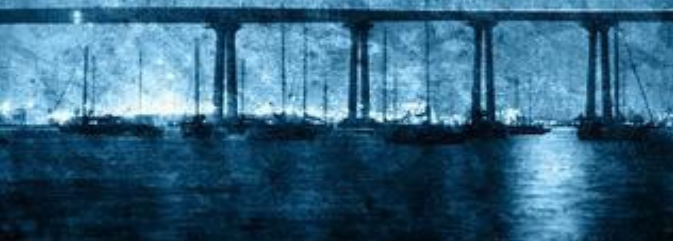


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THE KANSAS CITY STAR

THREAD OF HOPE **JEFF SHELBY**



Thread of Hope

Joe Tyler [1]

Jeff Shelby

(2011)

Rating: ★★☆☆☆

If someone took your child, how soon would you stop looking for her? If someone accused your best friend of a terrible crime, when would you stop defending him?

Seven years after Joe Tyler's daughter Elizabeth was abducted, he hasn't stopped looking for answers, and he

hasn't forgotten the friend who stood by him as he lost his wife, his home, and his career in his search. Now he's been brought back to San Diego by the news that this friend has been arrested for beating up a teenage girl—a girl not much older than Elizabeth would be now.

Joe is convinced Chuck Winslow is innocent, but Chuck is in a coma and can't explain what happened. And the more Joe hears about what Chuck's been up to in the years he's been gone, the less Joe recognizes his old friend. To find out the truth, he will have to face his ex-wife, his former bosses, and a hometown full of wealth, lies, and illicit privilege. When Chuck's accuser goes

missing, Joe must decide where his loyalties truly lie.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

THREAD OF HOPE

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Books by Jeff Shelby

The Joe Tyler Novels

THREAD OF HOPE

THREAD OF SUSPICION

The Noah Braddock Novels

KILLER SWELL

WICKED BREAK

LIQUID SMOKE

DRIFT AWAY

The Deuce Winters Novels
(Under the pseudonym Jeffrey
Allen)

STAY AT HOME DEAD

POPPED OFF

For Hannah Elizabeth

ONE

Bruises blossomed on Chuck Winslow's cheeks, explosions of red and black and purple staining his skin. A tube snaked into his mouth, held in place with small strips of clear tape. His eyelids were closed, fluttering every few seconds. An IV line ran into a thick vein in his left arm. Both of his wrists were encased in splints and wrapped with flesh colored bandages. The machines around the bed beeped and hissed, Chuck's wide chest rising and

falling with the rhythm of the noise.

“Fractured skull,” the doctor said from the other side of Chuck’s hospital bed. “Six broken ribs. Both wrists are fractured.” He flipped the pages on the chart in his hands. “Hasn’t been conscious since he was found. There’s some swelling around the brain. We’ll wait to see if it subsides before we do anything else.” He let the pages fall back into place, his demeanor measured and distant, as if he’d had the same conversation a thousand times. “Anything else I can answer?”

I shook my head.

The doctor hung the chart on the foot of the bed and hustled out of the room, nodding at me as he exited.

Chuck Winslow was still big. Six-foot-four packed with muscle. While many men let that muscle soften when they entered their forties, Chuck appeared to have added another layer since I'd last seen him. His forearms were thick, his shoulders wide. There were fine wrinkles around his eyes, deeper lines across his wide forehead. His thick brown hair was cut short, peppered with gray, and a jagged red gash splayed across his left temple, out of place and ugly.

“I didn’t know who else to call,” Lauren Tyler said.

She was sitting in the far corner of the room, next to the long rectangular window that peered out over Glorietta Bay, the small inlet between downtown San Diego and Coronado Island. Her legs were crossed, her right hand tugging gently at a strand of her auburn hair.

“How’d you find out?” I asked.

“Jane Wiley called me.” She let go of the hair. “She’s representing him. Her card was in his wallet when he was brought in, so the hospital contacted her. She found my number in his cell, the last

one he called.”

I glanced out the window. More buildings had been added to the downtown skyline since I’d last been home and they glimmered in the late day sunlight. “You talked to him before all this happened?”

She nodded, the small silver hoops in her earlobes bobbing forward. “I think it was the day before he was arrested.”

“Why was Chuck calling you?”

She stared at me for a moment, then smiled the same smile I saw a lot before she divorced me. The one that was sad

and frustrated and a lot of other things. “He checks up on me, Joe. Just to make sure I’m okay. Nothing more.”

The tone of her voice combined with that smile snapped me back eight years in time to when her voice and smile were much different. We weren’t standing in a hospital room. We were walking on the beach on the other side of the island, a couple of blocks from our home. Our lives were normal. She was a lawyer, I was a cop. We were married, had a family. We were happy. Things were good.

“Are you still looking for her?” Lauren asked, as if she could sense that I

had mentally left the room for a moment.

I shrugged, not having an uncomplicated answer to give her.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she said. She paused. “He looks, too, you know.”

“Chuck does?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

She looked at me like she’d never known me. “For you, Joe. For me, too, I guess, but mostly for you. He misses you.”

It was strange to hear that I'd been missed. I'd been in my own vacuum for awhile, not thinking about how my absence might affect others.

“He hasn't seen or heard from you in three years,” Lauren said. “Nobody around here has. He knew that finding her would be the only thing that might bring you back.”

I couldn't tell whether she was angry about that or just stating a fact.

I gestured at my friend in the bed. “Not the only thing.”

Lauren stood, ran her hands down the front of her jeans. “To be honest, I doubt Chuck would’ve believed you would’ve come even for this. I didn’t think you would.” She folded her arms across her chest. “I’m still surprised to see you here.”

I didn’t know how to respond, so I didn’t try. “How did it happen?”

She glanced at Chuck. “I’m not sure. When Jane called me, she just said that he’d been found on the beach. I’d imagine she knows more.”

“Why was he arrested?” I asked.

Lauren wrapped her arms tighter around herself. “I don’t know that, either. I didn’t even know he’d been arrested or that he was out on bail until Jane gave me a quick rundown. She just said he was arrested two days ago. She didn’t say why.”

Chuck and I hadn’t spoken in half a decade. I didn’t pretend to still know him, but finding him in a hospital bed was a shock to my system. I wasn’t sure how he thought of me, but I still thought of him as the best friend I’d ever had. It hurt to see him lying there, motionless, beaten to the point where he might not wake up.

“Jane was going to try and find you herself,” Lauren said.

“Me? Why?”

“Chuck asked her to.” She forced another smile onto her lips. “When Jane called me, she asked if I knew how to get ahold of you.” The smile tightened. “I wasn’t sure how to answer that. But I told her I’d call you. Told her it would be awhile before you responded and that I didn’t know where you were, but that I was pretty sure you’d get back to me.”

“Sorry,” I said, averting her eyes and shuffling my feet. “I should’ve...”

“It’s okay,” she interrupted. “Really. I think it’s better that I don’t know where you are, what you’re doing. It’s easier for me.”

She was staring at me and I could see the question in her eyes. She could say that she thought it was easier for her, but there was still a tiny fragment of her that wanted to know.

“There’s nothing new, Lauren,” I said. “I would’ve called you in a second if there was. You know that.”

Something flickered in her eyes, something I couldn’t read. She unfolded her arms. “I’m gonna go.” Her fingers

brushed my arm as she passed. “It’s good to see you. I’m glad you’re okay.”

It was good to see her, too, but I didn’t say that. Just like when our marriage was in its final crumbling months, I couldn’t get the right words out of my mouth.

“Did she say why, Lauren?” I asked. “Did Jane say why Chuck wanted to find me?” I looked at Chuck, then Lauren. “I mean, if it was about his arrest, I don’t see how I could help. I’m not a cop anymore. And it’s not like anyone around here would be glad to see me.”

She stood in the doorway, her hand on

the door, her eyes moving from Chuck to me. “All I know is that he told her you would know what to do.”

TWO

“Never thought I’d see you again, Joe Tyler,” Jane Wiley said, looking me up and down. “This can’t be much fun for you. How are you?”

We were in the public area down on the main floor of the hospital. Jane had gone to high school with Chuck and me and, like most people we went to school with, she hadn’t left Coronado, unable to pull herself away from the idyllic setting. I had left, but not because I’d

really wanted to.

“I’m fine. How are you, Jane?”

“Be better if my client hadn’t gotten the shit beat out of him.”

“Why exactly is he your client?”

She pointed at the two chairs next to us and we sat.

