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UNSEEN

A NOVEL

SIGHT UNSEEN

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For Cecilia Aiko Oliveira Johansen.

Always remembered, forever loved.

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About the Authors

Also by Iris and Roy Johansen

Copyright

PROLOGUE

DAMN, SHE WAS GOING to kill him.

Gary Decker turned onto Market Street and gave the accelerator some extra juice. On this of a nights, he hadn't wanted to be late picking up Corrine. She had arranged dinner and drinks with friends at Nobu, an occasion she had pitched as a casual get-together. But he knew better. It was another attempt to parade him before her friends and convince them that he wasn't the jerk they thought he was.

Screw 'em. He was marrying Corrine, not those immature losers.

He smiled. With an attitude like that, how could he not win them over?

Ah, hell. He could do this. He did the dog and pony show for his firm's obnoxious clients; he could do it for his fiancée's judgmental college pals.

He called Corrine as he pulled up to her Sabre Springs home, surprised that she hadn't already phoned to give him an earful for being so late.

His call went straight to voice mail.

He glanced up at the two-story Spanish-style house. Dark. Had she gotten pissed and left without him?

He cut the engine and walked toward the front door. He knocked. No answer. He pulled out his keys and let himself inside.

Soft classical music wafted from the stereo in the living room.

Weird. Not Corrine's style at all.

He called softly, "Honey?"

No answer.

He moved into the living room. What little light there was came from a single lamp in the corner.

The classical music became softer.

Gary froze when he saw Corrine. She was seated on the sofa, dressed like an uptight business executive in her tweed jacket and skirt. Her hair was pulled back, and she wore oversized black spectacles.

Definitely not Corrine's usual style. She managed a funky La Jolla art gallery, and her attire during work and after, often consisted of Capri slacks and a tie-dyed T-shirt.

Gary smiled. "Hey, you didn't tell me we had to wear costumes tonight. What are you supposed

be, a corporate lawyer?"

No response.

Damn, she *was* pissed.

Okay, he'd better be both humble and persuasive.

He moved closer to her. "Don't get me wrong. I kind of like those glasses. Maybe you can wear them for me later?" He sat down next to her and gently rubbed her thigh.

Cold. So cold.

He stiffened. "Honey...?"

He pulled the glasses from her face. Her bloodshot eyes were wide open and stared back at him.

Only then did he notice the bruising on her neck.

Oh, God.

He jumped to his feet and stumbled backward.

Holy shit!

Corrine. Dead.

It was even harder to believe since this ... *thing* didn't even look like her.

He fumbled for his phone, his hands shaking.

Something snapped around his neck.

Shit!

Choking ... Must fight ...

No air.

Must break free ...

He felt his attacker's hot breath in his ear.

Darkness creeping over him ...

It wasn't just breath, he realized as the darkness overtook him.

It was his killer's laughter.

CHAPTER

1

“NICE TO MEET YOU, KENDRA. Sorry I’m late. I’m Dean Halley.”

Kendra Michaels stood and shook hands with the handsome man who had just dashed into the Gaslamp Bar and Restaurant. She was experiencing a sinking feeling. Halley’s smile was a couple shades too white. He was also too good-looking and too well dressed. He breathed casual elegance and easy charm.

Mom, what have you gotten me into?

Halley’s brows rose. “You are Kendra, right?”

“Yes.” She forced a smile. “Sorry I had to cancel last week. Things got complicated.”

He shrugged. “It happens. But we’re here now, so that’s what matters.”

He was also too polite.

Oh, for God’s sake, give the guy a break.

It was her mother’s first attempt at arranging a blind date, and anyone but Kendra would have said that she’d done well.

Of course, the evening was still young.

Kendra had come straight from the office, where she had conducted five music-therapy sessions back-to-back. Her clients couldn’t have been more different from each other, ranging in age from eight months to ninety-two years. Her techniques varied for each patient, with simple mood-soothing music for some, with more complex exercises to draw out others who were autistic and emotionally withdrawn. Not all would respond to her techniques, but she had high hopes for a few of them. Despite the presence of this charming and too-perfect man in front of her, she wanted nothing more than to go home and write up her impressions while the sessions were still fresh in her mind.

Don’t let him see it. She had promised Mom. She smiled. “Yes, that’s all that matters.”

They took a booth in the bar and placed their drink orders. Dean drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “Your mother told me a lot about you, but I forgot almost all of it instantly.”

Now that was both honest and promising. “You sure know how to flatter a girl.”

“It’s not because I wasn’t interested. I was. But after she told me you used to be blind, I had trouble thinking about anything else.”

Way to go, Mom. “She actually led with that?”

“Good salesmanship. I was intrigued.”

“I don’t need anyone to sell me. What you see is what you get.”

