, she said, her voice cracking, he was free to do as he pleased.

And that's why Seth had sat outside her house every night for the past week. He was going to find the bastard and let him know he'd chosen the wrong woman to toy with.

CHAPTER 2

Hayley Hansen drove into the middle of what was known as the Nightclub District and parked her 1973 Chevy Impala at the curb. She climbed out, slammed the door shut, and headed down the pitted road looking for a bar . . . preferably a bar filled with unsavory characters. She knew this shabby end of the district offered several candidates. She'd been feeling a lot of tension lately and needed to release some of it before she did something really stupid—like, say, walk down the middle of a dangerous street after midnight looking for a fight.

Her boots clacked against pavement as she passed by a homeless man. He was sitting on the broken sidewalk, his back against a weather-beaten fence, his head bent forward, his stringy gray hair covering his face.

Without looking up, he extended a thin arm for a handout.

She went to him, bent down on one knee, and placed a five-dollar bill on his filthy, callused palm. "Get something to eat," she said before continuing on, heading for the grungiest establishment in sight.

Today marked two years since her mother's death—two years, and she still hadn't found Brian. Rosie, the man who'd killed her. Where the hell had the bastard gone? She'd leveraged every contact she had to help in her search for him, but she had nothing, not one clue as to where he was hiding out. The man was a goddamn ghost, which made no sense, since Brian had never struck her as a clever man.

A couple of assholes whistled the moment she entered the Blue Moon.

She gave them the finger as she walked straight for a stool as if she'd been coming to this shithole for years. She rested an elbow on the well-stained bar and asked the bartender for a shot of whiskey.

He asked for her ID and she showed it to him.

He held it to the light. "By the hair of your chinny-chin-chin," he said.

She said nothing.

He handed back her ID. "I don't know if this is the right place for you, honey."

"Trust me," she said without emotion, her body weightless, her bones hollow. "This is where I'm supposed to be."

He shrugged, grabbed a bottle from the shelf behind him, filled up a shot glass, and placed it on the bar in front of her.

It wasn't long before the bartender was busy with other customers and forgot all about her. Her focus remained on the contents of the glass—the gold liquid swirling about. For the first time in her twenty-one years, she felt the pull, the desire, the craving to let the whiskey burn a fire down her throat and take some of the pain away.

No, not pain. More like hatred and disgust.

For the world? For mankind?

No, just for Brian, the man who had managed to wreak havoc on her life, time after time before he dissipated like the morning fog.

She heard a scuffle at the back of the room. There was a *slap* and a *crack*. The sounds made when the palm of a hand makes contact with flesh.

Hayley turned and discovered a greaseball of a man with a big mouth and lots of missing teeth in the process of methodically hitting on his woman. She was tough, taking the openhanded blow pretty well, not even rising from her seat beside him. She had streaks of gray in her dark hair—thirty going on sixty. Hayley watched the woman take three slaps to the face without complaint, but when the prick used his knuckles, it was too much for her—she came to her feet so fast she upset the table and the toothless man lost his drink.

“Sit back down, whore,” he shouted, “so I can teach you a lesson.”

Despite the woman’s haggard look and the haunted eyes, Hayley fully expected her to fight back. Instead, she merely stood there. She had already given up.

“Put your hand on the table,” the man demanded as he raked his fingers through long, greasy hair.

The woman did as he said and he promptly leaned over and put his cigarette out on her white flesh.

Her cries were muffled beneath the hand she held over her mouth.

Hayley could smell the burned skin from where she sat. Letting her gaze drift around the room she noticed that most of the people in the place didn’t give a rat’s ass about what was happening.

“Leave her alone,” Hayley said. She should’ve interceded before now, before the cigarette, but she’d just sat there, dead on her stool. Now, though, she felt a bit of life creep up her hollow spine. She pulled out a ten-dollar bill and slid it next to her drink.

It took him a minute, but Greaseball finally looked at Hayley and grinned a wide, most toothless grin.