She shifted into lawyer mode, her expression growing serious. “Physical assault on an eighteen year old female. She’s a high school senior.”

“That’s not funny, Jane.”

“I’m serious.”

I paused. “Then it’s garbage.”

“Victim’s father filed the complaint,” she explained. “The girl backed it up with a statement. And with her appearance. She’s pretty banged up. There was more than enough to charge him.”

I hadn’t been around him for years but I knew that Chuck wouldn’t have beaten up a teenage girl. Couldn’t have.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“Said he didn’t do it,” she said, frustration showing in her bunched up eyebrows. “Then he shut down and asked me to find you.” She studied me. “Which, by the way, wasn’t the easiest thing I’ve ever tried to do. If I hadn’t run across Lauren’s number in his phone, I’d still be looking. Where the hell have you been?”

“You think the charge is solid?” I asked.

Annoyance flashed through her eyes. But it passed quickly. “As solid as you’d expect. He knew the girl. There was some corroboration by some of the girl’s friends that they were spending

time together. Alone.”

“She said, he said,” I said.

“Pretty much. The bruises tend to back it up,” she said.

“He didn’t do it.”

“Gonna need more than that, Joe.”

“So you can deal it down?” I asked.
“Cut its legs off and turn it into a misdemeanor?”

Her cheeks flushed and irritation rippled through her small, compact body. “Fuck you. I’ve already done ten

times more for him than some P.D. would've done by trying to dig up your sorry ass. Because Chuck's a friend. You wanna work on your bad lawyer clichés, I've got plenty of other clients who want my time. I couldn't care less." Her eyes narrowed. "And you're the last person I'd expect to be throwing around bullshit accusations."

She was right, but I didn't apologize. "What happened to him?"

She eyed me carefully before she spoke. "They're calling it a random attack. Maybe a robbery gone bad. Seems he was running on the beach and got jumped. No wits, of course, because

that would be too easy. He's been unconscious since he was found."

It would've taken more than one guy to bring down Chuck. "Is he gonna be alright? Doctor just gave me the basics."

"It's the skull fracture that's the issue," she said. "There's some swelling and bleeding in and around the brain. Assuming the swelling and bleeding subside, he should be okay. But he won't be alert until that happens."

Like the doctor, she didn't state the obvious, that the swelling and bleeding might not subside.

“You’re an investigator now?” Jane asked. “That’s what Lauren said.”

“Not officially. I’m not licensed or anything.”

“But it’s what you do, right? Mostly cases involving kids?”

I glanced past her toward the front doors. A man and a very pregnant woman walked in, glancing at each other, nervous smiles on their faces. She whispered something to him and they giggled. The man kissed her on the cheek as they walked past us toward the information desk.

I shifted on the sofa. “Lauren tell you that, too?”

She shrugged. “You know how it is. I hear things every so often. I would’ve found you. Crossing paths with Lauren just sped up the process. But I did find other bits and pieces. Seems like you’ve been able to help some people.”

The first few years after I left Coronado and San Diego, I had trouble looking people in the eye when they said something similar. I didn’t know how to take the compliment. But I’d finally gotten past it. I met Jane’s gaze. “I do alright.”

An uncomfortable look settled on her face and I knew what was coming. “I’m sorry, Joe. For everything you went through. Both you and Lauren. I’m sorry.”

I’d heard it so many times that I was numb to reacting. I responded automatically. “Thank you.”

She opened the satchel on the ground next to her feet, pulled out a file and leveled her eyes with mine. “But I have to say, I’m not sure having you attached to this is going to help Chuck. Your name comes with a lot of baggage.”

“I know.”

“And more than a few people here still think...”

“I’m here to help Chuck,” I said. “And I could give a shit what anyone here thinks of me.”

She kept her eyes on me, pursing her lips, like she was trying to make some sort of decision. Finally she shrugged and handed me the file folder. “That’s what I’ve got. It’s not much, at least for coming up with a defense. Nothing much will happen until he’s in better shape. It buys us some time. Keep me in the loop and I’ll do the same.” Jane stood and

hesitated for a moment, her eyes looking past me. “People already know, Joe.”

“Know what?”

She pulled the satchel over her shoulder and refocused her eyes on me. “I grabbed a sandwich over at Ike’s before I came over to meet you. And goddamn if half the restaurant didn’t already know. No idea how that shit happens, but it does. This place is worse than a girl’s bathroom in a middle school.”

I stood, the folder in my hand, uneasiness filling my chest. “Know what, Jane?”

She raised an eyebrow. “They
already know you’re back.”

THREE

I walked out of the hospital. Palm trees waved in the breeze, the smell of the ocean riding the air as if to remind me I was in a place that used to be home. Massive aircraft carriers hulked beneath the arching blue bridge on the other side of the bay, anchored to the south end of downtown. I sat down on a stone bench just off the main doors and opened the file Jane gave me.

The complaint had been filed on

behalf of eighteen-year-old Meredith Jordan. It said the contact between her and Chuck had come as a result of their relationship at Coronado High School. And it said Chuck beat the crap out of Meredith Jordan.

I stopped reading. Two questions immediately popped into my head. What was Chuck doing on a school campus? And more specifically, what was he doing at our alma mater? He wasn't a teacher or administrator last I knew and I was willing to bet that hadn't changed.

As unlikely as it was to find him on any school campus, Coronado High School's would've been the last one on

the list. We spent four years there and while I hadn't minded high school, Chuck thought it contained all the charm of a toxic dump. He had clashed with teachers, coaches and our classmates and barely managed to graduate. He'd skipped the graduation ceremony and as far as I knew he hadn't had anything to do with the school since he walked off the campus more than two decades prior.

He'd spent most of his adult life working construction. He started out as an employee for a homebuilder, but didn't care much for taking orders and building tract homes. He'd gotten his general contractor's license and built a small but thriving business of his own

when I'd left Coronado. He was happy doing it.

I flipped quickly through the papers in the file until I found what I was looking for. Five photos were clipped to the back flap of the folder. Meredith Jordan was a pretty girl beneath the bruises. Long brown hair. Two perfectly brown oval eyes above a slender nose. Cheekbones that looked magazine cover worthy. At least, before someone had used her as a sparring partner.

There was a wide cut across the bridge of her nose. Deep purplish rings encircled the pretty eyes. Small yellow bruises dotted her cheeks. Red lines that

resembled fingerprints snaked around the middle of her neck. Another cut at the right corner of her mouth gave her the macabre appearance of smiling when she was doing anything but.

The damage on her face wasn't from a fall or a car accident or any other benign occurrence. Someone had teed her up and swung away. Choked her for an encore.

I clipped the photos together again and paged through the rest of the file. Dates, descriptions, times. Nothing damning one way or another. The photos were enough.

I turned the pages again, looking for the girl's address, seeing if I might recognize it. I was surprised to find two. One in Coronado and one up in Rancho Santa Fe. I wondered if the girl's parents were divorced or if they had bought their way in to one of the best public high schools in the country. I closed the file and laid it down next to me.

A light fog was rolling in from the south, a thin layer of moisture clinging to the air. Lauren and I used to sit on our back deck with a bottle of wine, watching the fog drift in from the other side of the island across San Diego Harbor. We'd talk about dinner plans

and friends and vacations and work and family and other things you talked about when you were drunk on a cheap bottle of Merlot. Things that held promise, provided excitement.

I picked up the file and stood. I took a deep breath, let the salty air filter into my nose and lungs. Returning to Coronado was going to bring back memories. I knew that before I'd hopped on the plane. If I was going to help Chuck, I'd be fighting those memories the whole way and I wasn't sure I had it in me.

As I gazed at the now gray-looking buildings across the bay, murky behind

the fog, I felt no promise. No
excitement. No hope.

FOUR

The Jordan address in Coronado was clearly a buy-in.

On a seven-and-a-half-square-mile island, inhabited by just 26,000 people, there was only one high school. The classes were small, the teachers rarely left, and the wealthy parents on Coronado were very involved. It was a good high school, perhaps the best public one in the state of California. As such, people wanted their kids to attend

Coronado High School as much for the education as for the status.

But you had to live on the island to be eligible to enroll. With a limited amount of real estate and a median home price that edged closer to a million bucks every year, most folks just stared across the bay with envy.

Most folks.

The Jordan address on Coronado was a small bungalow south of the park on B Avenue. Maybe twelve-hundred square feet with a flat roof, windows without curtains, an uninspired lawn and an empty driveway. I knew it was vacant

and didn't even bother getting out of my car.