“Of course you don’t. Poor choice of words. I’m sure you’re as leery of setups as I am. What exactly did she say to convince you to go out with me?”

“She said if I didn’t, she would use her keys to scratch disparaging things about me on the hood of my car.”

He smiled that charming smile again. “She didn’t really say that.”

“She did. And she said she would let all my plants die the next time I had to attend an overseas conference. So you see, I had little choice.”

“Now it’s my turn to be flattered.”

“I think she was joking, at least about the car.”

“This would make some interesting fodder for the next departmental dinner. Do you mind if I tell the other faculty members?”

She smiled. “I wish you would. Though from what I understand, it probably wouldn’t surprise anyone. Ask around. She’s made quite a reputation for herself.”

He chuckled. “You’re right about that.”

Dean and her mother, Professor Diane Michaels, were both history professors at the University of California Campus in La Jolla. Mom had been cooking up this date practically from the time Halley had taken over the post the previous spring. But as Kendra’s eyes darted over him, she went still with surprise.

How ... interesting. Did Mom have any idea that Halley—?

“So you were born blind?” he asked.

She sipped her wine, still trying to process her observations. “Yes. And I stayed that way for the first twenty years of my life.”

“Incredible. And two surgical procedures later, you now see perfectly.”

“I don’t know perfectly, but well enough. Probably better than you without your contact lenses.”

He raised his eyebrows. “If you could see that in this lighting, then you’re doing all right.”

She nodded toward the bar’s street window. “Car headlights helped. My mother actually deserved most of the credit for how I turned out. I never felt handicapped. I learned to use what I had.”

“And you gained your sight from some kind of stem-cell procedure?”

She nodded again. “In England. They did a lot of the early work in ocular regeneration. It was an amazing time of my life, and a little overwhelming.”

“I can only imagine.”

No, he couldn’t even begin to imagine, and Kendra didn’t want to talk about it. She glanced up at the large TV over the bar. A live remote newscast was at the scene of a horrific traffic accident, and the reporter was struggling to make sense of the carnage and twisted metal strewn over the roadway.

Dean turned to see what had grabbed her attention. “Quite a pileup.”

She nodded, her gaze narrowed on the screen. A helicopter shot of the scene showed that the roadway was covered with work lights, police cars, and fire trucks, and was atop a tall white bridge.

She suddenly straightened in her chair.

Then she stood up and stepped closer to the television. Dean quickly joined her at the bar.

“The Cabrillo State Bridge,” she said, studying the overview that the helicopter shot offered.

“The one that goes toward the zoo?”

She nodded. “Those *idiots*. They’re treating it like an accident.”

He turned toward her. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“Because it’s not an accident.”

Dean laughed, but cut it short when he realized she was serious.

“Um, why do you think that?”

Kendra was still staring at the television and shook her head in disgust. “They’re blowing it. I can’t believe it. They’re totally blowing it.”

“I still don’t get how—”

Kendra muttered a curse beneath her breath. “I wish we’d never seen this damn thing.”

“I’m starting to wish that, too,” he said dryly. “Want me to ask the bartender to change the channel?”

“No.”

“Come on, let’s go back and sit down. I’ll tell you all about myself.” He tried to take her arm, but she remained planted at the bar.

“I know quite a bit already,” she said absently, her gaze still locked on the television. “I know you’ve been to prison.”

He froze. “What?”

Her eyes narrowed on the screen when another camera angle came on the screen. “When you were younger.”

He was silent. “Nobody knows that.”

“You grew up in Florida, then spent some time in the Northeast. Maybe your college years? Are you an Ivy Leaguer?”

“You Googled me?”

“What? No, life’s too short.” She swore again. “I can’t believe those damned cops don’t see what’s right in front of them.”

“Let’s get back to me for a second. Does your mother know about the prison thing? Because if she got out—”

“Don’t sweat it. I didn’t know until two minutes ago. I was just looking you over to see what Mom saw in you, and it popped up.”

“What else ‘popped’ up?”

“You’re a motorcycle enthusiast. That’s where a lot of your time and money goes. Not just riding, but the tinkering. You have a Harley Sportster. I’m thinking you did some degreasing on it today.”

“Jesus.”

“I take that as a confirmation.”

“Either you were spying on me, or you’re psychic.”

“Neither.” She was still concentrating on the screen. “Fools. Not one homicide detective there. Not one. All accident investigators.”

Dean smiled. “Your mother said you were very observant and not to let it rattle me. I’m just now realizing what she meant by that. And, for the record, you did rattle me.”

“Sorry. Mom always tells me to wait and let things just come out in conversation. I was distracted.”

“Don’t be sorry. I like it. I’d always heard that blind people develop their other senses to an amazing degree. I guess you’re living proof. But it must be more than that.”