“Whatchya gonna do about it, girly?”

“Apologize to the lady,” she said without moving from her stool.

He stopped grinning and took his sweet time getting his ass off the chair. Then he stepped slowly around the table and grabbed his woman in a choke hold. Why the lady hadn’t left while she had the chance, Hayley couldn’t imagine.

Hayley looked toward a group of big, beefy men who could easily take Greaseball out with their breath alone. “Is anyone going to help the lady?”

“She ain’t my bitch,” one of the beefy men said.

“Yeah,” another one said with a laugh. “She ain’t my bitch either.”

Original.

The woman’s face had turned a light shade of red, her eyes bulging as the life was choked out of her.

Blood rushed through Hayley’s body—exactly what she’d come for. She lit a cigarette of her own, then stood and walked toward the grinning son of a bitch until she could literally count the exact number of rotted teeth he had left. Seven. He had seven teeth left. Not for long. “Let her go, asshole.”

He backed up a half step, holding the woman in front of him as a human shield, big hands still gripping her throat. She was turning blue. The woman’s eyes met Hayley’s and despite the good chance she had of passing out at any moment, she choked out the words, “You don’t want to do this.”

“Oh, yes, I’m afraid I do.” Hayley took another long hit off her cigarette and then jammed the hot tip into the guy’s arm and held it there as he squealed like a pig, stepping after him as he tried to pull away without loosening his hold around the woman’s neck. When he finally had to release her, his drunken state got the best of him and he fell on his ass.

While the woman stumbled backward out of reach, holding her throat and catching her breath, the idiot scrambled to his feet. ~~He wasn't grinning now. He pulled out a shit-for-nothing switchblade and held it in front of him.~~ "You're gonna pay for that, darlin'."

Hayley had an aversion to being called *darlin'*, so she jammed her right foot into his crotch, crushing his worthless balls so hard and fast he didn't know what hit him. His switchblade slid across the floor and before he could get hold of it, Hayley reached for her ankle and her newly sharpened five-and-a-half-inch Choker fixed blade, a gift from Kitally for her twenty-first birthday. A few more steps and she had the man in a choke hold of her own with her blade to his throat.

His eyes were bulging now.

A drop of sticky blood slid over Hayley's fingers and onto his shirt.

"Say you're sorry."

He grunted.

Hayley pressed the knife deeper. More than a few drops of blood dripped onto his already stained pants. She glanced around to make sure the man had no friends willing to help him out, but there was as she expected. Everyone in the place was enjoying the show too much.

"I'm sorry," he croaked.

She looked at the woman standing with her back to the wall. "You might want to leave now." When the woman began making her way to the door, Hayley told the idiot, "If you ever touch her again, I promise you I will hear about it. And if I do, you're going to lose every rotted tooth in the mouth of yours—one by one, which would suck because there's nothing I hate worse than watching a grown man cry." She dropped her hold on him, twisted him hard aside from her, and headed across the room toward the exit, her blood pumping rapidly through her veins. *Finally*.

"What about your whiskey?" the bartender called after her.

"It's all yours," she said. "I don't drink."

CHAPTER 3

Seth's ass was sore and half-numb. Once again he'd been sitting in his car watching Madeline's neighborhood for too many hours. It was a Thursday evening, just past eleven.

After the nosy neighbor approached him last week, not only had he invested in a pair of binoculars so he could watch Madeline's house from farther away, but he'd also rented a car with fog windows that actually worked. The bad news was the car smelled as if decade-old smoke had seeped into every crack and crevice. He'd paid cash for the month's rental of the Nissan, since he didn't want his wife to know what he was up to. Every night he parked the car somewhere different, somewhere close to home so it was easy to get to.

Eyelids heavy, he was about to call it a night when he caught sight of a dark figure approaching Madeline's house.

A man, on foot, head held down. He wore jeans, sneakers, and a padded coat with a hood.