The only way around the tough enrollment boundaries for the high school was to buy in. The few homes that came up on the market were usually older, unexciting homes. Most people with the money to afford them wouldn't consider actually living in them, and the lots were too small to rebuild. So they would buy the home to get the Coronado address and send their child to the island schools but continue living elsewhere. The school district frowned upon it and did their best to ensure that it didn't happen often.

But sometimes it did and it was clear to me that the Jordan family had bought their way in to the high school.

I plugged the Jordan's Rancho Santa Fe address into my rental car's GPS and headed over the bridge to the mainland. Headed north on I-5, through downtown, past the airport, Sea World and the backside of La Jolla. The area had continued to grow rapidly during my absence, clusters of homes built into nearly every valley and canyon along the coast, like Monopoly pieces on an already crowded board.

When I hit Del Mar, I exited the freeway at Via De La Valle and turned

east. The GPS led me well back into the rolling canyons of Rancho Santa Fe, the mansions going from small to large to humongous the further east you went. The Jordan address was about as east as you could go, an indicator that whoever Meredith Jordan was, her family could afford a vacant home on Coronado. A few twists and turns into the canyon and I'd located the Jordan home.

Actually, I'd located their front gates. I couldn't see the house from where I stood. There was a small intercom just to the left of the drive and in front of the ornate iron gates. I got out of the rental and pushed the call button. After a pause, it crackled to life and a smooth

female voice asked “Yes, sir?”

I glanced up and saw two small security cameras mounted on top of the gates rotate in my direction. “My name’s Joe Tyler. I’d like to speak to Mr. Jordan.”

“Mr. Jordan doesn’t receive business calls at his home, sir.”

“I’m working on his daughter’s assault case.”

Another pause, longer this time. “Please wait there, Mr. Tyler.”

I nodded at the cameras and stepped

back to the car. I stood on the tips of my toes and tried to get a glimpse of anything over the small, grassy hill behind the gates but failed.

Five minutes later, headlights flashed in the darkness and a white BMW 750 pulled up on the other side of the gates. I squinted into the bright halogen lamps. A tall blond woman stepped out from the driver's side, pointed a remote at the gates and the huge iron fixtures began to slide to the sides.

She was around thirty, her hair cut short, almost to the point of looking like a boy's. She wore black cotton sweat pants that flared at her ankles, the kind

that usually had some word printed across the rear end. A matching jacket was zipped up to her neck. The stripes on her running shoes glowed in the dark as she crossed through the gate opening.

She held out her hand. “Gina Coleman. I work for Mr. Jordan.”

I took her hand and before I could say anything, she jerked me toward her, swept my legs out from under me with one of hers and dropped me to the ground on my back. The air whooshed out of my lungs and bright colors flashed in my eyes. She dropped down, spearing my chest with her knee, and dug a thumbnail deep into the skin just below

my right eye.

“You move and I’ll bury my thumb directly into your eyeball,” she said, her other hand expertly sweeping my body.

I held still, more irritated than afraid.

She finished the sweep and refocused her eyes on mine. Up close, I could see that her hair was a natural yellow-blond, her skin golden-tan, her eyes the color of fresh-cut green grass. Very attractive if she hadn’t been threatening to blind me.

She increased the pressure just a fraction below my eye, blurring my

sight. “Why are you out here?”

I was bigger than she was and I thought I could toss her weight off of me, but that thumb was too close to my eye and I appreciated the ability to see. “I told you. I’m working on his daughter’s case.”

“And you just show up here at night, unannounced?” She kept her voice low, relaxed, like she was perusing the items on a menu.

“I just got into town,” I said, moving my eyes to her thumb. Her nail was painted purple. “A friend of mine was arrested and I’m trying to help him.”

The pressure beneath my eye let up a fraction. “Your friend is Winslow?”

“Yeah.”

She blinked several times. “He tell you to come out here?”

“No. He can’t talk. He’s unconscious in the hospital. But where else would I start?”

Something flashed through her eyes. “The hospital?”

“With his head cracked open.”

The pressure let up again. “You’re serious?”

“Yeah.”

She removed her nail from my face and stood. She offered her hand to help me up. I ignored her and got myself up.

“He’s really hurt?”

I brushed off my jeans. “They found him on the beach. He’s in pretty bad shape.”

She started to say something, then stopped. She rubbed at her chin, her mouth drawn tight with concern. She

glanced at me and the conflict in her expression was gone.

“You’ve got some guts showing up here and representing the other side,” she said.

“And you’ve got one helluva way of greeting visitors,” I said, rubbing the throbbing area beneath my eye. I could feel the tiny, crescent-shaped impression her nail had made in my skin.

“It’s my job,” she said.

“To threaten people who say hello on the intercom? I didn’t force my way in. You came down to meet me.”

“I’m Mr. Jordan’s security director. We aren’t comfortable with people making their way out to his property, particularly when we’re unprepared for their arrival.”

“Well, I’m trying to do my job, too,” I said. “I’m an investigator.”

She looked over my shoulder at the car. “You got a gun in the car?”

There was no reason to lie. “Yes. In the trunk, in a backpack.”

She nodded. “Okay. Just wanted to see if you’d be up front about it.” She

studied me for a moment. “He won’t talk to you.”

“I’ll hang around until he does.”

“Then I’ll be forced to hurt you again.”

“But this time, I’ll know its coming.”

She smiled. “Won’t make any difference, honey. And I’ve got backup.”

She was confident. She wasn’t used to losing. And it worked in her favor.

“Look, I don’t want to fight with you,”

I said, not wanting to tangle with her again at that moment. “Chuck Winslow is a friend and I’m trying to help him. The complaint lists Mr. Jordan’s daughter as the one who filed the complaint. I understand why he might not want me to speak to her. She’s a minor. I get that. But, at the very least, I’m going to need to speak with him.”

She studied me, her eyes intense, brighter than the headlights on the BMW. “You used to live here, right? In San Diego? You were a cop?”

My gut jumped. “Yeah.”

“You’re the one he talked about.”

“Who?”

“Chuck.”

“You know him?”

She folded her arms across her chest and something changed in her eyes. Sympathy mixed with curiosity. I knew immediately that she knew Chuck and that she knew about me.

“I’ll talk to Mr. Jordan and see if he’ll agree to speak to you,” she said. “But don’t count on it.”

“Alright.”

“Where are you staying?” she asked.

She wasn't going to tell me how she knew Chuck. I let it go for the time being, pulled a card out of my pocket and handed it to her. “You can reach me at that number.”

She took the card and studied it for a moment before fixing her gaze on me. “I'll call you tomorrow.”

She slipped into the BMW, the gates slid to a close and she whipped a U-turn, disappearing into the darkness.

FIVE

I retraced my original route into Rancho Santa Fe and returned to the highway. Gina Coleman had asked where I was staying. I wouldn't have told her even if I had known, but the truth was I hadn't found a place to stay yet. I'd gone straight from the airport to the hospital to both of the Jordan homes.

I drove south out of Del Mar and back toward downtown. Staying on the island was expensive and something I didn't

want to do, regardless of money. It had been hard enough to drive over the bridge the first time, returning to a town that did nothing but bring my stomach to boil. But Chuck was there, Meredith Jordan went to high school there and I figured that at least being close would save me some time. I didn't have to stay on Coronado, but I knew I'd be spending time there.

I settled for one of the hotels across the bay from the island and checked into a room on the fifteenth floor. I threw my backpack in the closet and sat down on the edge of the bed. Twelve hours prior, I'd been napping in a small apartment in Biloxi, Mississippi, two blocks from the

Gulf of Mexico. I'd been in Biloxi for almost three months, enjoying the quiet and isolation and the walks along the shores of the Gulf. No one had come calling for my help recently and I was happy not to give it.

But Biloxi started to close in around me, as I found all places eventually did. Too much time by myself, with nothing to focus on other than the past. When my cell phone chirped and woke me from the nap, I was grateful for the interruption in what had become my life.

Lauren's voice had startled me. I hadn't spoken to her in close to a year and for a moment, for an excruciatingly

long moment, I thought that this was the phone call that I'd been hoping for for nearly seven years. Maybe we had an answer and after I said hello, I realized I was holding my breath. Lauren probably knew that and very quickly explained why she was calling. I was ripped hard back into reality.