“I’m a little obsessive. No, a lot obsessive. I now treasure everything that I can see. And I won’t let go of what I learned from my other senses when I was blind. I don’t take anything for granted.”

“I’ll accept that answer. But you have to tell me how you knew all those things about me.”

“Sure.” She pointed to the television screen. “But first I need you to drive me there.”

“To the accident?”

“It’s not an accident, remember?”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

He was silent a moment. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those fetishists who get off on—”

“Someone needs to talk to them before they break down the scene and destroy evidence.” She turned and looked him in the eye. “I walked here. Either you’re giving me a ride there, or I’m calling a cab.”

“So our date is over?”

“It’s only over if you don’t give me a ride.”

Dean looked back at the television, where the news copter was circling the platoon of emergency workers and their flashing vehicles. He shook his head. “Got to be the weirdest date of my life.”

* * *

KENDRA’S CELL PHONE RANG WHEN they were on the road only ten minutes. She made a face when she glanced at the ID. “Mom. I was half expecting this.”

“Really? We haven’t had time for her to wonder if I’m threatening your virtue.”

“It’s not my virtue Mom’s concerned about.” She accessed the call. “Hi, Mom. I’m with Dean Halley now. I didn’t no-show, and I haven’t scared him off yet.” She looked inquiringly at Dean. He shook his head. “No, he thinks I’m weird, but he’s sticking with me.”

“Brave man. I knew I could count on him. He’s a fine teacher and a great guy. You have to admit he did a good job of bringing you two together. Now all you have to do is cement the relationship.”

“A relationship neither one of us wanted from the beginning. Why, Mom?”

“You know the answer. Dean is steady and wonderfully normal. He’s as close to the guy next door as I could find. That’s what you need, Kendra. Dean could lead you away from all those police and FBI types and make you enjoy it. He’s intelligent, gorgeous, and has a sense of humor. The only thing he’ll want from you won’t be anything more complicated than sex.”

She chuckled. “I told Dean you wouldn’t be concerned about my virtue.”

“Screw virtue. I’m concerned about your life. I want you safe.”

“I know, Mom,” she said gently. “And that’s the only reason I gave in about tonight. I love you and wanted to give you the chance to play Mother Teresa and save me from myself. You’ve done that for my life and done a great job. Tell me, are you missing it?”

“Maybe a little. You were my whole life for quite a while.” She cleared her throat. “But that doesn’t mean that I’m not right in this. Now, do you like Dean?”

“We haven’t had time to—” She glanced at Dean. “Yes, I like him. At first, I thought that he was too pretty, but maybe he can’t help that. And he doesn’t try to dodge, and I think maybe he’s honest.”

Dean smiled, still staring out the windshield. “You do know I can hear everything you’re saying, right?”

“You didn’t put him through any hoops?” Diane asked.

“Not intentionally.” She had just spotted blinking lights ahead. “Look, Mom, I have to go. I’m in his car and I—”

“You’re going out to dinner?” Diane sounded pleased. “That’s progress.”

“Yes, isn’t it? I’ll talk to you later, Mom.” She hung up.

“You’re very close,” Dean said quietly. “I thought so when Diane was talking about you to me. But you just confirmed it.”

“I love her. She made me what I am. Both physically and mentally.” She grimaced. “Well, maybe not quite. I take full responsibility for my faults and the wild oats I’ve sown. She had nothing to do with them.”

“Wild oats? You’re a music-therapy teacher.”

“Who after I began to see believed that the wine of life should be tasted to the last drop.”

“Really?” He looked intrigued. “Diane never mentioned wild oats to me.”

“She wouldn’t. You’re her idea of the wholesome guy next door. She wouldn’t want to scare you away.”

“I notice you didn’t disillusion her ... yet.”

“No. I’ll have to probe a little more.” She smiled. “Guy-next-door types generally bore me. They show a lack of courage to reach out.” She held up her hand to stop him from answering. “Later. Those flashing lights up ahead is our destination. We’re going to have to run the gauntlet.”

* * *

“MA’AM, YOU’LL HAVE TO GET BACK in your car and clear out. Authorized personnel only.”

Kendra and Dean had driven around the two-mile-long line of stopped cars that extended from the

bridge, down Laurel Boulevard and across the 1-5 freeway. A stocky, female traffic cop was holding back the curious onlookers, mostly joggers and dog walkers, angling for a glimpse of the chaotic scene.

Kendra turned back toward Dean, who had just parked his car on the side of the Prado Road that transitioned to the bridge's two-lane roadway. She motioned for him to join her.

The traffic officer glared at him and raised her walkie-talkie as she would a lethal weapon. "So don't even think of leaving your car there. I have a tow truck on speed dial."

Kendra waved him over again. Dean hesitated, then climbed out of the car.