It was cold outside, but not cold enough to warrant a hood pulled up around the face. The guy was obviously trying to hide his identity.

Seth's pulse raced as he watched the man through his binoculars: crooked nose and unshaven jaw. Was this Madeline's stalker—the man who'd caused her so much grief?

Sure enough, the hooded figure made a right, walking at a brisk pace up Madeline's walkway. The man didn't bother looking around to see if he was being watched. It was as if he'd gone to her door a million times before.

Madeline would be returning home in another hour. Seth needed to think. *Keep your head straight*, he told himself. He leaned over and opened the glove compartment, pulled the hunting knife from its sheath and tucked it inside his jacket pocket. Then he slipped out of the car.

If he was lucky, he would catch the guy in action, maybe see him placing one of his gifts on Madeline's welcome mat. Two nights ago, she'd told her listeners that the gifts were appearing less often, but were much more disturbing.

With quiet steps, he walked toward Dr. Blair's house.

Hidden within a grouping of birch trees across the street, not far from where the neighbor had questioned him, he watched the hooded man curl his fingers around the door handle and try to push the door open. Giving up on the door, he peered through the front window.

Seth's fingers curled around the knife handle. He should call the police.

The streets were empty. Where was the busybody neighbor when he needed him?

The hooded figure disappeared through the side gate to Madeline's backyard, then returned to the front before Seth had the chance to follow him back there.

Although Seth wanted nothing more than to see what gift he'd left for her this time, he didn't want to lose him, so when the man walked away from the house, Seth followed, staying far enough back so the man wouldn't know he was being followed.

Now that he was outside, the man's hooded jacket made more sense. The temperature had

dropped considerably. They walked for three blocks before the man took a sudden right between two office buildings down an alleyway a block after the single-family homes stopped and the commercial buildings began.

If Seth didn't hurry, he was going to lose him. He stepped up his pace. Despite the intense cold, sweat covered his forehead. His breathing had grown heavy, his legs already cramping. Clearly, he didn't get enough exercise.

Making the same right into the alleyway, Seth saw that it ended in a loading dock some thirty feet ahead of him and stopped. Nothing stirred. He crept past a Dumpster overflowing with garbage along the brick wall to his right. Boxes and trash littered the ground. Dark shadows threw him off, but he finally noticed the man standing where the Dumpster met the wall.

"Why are you following me?" the man asked.

Seth stepped closer as he peered into the dark. "What are you doing in this neighborhood?"

"That's none of your business. Tell me why you're following me or I'm going to call the police."

"Go ahead," Seth said with a snort, relieved. "That's a great idea." He pulled his cell phone from his pocket so he could make the call himself, but the man batted it away, sending the phone clacking against the rough pavement and sliding out of reach.

The hooded man squinted into the dark in the direction of the phone. "Listen, man, sorry about your phone. I thought you were going for a gun or something. We both need to chill out."

This was the man who had been stalking Madeline. Seth was sure of it.

The man stepped farther down the alley, his head bent down as he searched the ground. "I'll get your phone."

Slowly, Seth reached into his coat pocket and made sure he had a good grip on the handle of his knife.

"My name is Chris Porter," the man said as he peered, still bent over, into the blackness against the next building's wall. "I live around the corner. I was visiting a friend, making sure she was OK. I'll get your phone, and then why don't you tell me why you're here and we can both return to our homes and call it a night?"

Bright lights, a kaleidoscope of colors, flashed inside Seth's head. The man was lying. He knew a liar when he heard one. His wife, Janelle, it turned out, had lied to him many times. So had his mother and every person he'd ever befriended.

While the guy's back was still to him, Seth pulled out the knife and advanced on him with the blade held straight out in front of him. The sharp blade glinted in the darkness. He didn't want to hurt the guy. He wanted the truth, and then he wanted to see him locked behind bars.

The throbbing in his temples felt like a metal vise pressing against his head. The pain was excruciating. His palms were drenched with sweat, and he tasted something metallic and horribly familiar.