The thought of returning to San Diego created a dull ache in my gut. There were so many reasons not to go back and yet as soon as she told me about Chuck, I said yes, told her that I was on my way. I had cut everyone out of my life and I knew he was the one person that hadn't held it against me. He understood. He'd stood by me in more ways than any

friend should ever be asked to and I owed him.

Things change quickly.

I walked over to the window. A ferry boat was crossing the bay to the island and lights freckled the bridge over to the place I'd called home for thirty-plus years.

I wasn't comfortable being back. My plan was to never come back because I didn't think that anything good would come of it. It wouldn't repair my marriage or my reputation, and it wouldn't bring my daughter back. The only thing I could count on was seeing

the past rush at me head-on. I stared out that hotel window and I could feel all of it bearing down on me, with no clue how to stop it.

SIX

Not ready for sleep, I went down to the main floor of the hotel and walked outside toward Seaport Village, a collection of shops and restaurants strung along the north end of the bay where PCH met Harbor Drive. I bought fish and chips from a walk-up window and found a small table near a fountain, trying to straighten out Chuck and the high school and Meredith Jordan in my head as I ate.

The complaint stated that Chuck knew Meredith through their contact at the high school. Maybe Chuck had some sort of mid-life crisis and decided to become a teacher. I doubted it, but anything was possible. Gina Coleman definitely knew Chuck, but I didn't know if that was through Meredith or another avenue. Coleman was the first link of any kind I'd found and I'd go back to her soon if I had no luck elsewhere.

A couple sat down at the table next to mine with their daughter. She looked to be about seven or eight. She was small for her age and struggled awkwardly to get into her chair. The family had purchased fish and chips as well and the

little girl was soaking the fries in ketchup, then jamming them into her mouth. She turned to me with stained lips and grinned.

My stomach jolted and I stood, gathering up my trash without returning the little girl's smile.

I walked through the village to Buster's, a beach-themed bar and grill with old longboards on the walls. I didn't want to go sit in my quiet hotel room. I found a corner stool at the far end of the bar with a window that looked out over the boardwalk toward Marina Park. I bummed a piece of paper and pen from the bartender and started

making notes on what little I knew about Chuck and Meredith. I was on my second diet soda when the guy two stools down from me motioned in my direction.

“You’ve got an admirer,” he said.

The guy was bigger and younger than me and looked like hell. Unshaven, black circles around his eyes. A tan that was fading.

“Excuse me?”

He motioned to the window. “Hang on. He’s coming around again. He’s watching you.”

Ten seconds later, I saw who he meant. A guy about six feet tall in jeans and a blue button-down walked past the window closest to me. He was subtle outside the restaurant, not really looking my way, not really doing anything. But there was a quick glance in my direction.

“That’s the third time he’s been by,” the guy at the bar said. “He’s circling. And he’s looking at you.”

“Maybe he’s looking at you.”

The guy finished his beer and stood. “If he was looking at me, I’d have

already broken his arm.” He kept his eyes on me as he stuck his hand in the pocket of his shorts. “He’s looking at you.” He pulled out a handful of bills and laid them on the bar. “But, whatever.”

The bartender came over and shoved the bills back in the guy’s direction. “On me, Noah.” The bartender placed his hands on the bar. “I heard what happened. I’m sorry, man. Liz was...”

The guy shoved the bills back toward the bartender and pointed at me. “Buy his drinks then.” The guy hesitated. “And if I don’t see you for awhile, take it easy.”

The guy glanced at me, the circles around his eyes darker now, then left.

I should've thanked him, but now I was focused on who might be watching me.

I waved at the bartender and kept an eye on the window, waiting for the fourth pass. The bartender hustled over.

“You’re good, man,” he said. “He got you.”

I pulled my wallet out of the back pocket of my jeans anyway and unfolded it, looking for a couple of bills to tip the

guy. Several quarters fell out of the fold and tumbled to the floor.

“Dammit,” I muttered, laying my wallet on the bar and bending over to pick up the quarters.

“Cute kid,” the bartender said to me when I was upright again.

“Excuse me?”

He pointed to my wallet. “She’s cute.”

The wallet had opened flat on the bar top and the picture of the young girl in the tattered plastic sleeve was staring

back at me. Plain gray background, her small oval faced framed with long yellow-blond hair. Her smile was awkward and missing two teeth, her head tilted fractionally to her left. It was taken the second week of second grade when life was still fair.

I fished quickly for cash from the back fold of the wallet, fighting a surge of nausea in my gut.

“How old is she?” he asked, leaning in to get a better look. “Seven or so?”

I found a ten-dollar bill, tossed it on the bar, folded up the wallet and shoved it in my pocket.

“Sixteen,” I said as I walked away, my steps heavy and forced. “She’d be sixteen.”

SEVEN

I was wrong. It wasn't a guy that was keeping an eye on me.

It was a kid.

I stood in the lobby of Buster's, fishing for a peppermint out of a small tin bowl, waiting for my friend to pass by. A minute later, he walked quickly past the front of the restaurant, not even glancing at the doors I was standing behind, probably assuming I was still at

the bar. I stepped out through the doors and followed him.

He turned at the far corner of the restaurant and it was clear to me he had no idea what he was doing. He'd made nothing but circles around the restaurant. When he turned the corner, I caught a better glimpse of his face. A bit of stubble dotted his chin, but his cheeks were a little red and there were no lines around the eyes. No way he was more than eighteen.

He came around to the boardwalk-side of the restaurant and I stayed a good distance behind him, tucked in behind an older couple wearing matching

Hawaiian shirts. When the kid got to the window at the bar, he glanced over, did a double take, then slowed, realizing I'd moved from my spot inside at the bar.

I slipped out from behind the couple to the wall that ran on the other side of the walk and half-turned, like I was looking at the birds feeding down by the water. I was parallel to him and he was still in my peripheral vision.

He stepped closer to the window, clearly wondering where the hell I'd gone. I moved forward, staying out of his line of vision. He hesitated for a moment, then broke into a pace just short of a jog as he circled the restaurant one

more time. I followed.

He came around to the window at the bar again and pulled out a cell phone. I stayed further behind him this time, out at the boardwalk railing, sidling up next to a group of teenage boys who were comparing skateboards.

My friend spun slowly in a circle, talking rapidly on the cell, gesturing, frustrated.

I thought about just walking up to him, surprising him and seeing what his response was. But if I did that, I wouldn't get any idea of who he was talking to or why he was following me.

Patience wasn't my strongest character quality, but I summoned what little I did have to see if I could learn a bit more.

He folded up the phone and headed west toward the Harbor House and the park that jutted out into the bay, dodging couples and tourists on the crowded boardwalk. I kept my distance, moving behind him. He wasn't looking around any longer, just seemed to be aiming for a new location.

The road into and out from the park was clogged with traffic and I was afraid I'd lose him, as he could've easily jumped into a car and sped off. I picked up the pace and was only about

fifty feet behind him as he crossed the busy road and walked over to the west side of the village.

I slowed, relieved that he wasn't looking for a ride and watched him stop as he came up behind the Harbor House.

He was joined by another kid about his age, shorter, with a baseball cap on backwards, shorts hanging below his knees and a bright blue T-shirt that had "Coronado Wrestling" written in white letters across the front. The shirt looked two sizes too small across the kid's broad chest.

They both sort of shrugged and turned,

heading for the park.

I'd used up my patience.

I angled back, still on the opposite side of the road, then slid in behind a group of college students and crossed the street, about ten feet in front of my followers as we headed right for them. I separated from the group just as we all hit the sidewalk and stepped out in front of my two new friends. Their eyes went wide.

“Hey guys,” I said. “Looking for me?”

EIGHT

The one that had been following me looked at his friend, then back to me. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“What’s your deal, mister?” the shorter one said, his face screwing up with agitation.

“My deal is your pal was following me.”

“Get out of our way,” the shorter one said.

I stood there. They stood there.

“Here’s the way it’s gonna go, guys.” I stepped in closer, looking at the taller one because he seemed less sure of their position. “All three of us know you were following me. I have no problem with that. As long as you tell me why. If you wanna act like nothing happened, that’s fine too. We can keep walking until we find a nice quiet spot and then I’ll make you tell me.

“We weren’t following you,” the tall

one said, unconvincingly.

“I saw you with a beer in your hand in the bar,” I said. “That’s illegal.”

The tall one’s face pinched together, looking at me like I was crazy.

“Bullshit,” the short one said. “He didn’t drink anything.”

“See? I can lie too.”