The stocky cop shouted something that was lost in the roar of the circling news'copters. Kendra surveyed the scene behind her. There *had* to be someone she knew here. She had assisted in a few police investigations in the past few years, but none of them involved the accident-investigations cop now on the bridge snapping photos and taping off the scene.

Finally, she saw a familiar face. Lieutenant Wallace Poole, a tall, gangly, bald man who seemed to be doing little other than positioning himself toward the bank of news cameras.

Poole ...

Kendra tried to remember if she had pissed him off during the Petco Stadium case a couple years before. Not that much, apparently. He stepped closer and waved her through the police line which simultaneously quieting the walkie-talkie-wielding traffic cop. He smiled. "Why, Dr. Michaels, what brings you here?"

"The same thing that brings you. How many fatalities?"

"Four." He gestured back to the three wrecked vehicles on the bridge. "A man and woman in the convertible, a man in the pickup truck, and a woman in the minivan." Poole's eyes narrowed on her face. "I thought you only helped out on murder cases. Who called you in?"

"I'm being rude." Kendra motioned toward Halley. "This is Dean Halley. Care to walk us through it?"

Poole appeared more mystified than before, but he nodded. "Uh, sure." He led them past a fire truck and a line of road flares.

Dean shot her a "what-in-the-hell-are-we-doing" glance, but Kendra was busy scanning the scene in front of her.

The pickup truck, charred and dripping with extinguisher foam, was still smoldering alongside the bridge's right-hand railing. A gray tarp was thrown over the driver's compartment, obviously to conceal a corpse. The convertible BMW was right behind, grill first into the granite railing. The minivan was on its side a few paces behind, also surrounded by mounds of extinguisher foam.

Poole motioned toward the pickup truck. "We figure the driver of the truck lost control and plowed into the bridge. It triggered a chain reaction. The Beamer swerved and hit the stone railing. The van swerved the other way, rolled, and ended on its side."

Kendra nodded. "No one was wearing seat belts?"

"No. That's probably why none of them survived."

“And no air bags deployed?”

“No. The investigators say it’s not all that uncommon unfortunately. They get stolen, or if they’re deployed once, they’re expensive to replace, and some people just don’t do it. It’s also possible that the crash sensors were faulty, or the trigger wires can get severed early in the crash sequence.”

“That took four lives.” Kendra leaned toward the BMW 320 coupe. It was easily the most intact of the cars, with no fire and only damaged at the crumpled front end. Two bodies were slumped in the front seat. They were a man and a woman, late twenties, both dressed in buttoned-down business attire, as if they were on their way home from a Fortune 500 board meeting. Blood ran from their heads and was splattered across the windshield. There were two impact shatter points on the glass, one in front of each victim.

“Anything about this look strange to you?” Kendra asked Poole.

“It *all* looks strange to me. What are you getting at?”

“Look at the number of windshield cracks radiating out from the impact points. The number is proportional to impact speed. With the speed that would have been necessary for those skulls to cause these kind of cracks, there should have been much more damage to this car’s front end when it struck the railing. I could see that from a barroom TV on Fifth Street. That was the first thing I noticed.” She leaned over the windshield and examined it more closely. “May I borrow an evidence glove?”

Poole peeled off his right glove and gave it to her. Kendra slipped it on and rubbed her fingers across the cracks, both inside the windshield and outside. She occasionally closed her eyes, letting her sense of touch guide her in a way that was seldom necessary anymore.

She finally looked up and stepped away. “And, what’s more, the force of impact came from outside of this windshield, not the inside.”

Poole leaned down to look. “Both sides are shattered. How can you tell?”

“There are two kinds of fractures here. Radial fractures, which jut out like the spokes of a wheel, and concentric fractures, which are like a series of circles radiating outward. The concentric fractures are always on the impact side. It’s difficult to see which side they’re actually on, but you can feel them.” She peeled off the glove and handed it to Poole. “Want to try?”

“No thanks. I’ll take your word for it.”

“Anyway, your forensics guys will back me up.” Kendra glanced around. “I take it no one actually saw the accident?”

“No. The zoo and botanical gardens had been closed for hours. There’s not a lot of traffic here after dark.”

“So what were the victims doing here?”

“Don’t know. We’ve just started notifying the next of kin.” He motioned toward the still-circling news’copters.” Although some may have found out already.” Poole turned to Dean. “What about you? Are you with the media? Who are you again?”

Dean extended his hand. “Dean Halley. History professor. Just along for the ride.”

Poole looked at Kendra.

“He doesn’t have anything to do with this,” she added quickly. “Blind date.”

Poole glanced from one to the other. “Huh. And how’s it going?”

“Pretty good, I think,” Kendra said.

Dean nodded. “Except for the dead bodies. Could have done without that.”

Poole stared at Kendra. “Then why in the hell are you here, Dr. Michaels?”