The same thing he tasted during his episodes when he was younger.

Shit. Not now.

"Here it is," the hooded man said as he turned. "I found your phone." Screwing with Seth's mind—the man didn't even look up at him as he came at him, pretending to try to piece the phone back together until he got close enough to strike.

Bright lights zipped and zapped, making the advancing man look as if his arms were flailing about in a roomful of strobe lights. Every movement distorted. Shadows everywhere.

Panicked, Seth thrust the knife forward, hitting the man dead center.

He felt the blade go deep.

Chris Porter, if that was really his name, gasped. He sucked in a breath as the knife went

deeper.

~~Their gazes met, the whites of the stalker's eyes gleaming like a wounded animal's in the darkness.~~

The phone hit the pavement again. The man wobbled. "Why?" he asked.

Still holding on to the handle, Seth felt the blade slicing through the man's soft innards. In his mind's eye, he could literally see the blade cut through the upper part of the abdominal cavity, piercing through muscle and tendons, hitting the diaphragm and then the pancreas. As he'd always suspected, the human body was complicated, but vulnerable and easily destroyed.

The hooded man put his hands to his stomach where the knife protruded, but it was too late.

Feeling a flash of disgust with what he'd done, Seth pulled the blade out. He felt confused and disoriented.

The man was still standing, struggling to stay on his feet.

Seth thought of Madeline and how relieved she would be when she realized her stalker was no longer bothering her. He was her hero. His groin tightened as he stepped toward the man and thrust the blade into his chest.

A kick of adrenaline registered. He inhaled sharply. What a high. With each thrust and twist of the knife came a series of involuntary contractions as his excitement peaked. He stabbed Madeline's stalker, again and again, enjoying the suctioning as he pulled out. The knife easily cut through flesh and muscle as he guided the blade into the man's left side. He thrust the knife into the man's shoulder next, saving his neck for last.

He froze, shuddered, closed his eyes.

Moments passed before he stood tall. He took a good long look at the body on the ground. Raw emotions flooded through him. The first thrust had been prompted by a burst of confusion replaced with rage. Then had come that wave of disgust, and finally something he could hardly comprehend: something sensual, bordering on erotic. He'd never experienced anything like it before.

He had killed a man for Madeline, and he was glad.

The skies opened up suddenly and heavy rain quickly seeped through his clothes and gave him a much-needed jolt. He needed to get out of there. He needed to be smart. He took off his eyeglasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose as he tried to think. There was lots of debris and trash scattered around. The man's hood no longer covered his face. He was quite young.

Noticing a grate, he bent down, grabbed the man's sweatshirt and dragged him over the grate so that the blood had somewhere to go. Next, he got down on one knee, patted the man down and found a wallet. The name on the ID read Chris Porter.

Had the man given him his real name?

When he slipped the wallet into his pocket he noticed blood covering his hands. He took off the man's sweatshirt and used it to clean himself up. Working quickly, he covered the body with boxes and trash, figuring he'd have to come back and find the strength to lift the body into the trunk of his car. He then went in search of his broken cell phone, relieved to find it close by.

Exiting the alleyway, both hands hidden within the pockets of his bloodied pants, he clicked his tongue as he walked off.

CHAPTER 4

Dr. Madeline Blair had eight minutes before she would be on the air.

Earlier today she'd had a talk with her boss. Ratings had tripled since she'd mentioned having a stalker on air. Although she felt a bit of guilt at deceiving her listeners and her boss, it was all in the name of entertainment. It wasn't like she was doing *real* therapy, after all—though she might have done just that, go about the daunting business of reestablishing an actual therapeutic practice, if she didn't maintain these ratings.

And if she wanted to keep the momentum going, she needed her stalker to call in one more time.

Drastic times called for drastic measures. She picked up her cell and made the call. Her friend David picked up on the first ring.

"What's up, Jelly Bean?"