Their faces reddened and I tried to seize the moment. “Right now. One of you starts talking or I’m gonna kick both your asses. Right now.”

The taller one took a step back, clearly the weaker of the two. “Okay, okay.”

“Jesus, Matt,” the other one said.

“Hey, this was your idea, Derek,” Matt fired back at his friend.

“Now I got names,” I said. “Derek and Matt. We’re off to a good start.” I looked at Matt. “You were following me. Why?”

“We saw you outside the gates at Meredith’s house,” Matt said.

Derek winced, shaking his head.

I knew my way around San Diego. It wasn't like going to a city I was unfamiliar with. I didn't have to think about where I was going. Apparently, I'd been too comfortable navigating the streets of the city to pay attention to the rearview mirror.

“We wanted to see where you were going,” Matt said, then pointed at Derek. “*He* wanted to see.”

Derek scowled again, then looked at me. “You’re friends with him, right?”

“With who?”

“With that asshole that fucked Meredith,” he spat. “He fucked her and then he fucked her up so she wouldn’t tell.”

His words were like a kick to my shins. Chuck slept with Meredith? No way in hell did I believe that. Derek’s anger was real, though, and his statement bothered me.

“Yeah, he’s my friend,” I said. “I’m an investigator.”

“Yeah, I know,” Derek said. “We heard that when you were talking with Mr. Jordan’s security chick. And you’re working for Coach Winslow.”

I blinked my eyes a couple of times, clearing my head, making sure I'd heard him right. "Coach Winslow?"

His face tightened again, irritated. "Yeah. He never should've come to our school."

I pointed at Derek's T-shirt. "He coaches at Coronado?"

Matt nodded, just wanting the interrogation to end. But Derek cocked his head at me, unsure of me now. "I thought you were friends with him?"

"I am."

He nodded, a sly grin creeping onto his face. “Well, for a friend, you don’t seem to know shit.”

Couldn’t argue with that.

Derek lifted his chin at Matt. “Come on.”

Matt stood still, not sure what to do.

“He’s not gonna do anything,” Derek said, turning back to me. “You’re not gonna do a thing.”

“Sure about that?”

He nodded, confident. “Yeah, I am. Go ahead. Start kicking our asses, like you said. Let’s see what happens.” His eyes swept the area. “Lotta people around here right now.”

He was right. I wasn’t going to start smacking around a couple of high school kids in the middle of a crowd, particularly when they hadn’t done anything really wrong.

“Why were you following me?” I asked again, bringing the conversation full circle.

Derek grabbed Matt by the arm and pulled him past me. Matt looked down

at the ground, refusing to meet my eyes. Derek, on the other hand, was happy to sneer at me as they went past me. I did nothing.

NINE

I went back to my hotel room for an uneasy night of sleep, my mind bouncing from Chuck lying in a hospital bed, to two punk kids tailing me, to the phrase “Coach Winslow,” to knowing I was going to have cross back over to the island the next morning.

Chuck always did his own thing and had ever since I’d known him in high school. We were as close as friends could be, but not in a dependent way.

And while there was now a fracture in our relationship, I still felt like I had a good handle on who he was. Hearing that he was a coach struck me as odd, but hearing that he slept with a teenage girl struck me as flat out fiction.

I had zero doubt the charges against him were crap. He did a lot of stupid things but he wouldn't sleep with an underage kid. Not in a million years. But the fact that he now seemed to be doing other things that I wouldn't have expected had my mind spinning.

I got up the following morning and, after a light breakfast, headed back over the bridge to the island.

There is nothing spectacular looking about Coronado High School. Originally built in 1912, it still occupies the same location off of D Avenue where it was initially established. It had slowly grown to a four-block campus extending west toward H Avenue, a neat rectangle of small two-story Spanish style stucco buildings dotted with palm trees and striped with long medians of green grass. I knew that the school had undergone some capital improvements—refurbished classrooms, a new library, an entirely separate arts center—but from the exterior, it was the same school I'd attended nearly twenty-five years earlier.

There was no school parking lot and cars ringed the streets around the campus. It was like a convention of expensive cars. BMWs, Land Rovers, Saabs and a few Porsches lined the curbs. Even though most of the students lived within walking distance, the kids at Coronado knew how to get to school.

Students were hanging around aimlessly on the shallow steps in front of the administrative building. They didn't seem to notice that I was there, that I was older than they were and that I wasn't dressed as well. It was Abercrombie and Fitch everywhere, like the catalog had come to life, complete

with the models. Tan skin, shiny hair, expensive jewelry, boys and girls who looked twenty-five rather than seventeen.

As old as the school was, Lana McCauley seemed nearly as old. She'd been there when I was a student and she was still there when I walked in that morning.

“Joseph Tyler,” she said, smiling.
“Class of ’88.”

Despite my conflicted feelings about why I was back on campus, I smiled. It was what Lana was famous for. Within one month of your freshman year, she

knew your name and never forgot it. Ever.

“Hello, Mrs. McCauley,” I said.
“How are you?”

She spread her arms across the desk in front of her. “Just making sure things stay on track, as always.”

“As always.”

Her phone beeped and she held up a finger. She answered the phone, transferred the call and focused on me again. “I’m surprised to see you here, Joseph.”

“Why’s that?”

She tented her fingers. “I didn’t know you were back on Coronado.”

“Just got back yesterday.”

She studied me for a moment. “Well, it’s a pleasure to see you. How can I help you?”

I knew she must’ve had a hundred different questions, like everyone else I used to know would. The difference was that Lana had the dignity not to blurt them out.

There were several different things I

could've told her. But these days in a school, it was best not to mess around. And I didn't want to insult Lana.

“I'm investigating an incident with a current student here,” I said. “Meredith Jordan.”

Lana McCauley's smile thinned. “I cannot allow you to speak with a student on the campus, Joseph, unless you are accompanied by the parents of that student. I'm sorry.” She said it with a tone that implied she knew I wasn't there with the girl's parents.

“Certainly, I understand,” I said, anticipating her response. “Could I ask

you a question or two?”

“It’s not my place, Joseph.”

“Nothing too hard, I promise.”

“It’s not the difficulty that would be the problem.”

I smiled. Only a fool would attempt to fool Lana. “Was Chuck Winslow employed here?”

“I cannot comment on that,” she said. “You’ll have to inquire at the district offices. I can give you their contact information.”

The Coronado Unified School District office was about a block away from where I was standing, housed on the same campus. But I was trying to be agreeable.

“That’d be fine,” I said.

She sat up straighter in her chair and quickly began scribbling on a piece of paper.

“Is Mr. Willis still the Athletic Director here?” I asked.

She shook her head and handed me the piece of paper. “No. He retired three years ago and moved to Phoenix.”

“Who replaced him?”

“Mr. Stricker is our Athletic Director now.”

“Is he available?”

The wheels were turning in Lana's head, wondering if I was trying to trick her into something she wasn't supposed to do. I wasn't. Both Matt and Derek had referred to Chuck as “Coach Winslow” which I assumed meant he was connected to the athletic department. And if Lana didn't want to call him directly, I could walk outside, dial the school from my cell and ask to

speak to him. He wasn't off-limits.

After a moment of thought, she picked up the phone, turned away and spoke quietly into it, then hung up. "Mr. Stricker will be with you shortly, Joseph."

"Thank you," I said. "I appreciate it."

She nodded, smiling, happy to oblige.

"Chuck was coaching swimming, right?" I asked.

She pursed her lips. "I'm sure Mr. Stricker will be able to answer your questions."

Worth the shot, but I should've known better.

Five minutes later, a man the size of a garage door came walking down the hallway. Dressed in a golf shirt with the Coronado tiki emblem over the chest and khaki slacks with creases sharp enough to cut, he smiled at me from a distance. Square head, blond hair cut short and going gray, a neck as thick as my thigh. He looked vaguely familiar but I couldn't place him.

He reached me and extended his big bear paw of a hand. "Robert Stricker."

The name hit another bell and suddenly I saw him on my television on Sunday afternoons.

I shook his hand. “Joe Tyler. Linebacker for the Chargers, right?”

He smiled politely, indicating he’d heard it plenty of times before. “A long time ago.”

“I enjoyed watching you play.”

“Thank you,” he said, graciously taking a compliment he probably got once a week. “Why don’t you come down to my office?”

He was only an inch or two taller than me but his girth made it seem like the difference was a foot. It felt like he was looming over me as we walked.

“You’ve been here since Willis left?”
I asked.