“I didn’t want evidence compromised. I’m sure your medical examiner will tell you this later tonight or tomorrow, but these people didn’t die here.”

Poole gazed at her for another long moment. “What makes you say that?”

“There would be a lot more blood if they had hit this windshield with enough force to kill them. They both have identical bruising on their necks, as if they were strangled by the same patterned belt or cord.”

Poole examined the corpses in the BMW more closely. “And how did you know you would find this?”

“I didn’t. But like I said, I could see this accident wasn’t what it seemed to be.” She pointed to the long skid mark behind the overturned minivan. “This was meant to look like it came from that van, but I don’t think it did. If you skid on antilock brakes, the mark looks like a series of dashes, not an unbroken line. Another thing I spotted from the news helicopter.”

Poole walked over to the unbroken skid mark and squatted to look at it.

Kendra followed him. “The van burned quickly. There was a Toluene-based accelerant used.”

“Toluene?” One of the investigators, whom Kendra had just seen draw a chalk line around a severed hand next to the van, looked up at the word. “As in a solvent for paint?”

“Or for model-airplane glue.”

“How do you figure that?”

Kendra grimaced. “I smell it. It’s a lot like benzene.”

The investigator, a slender man with short gray hair, stood up and sniffed the air. “I’m smelling a lot of things right now, but that isn’t one of them.”

“Trust me. Take samples and run your tests. These cars were burned intentionally.”

The investigator looked at her skeptically. “Trust you? Pardon me for asking, but who the hell are you?”

“Someone you should listen to, Johnson,” Poole said. He took Kendra by the arm and guided her away. “Look,” he said in a low voice, “I’m going to call in Homicide. Stick around for a few, and I’ll have you—”

“No.”

“What?”

“I’m not sticking around. This has taken up enough of my evening already. I just wanted to give you a heads-up. Your forensics people can take it from here.”

He stared at her in shock. “You can’t be serious. You came out here just to—”

“Just to keep you from mistaking a murder scene for an accident. Though I guess I shouldn’t blame

you too much. It's probably one of the most unusual murder scenes any of you have ever seen." She glanced back. "Although, like I said, I doubt whether any of these people actually died *here*."

"And this doesn't pique your curiosity just a little bit?"

"Sure. I'll keep up with it in the newspaper. Good luck with your investigation."

Poole frowned. "I can make you stay, you know."

Kendra smiled. "On what grounds? Failure to perform police work on command?"

"What about civic duty?"

"I just did it. I told you everything I know. Good night, Poole."

Kendra turned and moved around the forensics techs crouched behind the BMW.

Dean cast another look at the scene as they walked away. "I know you were just trying to impress me back there."

"Did it work?"

"Of course, but it was totally unnecessary. You had me at 'prison.' You still owe me an explanation for that, you know."

She took a quick look over her shoulder. Poole was still glaring at her. "Later. Right now, we'd better get to your car before Poole has it towed. He isn't very happy with me at the moment."

* * *

THEY DROVE BACK TO KENDRA'S condominium complex in less than fifteen minutes.

"You were amazing," Dean said, as he walked her to the building's front door. "The cops thought so, too. You could see it on their faces."

"Trust me, those expressions can turn sour in a hurry. Especially if they think I'm making them look bad. Poole only wanted me to stick around because he knew his superiors wouldn't have believed that he'd come up with those answers."

He nodded. "I can imagine there would be problems. But why aren't you interested in following up? Seems like a pretty interesting case."

"I already have a job. It's a lot more positive and fulfilling to me than what those people are doing on that bridge tonight."

"Music therapy."

"Yes. I help people. And I conduct research and publish papers that help *others* help people." She unlocked the door. "Anyway, thanks for the ride. I'm sure this wasn't the evening you had in mind."

"It was better." He grinned. "Sure beats first-date small talk."

"Not sure what I can do to top it. You want to quit while we're ahead?"

"No way." He stepped closer to her.

She couldn't deny how likeable she found him. She was happy at that response. She smiled. "Well, you have my number."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. I'm not saying good night until you explain a few things to me. Let's start with my bike. How did you know about that?"

“You have helmet head.”

He ran his hands through his hair. “Impossible. I’ve washed my hair a couple times since the last time I wore a helmet.”

“Not your hair. Your skin. You have a clean tan line around your neck, and an inverted “U” that frames your face. And there’s a slight singe on the inside right leg of those jeans you’re wearing, right about knee level. The Harley Sportster’s rear exhaust pipe would hit you about there every time you have your foot off the pedal at a long stoplight.”

“Just the Sportster?”

“There are others, but that’s probably the most popular one. And the Harley Davidson sunglasses tucked into your shirt clinches it a bit more.”

He laughed and patted the sunglasses dangling from his neckline. “Do you ride?”