She'd been addicted to Jelly Belly jelly beans almost as long as she'd known David. And that was how her nickname had been born. "Hey, Stalker," she said.

"No, no." She could hear the smile go out of his voice. "Let's dump that nickname."

"Oh please, David. That's a little dramatic, isn't it?"

"Maybe. Someday we'll look back on this and laugh, maybe. But for now, let's put it behind us, all right?"

"Well . . ." she said. "Maybe not just yet?"

She could hear him breathing.

"I need you to make one more creepy call."

"You can't be serious. You promised me that the last call I made would be the absolute final call."

"Please, David. Just one more time, I promise. My ratings went through the roof. You *sold* it. So many listeners called in to ask about the creepy caller. It was perfect. Do you have any idea what that means for my career?"

He lowered his voice. "Do you have any idea what this could do to *my* career if anyone found out what I did? And what about my wife? Debra would kill me if she knew what we were up to."

"Nobody is going to find out. And besides, Debra would love you more for helping out a friend in need. One more call and I will never ask you to do it again, I swear. I'll watch your kids for an entire week straight so you and Debra can go on a second honeymoon."

No response.

"Please, David. I have to be back on air in a couple of minutes."

A ponderous sigh. "When should I call?" he asked, clearly not happy with her. "And what do you want me to say this time?"

"It will be sometime in the next few days. I'll call you an hour before the show to remind you. Use the same voice you used the first time, but try to keep it going for as long as possible—you know

lots of deep breathing and long pauses, like last time. And if you could ask me a few questions about what I'm wearing, that would be great. Or maybe you should ask me why I refuse to go out on a date with you. Ask me something very personal; make my listeners stop what they're doing and turn up the volume."

"God, Madeline. Listen to yourself." She could hear him swallow thickly. "This is so not right. It's not worth just some temporary spike in ratings."

"I'm begging you. Think about all the people who call in, all the people I'm able to hear because of this show."

"I want to go on record saying I don't like it, Madeline. We've been friends for a long time but for the first time ever I'm questioning why I even like you. It's time for you to get a life. You need to get out there and mingle with real people instead of the voices on your radio show. You're scaring me."

She laughed. "Now you're being dramatic. You'll be happy to know I've been spending time with a neighbor of mine."

"A real live person?"

"Yes, David, a real person. A man, in fact."

"I don't believe it. What's his name?"

"Chris Porter. He's a few years younger than me, but he's adorable and a real, honest-to-God gentleman. He's a great guy. You and Debra are going to love him."

"Have you told Chris that you're pretending you have a stalker?"

"No, of course not. I doubt he listens to my show."

"If he's the great guy you think he is and he's interested in you, then believe me, he's listening to your show. And if that's the case, he's probably worried for you."

"Since when have you become such a worrywart?"

"Since I married and had two daughters. Promise me you'll tell this new guy of yours what's going on, and I'll make the call."

"It's a deal."

CHAPTER 5

The café in Roseville had an outside seating area. It was nine in the morning, chilly enough to turn every breath into a tiny cloud of white mist. Jessica Pleiss was the only one sitting in the back area, framed by latticed wood walls and a couple of potted plants. She looked over her shoulder when the back door of the café opened, surprised to see that Hayley had actually come.

She didn't come to her feet. Instead, she waited for Hayley to take a seat across from her, which she did. "Thanks for meeting me," Jessica said. "Care for some coffee? Something to eat?"

"No, thanks. Why don't you go ahead and tell me why you asked me to meet you."

Jessica took a breath and processed the moment. After she'd quit working for Lizzy, she realized she wasn't sure if she'd ever see Hayley again. And now here they were. "It's hard to believe it's been two years since I saw you last. How have you been?"

"The same."

Jessica knew that was a lie. Hayley looked as if she'd lost fifteen pounds she didn't need to lose. With her pale skin and dark circles under her eyes, she looked like death. "I asked you to meet me because I need your help."