“Yes. Did you know him?”

“I graduated from here in ‘84.”

“I came in a year before he left,” Stricker said. “Got my feet wet, learned what I could. Just trying not to screw things up now.”

He guided me toward the entrance to

the gymnasium. He held open one of the large doors so I could pass. As soon as I got inside, I stopped.

The gymnasium had always been the one piece of the campus that linked to its earlier days, remaining unchanged for decades. The seats were up above, suspended above the court. The playing floor had gone from tan to dark brown, dead spots hiding everywhere. There had been no scoreboard, just a flip rack on a table on the opposite side of the bleachers.

But it had undergone significant changes since I'd last set foot in it.

The seats were still suspended above, but a bank of bleachers had been put in below them, doubling the seating capacity. The seemingly brand new floor gleamed with polish, the smell of varnish heavy in the air. A massive scoreboard was mounted on the far wall.

I looked at Stricker. “This is all new.”

Stricker led me around the baseline, behind the cushioned chairs that the teams sat in. “Thing was falling down around us. Parents stepped up and got us some money. It’s still small compared to some of the other gyms we play in, but at least we aren’t taping it together to

hold it up.” He pointed across the gym floor to a bank of windows. “My office is there now and we’ve got office space for all of the coaches on campus. Makes a big difference.”

I remembered Mr. Willis’ office as being a table set up outside the locker room. I imagined it did indeed make a big difference.

Stricker’s office was a perfect square with a big window looking back toward the gym. Nothing in the office indicated he’d been a star professional athlete. A couple of certificates, a degree from UNLV and pictures of Coronado’s teams adorned the walls.

He gestured at the chair across from his desk as he lowered himself into an oversized leather desk chair. It squawked beneath his weight. He folded his hands across his chest and stared at me, his look having subtly changed from when he came out to get me. He'd gone from friendly officer of the school to linebacker looking to smash a quarterback in the face.

“Two ways we can go about this,” he said. “We can dance around or we can cut to the chase. I’ll leave it to you to choose.”

“I prefer cutting.”

“Good. Saves us both time.” He paused. “I can’t tell you shit.”

“About what?”

“Thought we weren’t going to dance.”

I didn’t say anything.

Stricker sighed. “Lana told me you were here looking for info on the Jordan and Winslow thing. And I can’t tell you shit.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Doesn’t matter. Same result either

way.”

“I’m not looking for info on Meredith Jordan,” I said.

“Yeah, you are,” he said, smiling.
“But let’s pretend that’s true and we skip to the next item on your list.”

If he’d taken shots to the head during his career, it didn’t show. He was sharp and all business.

“Whatever she says Chuck Winslow did to her isn’t true,” I said.

“You know that for a fact?”

“I do.”

“How?”

“Think about whoever your closest teammate was,” I said. “The one single guy you would’ve picked every week to go to battle with because you trusted him so completely.”

Something shifted through his eyes, then he nodded.

“Chuck’s like that times ten in my life,” I said. “I know what he’s capable of and this isn’t it.”

Stricker let that settle in his thoughts

for a moment. Then he leaned forward, placing his elbows on his desk. “I can appreciate that. But as a school administrator, I’m going to come down on the side of the student. Every time, until I hear otherwise.”

“Then why are you even talking to me?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re the A.D. Why not pawn me off on the principal or some other administrator?” I asked. “If you aren’t going to talk to me and you aren’t interested in what I have to say about Chuck, why see me? What do you

care?”

He grunted, the corners of his mouth twitching like small electrical currents. Finally he said, “Because I’m the one who okay’d hiring Winslow.”

“Hired him?” I asked.

Stricker leaned back in his chair, like he was trying to create more distance between us. “Technically, we didn’t hire him. But I signed off on his involvement with the girls basketball program. He was a volunteer coach for the last month.”

The whole concept of Chuck as coach just didn’t sit right in my head. He’d

never showed any inclination to coach and seemed to have had as much use for high school kids as he did used cigarette butts. Maybe it was a secret ambition he'd kept hidden from me. Or maybe things had changed more than I knew since I'd last seen him.

“He was straight with me from the day I met him,” Stricker said. “He told me he didn’t have a degree, that he hadn’t worked in a school before, that he hadn’t coached before. He’d played basketball in high school here and that was about the only qualification he had.”

That sounded right to me. We’d played together at Coronado, in the older

version of the gym directly behind me. Chuck was a brute, using his size to make himself into a player. He was athletic enough to use finesse to score, but he preferred banging into people. And he was talented enough to attract some college interest but he blew it off, despising the thought of spending any more time in school, even if it meant a free ride and playing ball.

“So he was here for a month?” I asked.

“About a month, month-and-a-half,” he said. “I watched him in the gym with the team. He was pretty good. He knew how to explain things. Footwork, body

position, nuances that can be tough to teach kids. He could do it. During games, he stayed in his seat and kept his mouth shut, working with the girls. He was a model assistant coach.”

“Who’s the head coach?” I asked.

“Kelly Rundles,” he said. “She’s been here three years. She was my first hire. She’s very good.”

“She and Chuck got along alright?”

“Yes. Kelly’s not the type to let anyone step in front of her. She runs the ship. But her ego is manageable enough that if she finds someone who can help,

she lets them do their thing. That's what she did with Winslow."

"And Meredith Jordan was on the varsity team?" I asked.

"Said we weren't going to talk about Ms. Jordan," he said.

"Pretty sure I can look it up online when we're done," I said.

He smiled. "Look up whatever you like. I'm not talking about Ms. Jordan."

The whole scenario was like science fiction. Chuck, in a school, working with teenagers, acting as a role model.

Doing something worthwhile. Stricker hadn't touched on one thing I wanted to know, though.

“Did Chuck just show up here at the school?” I asked. “Looking to volunteer?”

He shifted in his seat, his movements stiffer, more uncomfortable. “No. He was recommended.”

“By who?”

Stricker leveled his gaze at me. “Ms. Jordan's father.”

ELEVEN

“Jon Jordan recommended Chuck?” I asked, making sure I understood correctly.

Stricker nodded. “Yep. Called me up, said he was sending over a guy who was interested in coaching.”

“You know Jordan well enough to take his word on something like that?”

He shifted again and folded his hands

together. “I barely know the man. But he does a lot of things for the school.”

“Things?”

“He financed most of what we did in there,” he said, pointing over my shoulder at the gym. “Other stuff around campus, too.

“And you can’t say no to a guy with pockets like that?”

Stricker shrugged. “I would have if Winslow didn’t feel right to me. But like I said, I watched the guy interact with the kids and the team. I was comfortable having him here.”

“So you saw him interact with Meredith Jordan?”

“I saw him interact with all of the girls.”

I stayed quiet.

“But, yes, I saw him with Meredith,” he said, his words careful now, cautious. “They spent some time together. Just the two of them.”

That was not what I was hoping to hear.

“After practice, sometimes before

school,” Stricker said. “Two of them in there, working on things. They seemed...close.”

“Close,” I repeated.

Stricker stared past me at the gym before refocusing on me. “We were getting to the point where I was going to sit him down and have a conversation with him. It was getting pretty frequent and it’s my job to be aware of things like that.”

“But you didn’t ask him about it?”

“Didn’t get the chance,” Stricker said. “Day I was gonna catch him

before practice was the day he was arrested.” He paused. “And that is all I am going to say about Ms. Jordan.”

Without saying as much, Stricker was telling me that he suspected something was going on. That bothered me a great deal because in the short time I’d been speaking to him, Robert Stricker didn’t strike me as a guy who had any sort of agenda other than watching over his athletic program. Even if nothing inappropriate was going on between Meredith and Chuck, the fact that someone else noticed that they were spending time together was not a good thing.

“Did Jordan say how he knew Chuck?” I asked.

Stricker started to say something, then stopped and let his eyes wander over my shoulder again. I turned around to see what he was looking at.

Two men, dressed casually in button-down shirts and khaki pants, were heading toward the office.

“Your ride’s here,” Stricker said.

I turned back to him. “My ride?”

“You better hope it’s just a ride,” Stricker said, standing up. “Just be

straight with him, tell him what you're doing. He's an intimidating guy, but honesty goes a long way with him."

"Him meaning Jordan?" I asked.

Stricker nodded.

"Thought you said you didn't know him that well."

"I know him enough," Stricker said.

"Enough to call him before you came down the hall to meet me?" I asked.