“I used to run with a pretty wild crowd, and I sometimes rode with them.” She raised her right pant leg and showed a small burn scar on her inside right calf. “It’s never a good idea to ride a motorcycle in shorts.”

“And here I was thinking you were so brilliant.”

“Well, it only happened once. I’m a fast learner.”

“I have no doubt.”

“And I caught a whiff of Castrol Simple Green on you. That’s how I knew you were doing some degreasing today.”

“Actually, it was yesterday. And I’ve showered since then.”

“Were you wearing those shoes when you were working on it?”

He looked down at his brown walking shoes. “Maybe.”

“And you’d be surprised how long our skin can hold on to odors, shower or no shower. It’s like a big sponge.”

“Okay. And how did you know where I’m from?”

She shrugged. “Your speech. You have a Central Florida dialect, peppered with an adult New England influence.”

He stared at her for a moment. “An adult New England influence?”

“If you’d moved there when you were younger, it would have a different sound. It would have had a different effect on the speech patterns you’ve been practicing since birth. I figured you moved there around college age.”

He nodded. “You’re right. But not quite Ivy League. Boston U. So you’re a linguistics expert, too.”

“Not really. Like you, I’ve met thousands of people in my life. From an early age, I got into the habit of listening and matching what I heard with what I found out about them. When you can’t see, you use what you have.”

He nodded, then paused. “Okay, now tell me what I really want to know.”

“Prison.”

“I’ve taken steps to make sure that period of my life won’t get in the way of my future. I didn’t

think anyone in the city was aware of it, and I'd like to keep it that way."

She tilted her head. "I'll make you a deal. Tell me what you were in for, and I'll tell you how I knew."

"You got it."

She took his left hand and angled it into the entranceway light. "I'm sure almost no one would notice this, but there's a very faint tattoo remnant here, between your thumb and forefinger. You obviously tried to have it removed."

"You're right. Almost no one notices. And if they do, they see that it's a box filled with an X. Like a strike on a bowling score sheet. Not like any prison tattoo I've ever seen."

"And that was your intention when you tattooed over the five dots that were originally there. Five dots. One in the middle representing the prisoner, four more on each corner representing the prison. A pattern that's almost always tattooed on the hand between the thumb and forefinger. It's the placement that gives it away more than anything else."

"How do you know so much about prison tats?"

"Like I said, I used to run with a rough crowd." She looked him in the eye. "Your turn."

He jammed his hands in his pockets and glanced away from her. "Well, you're right. I had a drug problem in grad school, and I got in so deep that I supported my habit by selling some to my fellow students. Really stupid. I went away for thirty months. I got clean, got my Ph.D., and never looked back."

"Except when you look at your hand. There are probably ways to get rid of that tattoo more completely these days."

"It's okay." He held up his hand and looked at it. "Sometimes it's good to remember what an idiot I can be. You know?"

She nodded. "I know."

"So may I still call you?"

Kendra studied him. She liked Dean's forthright manner. No excuses, no tap dancing around the mistakes he had made and clearly regretted. She also appreciated that dry sense of humor and his lack of intimidation when she'd virtually ruined the possibility of a normal evening. Mom was right, he was a good guy. She smiled. "Sure. Call me."

"Great." He kissed her on the cheek, turned, and headed back down the sidewalk toward his car.

* * *

MYATT READJUSTED HIS BINOCULARS as he shifted in the tall grass. He had found a spot that offered him an excellent view of the Cabrillo State Bridge. Close enough to see what was going on, far enough away that he could watch undetected.

He panned across the bridge, taking in the scene.

The wrecked cars.

The smoldering van.

The elegantly dressed corpses.

It was beautiful.

Kendra Michaels's visit had thrown the cops into a tizzy, and the scope of the scene had abruptly changed. They already knew it was more than just an accident. He had expected them to make the discovery later that night or possibly in the morning.

No matter.

If anything, Kendra's appearance was a welcome development. Disappointing that she had left with such an apparent lack of interest, but he'd draw her back in.

The game is on, Kendra.

Even if you don't realize it yet ...

CHAPTER

2

Seaport Village

San Diego

THE SEVEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL WAS squeezing Kendra's hand so tightly that she threatened to cut off her circulation.

Zoey Beale was a new client whom Kendra had only seen twice before. The child showed signs of agoraphobia; she was terrified of crowds and clearly uncomfortable in any environment other than her home. Zoey did, however, enjoy music, which prompted her referral from a psychologist affiliated with Rady's Children's Hospital. Kendra preferred to meet clients in her studio, but she had made an exception in Zoey's case, bringing a guitar to the girl's home to calm her and build trust over the course of the two initial sessions.

Building trust to take her out of her comfort zone.