No raised eyebrow. No crossing of the arms. Nothing.

"A little girl was shot and killed about two weeks ago," Jessica continued. "Her name was Taylor. It was in the news. A twelve-year-old, minding her own business, just sitting alone at the table doing her homework. Her older brother, it turned out, had pissed off some idiot in a gang, so they did a drive-by and happened to tag his little sister."

"Where's the connection?"

"What do you mean?"

"The connection to you," Hayley said. "Why do you care?"

"The connection is Eloise Hampton, the girl's mother. Back in the day, before my sister disappeared and my family fell apart, Mom paid Eloise to clean the house and help with laundry. Eloise is only ten years older than me. I think of her as family. Eventually she married, moved away, had kids. Then her husband left her and the kids to fend for themselves. We've stayed in touch. Ever now and then, I watch her kids for her." Jessica drew in another deep breath and willed her pulse to slow. "I need to know who killed her daughter. I need a name."

"I heard that you were accepted into the academy."

"That's right."

"Good for you."

"Thanks."

"Since you work for the feds—"

"Hardly—"

"—it shouldn't be too hard for *you* to find out which gang is responsible and then go knock on their leader's door."

“I already did. A member of the Franklin gang is responsible. Nobody’s talking.”

Hayley snorted. “But you think they’ll talk to me?”

“Not you. Your friend.” She tried to remember the girl’s name and came up empty. She’d only met her once or twice. She was younger than Hayley, maybe sixteen when Jessica had met her two years ago.

“Kitally?”

“That’s the one.”

“So because she was in detention, you figure she would have connections to a gang—”

Jessica gestured toward her own elbow. “She has a tattoo on the back of her left arm, near her elbow. It matches the Franklin gang’s tattoo. Looks like a crescent moon with three dots.”

“Very observant.”

Jessica said nothing, although she wondered if Hayley realized she’d just complimented her. Probably not.

Hayley’s eyes narrowed. “You seem different.”

“Ditto.”

“You’re serious about this, aren’t you?” Hayley asked.

Jessica nodded. “Two thousand dollars if you get me a name.”

“Nobody is going to tell Kitally or me the shooter’s name. What you’re asking us to do is dangerous. We could get in some serious shit if we choose to get involved, maybe even get killed.”

Jessica didn’t waver. “There’s always that possibility.”

Hayley laughed out loud. “Holy shit. What has happened to you?”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“I haven’t seen you in months, years, whatever, and you call me out of the blue, not to say hello or ask how I’ve been, but to do you a favor. The Jessica I knew wouldn’t have had the balls to ask her friend to risk her life for a few thousand bucks, let alone a stupid name.”

“First of all,” Jessica said, leaning over the table, “you and me, we were never friends. You made that clear on numerous occasions. Secondly, at the age of twelve, this little girl”—she held up a picture of Taylor, the girl who was killed—“was smarter than you and me put together. She used to tell me she was going to be the first woman president and I never once doubted it. She died and I can’t bring her back, but I can make damn sure the person responsible is locked behind bars and pays for what he did.”

“I’ll talk to Kitally,” Hayley told her.

Jessica slipped the picture of the girl along with a business card across the table, just in case Hayley had deleted her number from her phone. “Let me know what she says, will you?”

“What if she tells you to fuck off?”

“Then I guess I’d have to go to plan B, which would mean making sure a pregnant girl named Kiki stays in jail for a very long time.”

“Kiki?”

“Someone who happens to mean a lot to the leader of the Franklin gang.” Jessica looked at her cell phone. “I should get going.”

Hayley gave her a sloppy two-fingered salute. “See you around, Agent Pleiss.”

Jessica climbed in behind the wheel of her car and sat there for a moment, trying to catch her breath. It wasn’t easy swallowing the lump in her throat. When she’d first seen Hayley walk through the door, she’d had a difficult time not showing alarm at her appearance. But Hayley didn’t respond well

caring, nurturing people, so she'd kept any and all emotions to herself.