He didn't respond, just let his expression frost over. I should've

known it was too easy to get in to see him.

“I’ll bet it’s a long way from calling signals on an NFL defense to taking orders from a rich guy,” I said.

Anger melted the icy expression, but he stayed quiet.

There was a knock on the office door and Stricker told them to come in. Both were younger than me, late twenties, good shape. Both nice-looking, smiled like they meant it.

The one on the right held up a hand at Stricker. “Hey, Mr. Stricker. Nice to

see you.”

Stricker didn't smile. “Yeah.”

The guy looked at me. “Mr. Tyler. My name is James Hanley. This is Trevor Boyle. We work for Jon Jordan.”

Trevor nodded politely at me. They reminded me of those Mormon kids you see bicycling down the streets in your neighborhood. All friendly and wanting to help out in any way they could.

“Mr. Jordan was sorry not to have met with you last night. He's wondering if you'd join him for an early lunch,”

James said. “We’d be happy to escort you to meet him.”

The request was pleasant. Nothing sinister behind it. But it didn’t leave much room for rejection. And I’d shown up at his house the previous night to talk to him anyway. No use wasting any more time.

I looked at Stricker. “Thanks for your time.”

Stricker nodded, but watched Hanley and Boyle. “You’re welcome. Good luck.”

TWELVE

It was not an ominous car ride out of a movie scene. They suggested I follow them in my rental. No threats, no warnings. Hanley just gave me directions and said they'd go slowly so I could follow.

Polite coercion, I suppose.

We took the bridge off the island and up the 163 north, cutting through the steep canyons that housed Balboa Park

and the zoo. After snaking through the heavy traffic in Mission Valley, we took the 805 into Sorrento Valley, angling back toward the coast. I followed them off the freeway into the parking lot of one of the hundreds of identical looking office parks in San Diego's own miniature Silicon Valley.

I got out of the car and approached Hanley and Boyle. "Where are we?"

Hanley smiled, happy to be of service. "These are the offices of Jordan Enterprises."

"Which is?"

“Real estate development, mainly,” Hanley said. “Mr. Jordan develops corporate properties like hotels and office buildings.” He tossed a thumb over his shoulder. “All that new construction around the ballpark? When we were coming off the island? He’s involved with a lot of that.”

The city had finally gotten off its rear end and realized that the downtown area could drive tourism rather than repel it. They’d slowly developed the area around the harbor with a convention center, hotels and a baseball stadium. Everything else followed quickly and the renaissance that was going on in downtown San Diego was turning into a

model for other large cities around the country.

And if Jordan had his hands in that, he was beyond wealthy. Which was why the understated office building confused me. A guy with that kind of money usually liked to show it off. But the building we were at was no different than the others in the area. It could've been anything.

“Mr. Jordan likes to keep things simple,” Hanley said, reading my expression. Boyle started toward the building and Hanley gestured in his direction. “Shall we?”

As we walked into the building, I couldn't help but think I was missing something. Hanley and Boyle were as non-threatening as they could be, yet they did track me down at the high school and they had obviously been given directions to bring me back. I made a mental note to not let the friendly demeanor push down my guard.

The interior of the building was no more exciting than that of any office. Framed photos, fake plants, industrial carpeting. Jordan certainly wasn't spending his fortune on these digs.

We took the elevator to the fourth floor. Boyle and Hanley waved at a

receptionist who barely looked up from her cubicle greeting area. Boyle knocked on a door at the end of the hall and a voice beckoned us in. Boyle stepped aside and waved me past.

I recognized Jonathon Jordan as soon as I saw him. From what, I couldn't recall, but I knew I'd seen him in a magazine or a newspaper or something. He was standing behind his desk. He was average height, maybe 5'10", not spectacular looking, but not ugly, either. Dark brown hair, five o'clock shadow over tan skin, brown eyes, a crooked nose and a wide mouth. His shoulders were wide for a guy his size and he looked athletic. He was wearing an

aquamarine long-sleeve button down and expensive looking blue jeans.

He stared me down for a long moment before looking past me. “Thanks, guys. We’re good.”

I turned to see Hanley and Boyle exiting, closing the door behind them.

Jordan sat, then folded his hands into a tight knot and laid them on his desk. “Most people who show up at my home unannounced leave in an ambulance.”

There were two chairs in front of the desk, but he made no motion for me to take one. Probably thought I’d be more

uncomfortable standing.

“Guess I’m lucky then.”

“You’re lucky I let Gina handle things the way she does.” His folded hands tightened. “If I’d come out to meet you, there wouldn’t have been enough left of you for the medical folks to haul away.”

I was accustomed to people making threats. Most did so because they felt compelled. They wanted to appear strong, brave, defiant. But most didn’t come across as being able to back it up.

Jordan wasn’t a big guy and he wasn’t posturing. Something in his voice,

though, convinced me he meant what he was saying and I wasn't going to get anywhere by being antagonistic.

“I didn't mean to intrude,” I said. “And I apologize for any inconvenience.”

He pushed back from the desk and crossed his legs, eyeing me from the side. “And do you apologize for the beating your friend handed out to my daughter?”

“My friend didn't hurt your daughter,” I said.

Anger radiated from his face. “She

says differently.”

“I know that. I’m trying to figure out why.”

The corner of his mouth curled up. “So now my daughter’s lying.” It wasn’t a question. Just a statement meant to make me realize I’d insulted his daughter.

“I don’t know your daughter,” I said. “But I know my friend. He wouldn’t hurt a teenage girl. Ever.”

Jordan shook his head, as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing, then let out a snort like I was the court

jester that had failed to entertain him. Then something else moved through his expression, something darker.

“You know your friend?”

“I do.”

He stared intently at me across his desk. “I’d think it would be tough to know someone you haven’t seen in a very long time.” He paused and squinted. “Tough to still know the people in your life when you run away from them.”

A shiver prickled the back of my neck.

“Disgraced cop, missing daughter, divorced,” Jordan continued. “That’s a lot of shit. Maybe I would’ve taken off, too.”

The shiver turned to icicles but I managed to hold his gaze. I hated myself for not being able to find the words to fight back.

“Must be hell for you,” Jordan said, watching me. “Having to live with it.”

The muscles in my throat constricted and the floor beneath me felt unsteady.

“Not knowing,” Jordan said. “It must

be hell.”

My hands curled into fists. He was playing a game with me, trying to establish an upper hand. Blowing up or going across the desk to rip his head off wouldn't have done Chuck or me any good. But I was done trying to be polite. I took a deep breath, exhaled and unclenched my fists.

“What did it cost you?” I asked.

“What did what cost me?”

“Getting someone to kick the shit out of Chuck,” I said. “You just keep someone on retainer or was this a new

venture?”

Nothing in his expression changed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure. Just more bad luck for Chuck, I guess.”

“I guess.”

We stared at each other for a moment.

“He didn’t hurt your daughter,” I said.

“Have you seen the case file?”

“Yeah.”

“You think my daughter just fell down? Tripped? Banged her entire face on a wall?” A cold smile forced its way onto his mouth. “Maybe that’s what happened to Mr. Winslow. Maybe he tripped.”

It was as much of an admission as I would get from him. But it was enough.

“No,” I said. “It’s clear something happened to your daughter. But Chuck Winslow isn’t responsible.”

He looked away, an incredulous expression on his face, like he was explaining simple addition to an adult.

“So, what?” he asked. “You just want to talk to Meredith? Find out the real story?”

“I would like to speak to her, yes.”

He shook his head slowly and pushed himself out of his chair, like it was the toughest physical task he'd ever performed.

“I don't really give a shit who you think you are or how well you think you know your friend,” Jon Jordan said. “But I saw my daughter come home beaten up, barely able to walk, barely able to speak. And the first words out of her mouth were that your friend—

someone she thought was her friend, too—had kicked the shit out of her.” He paused. “My daughter’s not a liar. So you can stand there all you want and defend him. I couldn’t care less. But if you think I’m going to let you talk to my daughter...”

I was getting nowhere in a hurry. I needed to move away from the subject of his daughter.

“Robert Stricker told me that you recommended Chuck,” I said.

His cheeks sucked in a bit and they started to flush. “I did a favor for someone by making that call. I’ve never

actually met Mr. Winslow. And at this point, that's lucky for him."

None of this made sense and it was starting to irritate me.

"You're big on the threats," I said. "But yet you let me walk away last night, then have me escorted here today. To you. Why? Why not just send me on my way last night?"