The little girl nodded even as her hand squeezed tighter. They walked down the embarcadero and approached Seaport Village, an open-air shopping center by the bay. It was a sunny Saturday afternoon, and the place was already jammed with shoppers and lunchtime restaurant patrons.

And scores of street performers. Perfect.

Three African men stood on the sidewalk playing a soothing melody on their wood pipes. Dressed in orange-and-yellow tunics, they swayed in perfect unison to the music.

Kendra stopped fifteen feet away and glanced down at Zoey. The music had captured her attention. She was transfixed, and after a minute, her iron grip loosened. A minute after that, the crowds and unfamiliar surroundings seemed to melt away.

Kendra pointed ahead. "There are more musicians up there. Want to go see?"

Zoey nodded. As they walked together, Kendra sensed less hesitancy from the little girl.

Good. Come on, Zoey. It can be a wonderful world out here. Let me show it to you.

Two young men were using an assortment of inverted plastic industrial food containers as drums, beating them with kitchen utensils. Zoey obviously liked the rhythms and unusual sounds, and she began bopping her head to the beat. Again, her surroundings seem to fade, but faster this time.

This could work.

This could be the key that Zoey needed to—

The little girl shrieked.

A pair of mimes had jumped in front of her and were doing their usual shtick. They were pretending to be marionettes, jerking in time to the performers' drumbeats.

Kendra pulled Zoey close and shielded her from the creepy spectacle. "It's okay, honey. It's all right."

The mimes approached them, putting on cheerful faces that were probably meant to comfort the girl, but only appeared more weird and frightening.

Kendra leaned close to the mimes and pointed up the embarcadero. "Take that shit somewhere else," she hissed. "Now!"

Zoey was crying. Her mother, Danica, who had been watching behind a vendor cart, ran toward them. "It's okay, baby. It's okay." Danica held her daughter close. "Nothing to be afraid about. Everything's okay."

"I'm sorry," Kendra mouthed.

Danica nodded as she guided her daughter toward the parking lot.

Kendra watched them, her fists clenching helplessly.

Dammit.

One step forward, two steps back.

She stood there until Zoey and Danica disappeared from view.

"Can you blame her?"

That voice. That all-too-familiar voice. "Adam Lynch." She turned around to face him.

It was Lynch, all right. Powerful, sexy, dynamic. And he was wearing that movie-star smile that probably melted most women's hearts but just pissed her off. "Hello, Kendra. Good to see you."

Lynch was dressed in slacks, loafers, button-down collar shirt, and a tan jacket. He stood out from the shorts-and-T-shirt crowd who currently inhabited the place. But then he always stood out wherever he was, she thought. It wasn't only the appearance but the aura of magnetism and toughness that he emitted. "Hello, Lynch. My, my, what a surprise."

"Surprise?"

"You know, this doesn't seem like the kind of place you'd go for an afternoon out."

"Really? And where would you see me?"

"Hmm. Maybe playing golf with your fellow government agents, drinking disgusting whiskey drinks, trading war stories, comparing notes on your favorite ammo clips."

He smiled again. "I'd be offended if that wasn't pretty much how I spent last Saturday. You should join us sometime."

"I work on Saturdays."

"Yes, I noticed. Things were going really well with that girl until the mimes showed up." He shrugged. "I could take 'em out for you. You know, for old times' sake."

This made her smile. "There was a time I would have thought you were serious."

"There was a time I *would* have been serious. But that was before you knew me. I've mellowed."

“Not likely.” It had been almost a year since she had last seen Adam Lynch. He was a former FBI agent who lately had been working as a freelance operative of choice for a variety of officials in the U.S. Intelligence community. Lynch had recently recruited her for a case that, although overall successful, reminded her how grim and gut-wrenching that line of work could be. She had no desire for a return engagement.

Lynch leaned against a lamppost. “I heard about your show on the bridge last night.”

“My show? Is that what they’re calling it?”

“It’s what I’m calling it. I wish I’d been there. I love watching you in action with all pistol firing.”

Kendra nodded. He was wearing that infuriatingly charming smile again. It annoyed her that she could see the appeal even if she fought against it. “Why are you here, Lynch? Why in the hell are you spying on me?”

“‘Spying’ is such a nasty word. It implies a nefarious purpose, which couldn’t be further from the truth.”

“Oh, my money is definitely on nefarious. It’s in your DNA.”

“I wasn’t spying. I was waiting for an opportunity to speak to you. I didn’t want to interrupt your session. I know how important your work is to you.”

“It’s everything.”

“I read about your study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*,” he said. “Your music-therapy techniques are being adopted for autism patients.”

“It’s all about helping people make connections with the outside world. Whether it’s autism or Alzheimer’s, music is often the way to reach people and bridge those gulfs. I’ve been designing protocols to assess the effectiveness of various techniques. It’s a young science, but we’ve made a lot of progress.”