—She hadn't seen her since Hayley's mother's funeral. After Lizzy had hired Hayley, Jessica had done her best to get along with her. Although they were complete opposites and had constant disagreements, she'd grown to like Hayley. She even came to think of Hayley as a sister. Although it was true that Jessica had kept her distance over the years, that didn't mean she didn't think about Hayley. She cared deeply about her, in fact. But being around her used to make Jessica feel inadequate. Hayley had a way of taking control of every situation. Once she got away from her, Jessica had gained confidence not just in her decision-making abilities, but with being herself.

Jessica considered returning to the café to tell Hayley to forget the whole thing. The last thing she wanted to do was put her or Kitally in danger. It hadn't really occurred to her. While it was undeniably true that the Franklin gang was a bunch of degenerate, law-breaking fools—they carried deadly weapons, and many of them had not only spent time in prison but were proud of it—they also lived in exactly the sketchier areas of Sacramento that Hayley liked to frequent in the dead of night. Jessica had figured it would be just another night out for her.

Clutching the steering wheel tighter, Jessica could still hear the wails of the little girl's mother after Jessica had raced to the house when she'd heard what happened. She pictured the young girl, the first woman president of the United States, studying at the kitchen table one moment and shot dead the next, all her hopes and dreams obliterated in an instant. Why?

Jessica wiped her eyes, then turned on the ignition and drove off.

She needed a name.

CHAPTER 6

Hands on the steering wheel, Lizzy watched the diamond ring on her left hand sparkle, sending an electric current of tension through her body.

An impending wedding to the man she loved should cause her to feel giddy, not tense. At thirty-four, she wasn't getting any younger. And Jared was one of the good guys, the last of the unicorns. Time after time he'd proved to be her rock, her safety net. And yet here she was again with sweaty palms and dry mouth at the mere thought of walking down the aisle in three months. Her sister had given up trying to pry details about the wedding from her—always calling to ask Lizzy if she'd decided on a color scheme, flowers, music. Had she written her vows? When would they go dress shopping? Cathy had also been badgering her to tell their parents the news, but Lizzy didn't see the point; she rarely talked to either of them. Her mother was busy with work and a new man. Her father wanted nothing to do with her.

Up ahead, Lizzy saw a bolt of brown—a dog?—shoot across the street at the same time a flashy sports car sped around the corner. “No, no, no,” she said.

A screech of brakes. *BAM.*

The animal flew through the air like a catapulted rag doll, landing on the hillside in high grass.

The car wasn't stopping. Lizzy caught a glimpse of the driver as he passed: male, broad-shouldered, light-colored hair trimmed short around his ears.

Bastard.

Pulling to the side of the road, she shut off the engine and climbed out.

It was eight in the morning. Still early. Freezing cold.

She was on her way to North Laguna to see Hayley. Thought she could save a few minutes by taking a couple of back streets. No such luck. Murphy's Law had struck again.

She crossed the road, taking in the fresh tire marks left on the pavement. She hopped over the ditch and trampled through weeds and stickers.

Hands on her hips, she looked around, the air crisp enough to elicit goose bumps. She held still. Listened. Waited. Thirty seconds passed before she saw movement behind an oak tree.

Maybe it wasn't a dog. It could be a coyote or a giant raccoon. Whichever, it could have rabies. She reminded herself as she headed for the tree.

The first thing she saw was a tail—more like a stump—thumping against the ground.

Although the animal smelled like a skunk, it was actually a dog: a medium-sized, mangy mutt without a collar or tags. Even injured and vulnerable, he wasn't growling. In fact, he looked downright friendly.

Extending her arm, she moved closer and let him sniff her hand. His ribs were showing and his wiry hair was matted. Big grayish eyes matched the color of his fur. The dog looked wary, frightened, but his tail thumped against the dirt every time she talked to him.

“Are you hurt?”

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