“But you did manage to find time to join the Eve Duncan case. I read the file. Amazing investigative work, by the way.”

“I only did that because Eve is a good friend. She needed my help.”

“You helped save her life. And probably a lot of other lives.”

She gestured impatiently. “Why are you here, Lynch?”

“You were right. That accident scene on the bridge last night was staged.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know.”

“The case has been kicked over to the FBI. It has the mark of a serial killer. But you already knew that, didn’t you? That was remarkably similar to another case of yours, an old one.”

“I don’t know if I’d say remarkably similar.”

“I would. Multiple murders made to look like an accident. That was Stanley Veers’s M.O., was it not? He killed at least fourteen people over a three-year period in Houston and Austin.”

“Veers is now on death row in Huntsville Penitentiary.”

“Thanks to you. He killed people for years before anyone realized they were murders, not

accidents. Serial killers usually like the attention, but not him. He created his own private thrill show. He liked the idea of committing murder right under everyone's noses. I'm sure you thought of him when you were at that crime scene last night."

"Of course I did, though it was more ambitious than anything Veers did. The investigators think the killer may have coned off one end for a few minutes and used a truck to block the other. They're still trying to identify possible staging areas. It's a staggering feat to pull off. But unlike Veers, this one wasn't all that concerned with covering his tracks. He wanted the world to know what he had done."

"But not immediately."

"Probably not. He knew the media would report the accident but that it would soon be revealed as something else. He'd get to have his cake and eat it, too."

Lynch nodded. "That's the way the FBI profilers see it."

"And since when did you become the Bureau's errand boy?"

"Errand boy?"

"They sent you to talk me into working with them on this case. Am I right?"

"In a roundabout way. Senior Special Agent Griffin knew better than to contact you directly. You've made your attitude known in no uncertain terms regarding working with them again. He asked some higher-ups in D.C. to have me approach you."

"Roundabout is right. Why did he think you would be any more effective than asking me himself?"

"Because I'm so damn charming and likeable?"

"Next?"

Lynch smiled. "You're not going to make this easy, are you?"

"Of course not."

"I was tasked to talk to you because they thought we worked well together last year."

"Oh. Well, we did."

"You admit it?"

"Of course. Sometimes a sledgehammer is the best tool for the job."

He laughed. "So I'm a sledgehammer. And I guess that makes you a precision-tooled scalpel."

"Well, if you want to push the metaphor ... yes."

"So be it. The Bureau wants a scalpel to help work this case. And not just any scalpel. They want you."

"You said that you were tasked to talk to me. But I thought you only took jobs you wanted to take. You're a freelancer."

"That's correct. I do only take jobs that interest me."

This time there was no high-wattage smile. Just sincerity and maybe a hint of warmth.

Maybe.

Lynch's nickname in the Bureau has been the Puppetmaster, given for his ability to manipulate people and circumstances to his own ends. He had been able to pull off incredible feats by that skill.

Was he manipulating her now? Probably.

He stepped toward her. “Listen, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about working on the case. I was only intrigued with the idea of working with you again. You know I always work alone, but that time with you was different, special. I wanted to do it again. If you tell me to go to hell, I won’t spend another minute on this investigation. I’m actually in the middle of something else right now.”

“Cloak-and-dagger stuff?”

“In a way. But the powers that be thought this was important enough for me to try to bring you in. Aside from your, shall we say, unique skill set, you’re one of the few people who’ve had any success dealing with a killer like this.”

“Only because killers like this are so rare.”

“You know that’s not the only reason. Modesty doesn’t become you, Kendra.” Lynch paused as a pair of Goth-looking street performers walked past, playing their violins. “By the way, who was the guy?”

“What guy?”

“The guy who was tagging along with you last night. I heard something about a blind date, but figured the cops on the scene got that part wrong. Even you aren’t so socially inept as to bring a date to a murder scene.”

“I needed a ride.”

He clicked his tongue. “Oh, Kendra...”

“I think he liked it.”

“Even worse. What kind of ghouls like going to a murder scene?”

“You said you wish you could have seen me there last night.”

“Because this is my job. Professional interest. What does this guy do?”

“He’s a history professor.”

“Definitely a whack job.”

His attitude was very peculiar for Lynch, Kendra thought. “Hmm. Jealous much?”

“Jealous? That’s ridiculous.”

“I thought so, too, considering our relationship. I’m just going with what I see and hear. My ‘unique skill set’ you know.”

“Then you’re slipping.” He laughed. “Have you seen that swimsuit ad that’s been showing up on the sides of buses around town? The one with the Asian woman in the striped bikini?”

“Sure.”

“I’ve actually been dating her.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s true. Her name is Ashley.”

Kendra raised her brows. “Wow. She’s beautiful.”

“Yes.”

“And are you taking her to her high-school prom?”

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