He shoved his hands in his pockets and chuckled. "Gina made a recommendation. I followed it. It allowed me to check up on you, understand why you were here. My courtesy has now expired." His smile

dimmed. “I’m done with you.”

“You can kick me out of your office and off your property,” I said, heading for the door. “But you can’t kick me out of San Diego. I’ll stay here until I figure out what happened to your daughter. Until I make sure everyone knows that my friend did nothing to her.”

I’d reached the door when he said “A hearse.”

I turned around. “Excuse me?”

His eyes were so hard they seemed metallic. “You go near my daughter, they won’t take you away in an

ambulance. It'll be in a hearse.”

THIRTEEN

I left Jordan's office pissed off, but at least I knew where I stood. He could make all the threats he wanted—and I'd be wary of them—but I wouldn't walk away from helping the one person who had never walked away from me. It was time to pay Chuck back for that kind of friendship.

I drove back to Coronado. The high school was just letting out. The expensive cars whizzed past me as I

made my way toward the gym. I wanted to shout a protest but I knew it would fall on deaf ears. Teenagers live with a feeling of invincibility right up until that feeling is unexpectedly punctured.

The gym was on the west side of the campus and I found a parking spot a block away. As I got closer to the building, I heard the squeaks of sneakers and sharp voices yelling instruction. It took me back twenty-five years to when Chuck and I were the ones in the gym, practicing with ten other guys, getting yelled at and working our asses off. It was when we had cemented our friendship and as I pushed through the heavy closed doors at the front of the

building, a strange sense of déjà vu overwhelmed me.

And I was nearly run over by a girl in a hurry.

She bounced off me and hit the ground, her large athletic bag landing on top of her.

“Jeez, I’m sorry,” I said, bending down toward her. “Are you alright?”

She pushed the bag off of her and sat up.

The bruises were fading and the cut above her nose was still sewn shut with

several ragged stitches. Her hair was pulled back away from her face, hidden beneath a Coronado do-rag.

“I’m fine.” Meredith Jordan ignored my hand and stood. “Sorry.”

I stared at her for a minute, contemplating.

“Meredith, my name’s Joe,” I finally said. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

She stepped away from me, her eyes immediately wary. “How do you know my name?”

I couldn’t think of anything other than

the truth. “Chuck Winslow is a friend of mine.”

The fear left her face. Now she just looked guarded. “I have to go.”

She tried to go around me, but I stepped into her path. “Wait. Come on. He was arrested and now he’s in the hospital. He didn’t really do this to you, did he?”

She looked at me, surprised. “Hospital?”

“He’s hurt pretty bad,” I said. “He can’t talk right now. But when he can, he’s gonna tell me he didn’t do anything

to you.”

She hesitated again, pulling tightly on the bag on her shoulder. Three other girls walked out from the hall behind us, chattering. They quieted down as they approached, tried to discreetly keep an eye on us as they exited, then hurried along the outside walk.

“Look,” I said. “Something happened to you. No doubt. And I can help you if you want. But I don’t think Chuck had anything to do with it. And it’s not right that you’re telling everyone that he did.”

She looked down at the floor and whispered something I couldn’t make

out.

“What?”

She looked up at me, tears in her eyes. “I don’t have a choice.”

“You don’t have a choice?” I asked.
“What does that mean?”

She started edging past me for the door. “He hurt me. I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“Is it your dad?” I wanted to grab her and stop her, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. “Is he the one forcing you to blame Chuck?”

She again looked surprised at what I'd said, but it was different this time. There was something in her expression that told me I'd gotten something wrong.

She put her hand on the metal bar that ran across the door. "I'm sorry. I swear to God. I'm sorry."

Meredith pushed open the door and ran outside, vanishing up the walk.

FOURTEEN

I wanted to sprint after Meredith but good sense told me not to. A grown man chasing a girl across a high school campus wouldn't look good, especially when the girl had already been assaulted once. I took several deep breaths, told myself I'd get another chance with her and walked into the gym.

A high school gym has distinct smells. Stale popcorn, old sweat and an odor belonging only to a wood playing

floor. The new Coronado gym had none of that, as bright and shiny and new as if it had opened that morning. All six baskets were down, the girls working in pairs at each one, doing footwork drills in the area below the basket.

“Rotate!” a voice yelled from the far corner and the girls moved in their pairs to the next basket on their right and went to work again.

I looked to where the voice had come from. She was about six feet tall, dirty blonde hair pulled tightly away from her face, wearing a bright white T-shirt emblazoned with “Islanders” across the front in red. Red mesh basketball shorts

and running shoes in the same colors. She was lean and bounced with that flame-turned-to-low energy athletes have. No whistle around her neck, but there was no doubt she was in charge as her eyes swept the gym, watching each pair of girls intently as they worked.

The eyes stopped on me and she jogged across the floor, seemingly gliding because she moved with such little effort.

“Help you?” she asked without a smile.

“Just watching.”

“Practice is closed,” she said.

“I talked to Rob earlier,” I said. Not a complete lie, but not the truth earlier.

“Rob?”

“Stricker. Your A.D.”

“He didn’t tell me,” she said, then glanced over her shoulder. She yelled “Okay. Water and then back in for shells. Hurry up!” The girls jogged out of the gym and she turned back to me. “And he doesn’t go by Rob.”

Dammit. “My name’s Joe Tyler. I understand Chuck Winslow was helping

you out?”

She threw her shoulders back, stiffening, a questioning look now in her eyes. “You working for or against him?”

“For. Definitely for him.”

The girls started trickling back in the gym, red faced and sweating, looking in our direction.

“Look, I don’t want to take practice time to do this,” she said, watching the girls return. “But I can talk to you afterward.” She hesitated. “You the friend that used to live here?”

Her words were like small hammers on my spine. “*The* friend? I don’t know. I used to live here, yes.”

She ran a hand over her mouth, watching me. “His point guard in high school? You look like a point guard.”

Chuck had done a lot of talking about me in my absence. I felt guilty, like I’d forced him into it. But a small sense of relief flooded through me, glad she was talking about basketball and not Elizabeth. “Yeah, that was me.”

“I’m Kelly Rundles, the coach.” She pointed in the direction of the girls.

“I’m short an assistant coach today. You rebound for my guards and we’ll talk when we’re through.”

I stared at the girls. There was irritation in their faces now, frustrated that some intruder had interrupted their practice. I didn’t see any welcoming looks coming from their direction. I could still play a little, but I’d never coached.

But it all came back to Chuck.

“Deal,” I said and followed her to the center of the court.

FIFTEEN

“They’re gonna do closeouts from the block to the wing,” Kelly said as we walked quickly. “Shooter on the wing. You rebound and pass hard to the player on the block. They’ll do the rest.”

I tried to process that through my head, reverting back to my high school days, trying to remember the vocabulary and what it all should look like. It didn’t come as fast as I would’ve liked.

“Okay,” Kelly said at mid-court. “This is Coach Tyler. He’s got the guards at the far end. I’ve got the bigs. Five minutes of closeouts to the wing. Shooter catches on the fly, from the ready. Defender chops her steps hard all the way out. Defense to offense, offense rotates down. Go.”

The group of girls split on the run and hustled to opposite ends of the court. Kelly went to one end, so I jogged to the other.

There were six girls with me. They immediately formed two lines, one at the wing on the right and one at the baseline. The first girl on the baseline

jumped with the ball to the square block and fired at the first girl on the wing.

The passer shuffled hard out to the wing, her hands up, calling “Ball! Ball!” the whole way, her screams echoing in the gym. The shooter caught the ball, set and released her shot just as the passer reached her, pivoted into her and stuck her butt into the shooter’s thighs.

The ball bounced high off the rim and to the far side of the court.

The shooter looked at me, her mouth twisted into annoyance. “Uh, aren’t you rebounding?”

Shit.

I scrambled to the corner, grabbed the ball and fired it back out to the new shooter. She giggled, shook her head like I'd thrown her an apple instead of a basketball and bounced a pass to the new girl on the block.

Which is where I should've thrown the ball to begin with.

I felt my face flush as I jogged back to the basket, wondering why in the hell teenagers had such a powerful ability to make adults feel so foolish.

The next two ran the drill and the

shooter nailed the shot. I ripped the ball out of the net and fired it at the next girl popping to the block, a little harder than needed, but I was pissed at myself for screwing up.

If the girl noticed my use of my super-human male strength, she didn't react, just caught the ball, pivoted and passed to the next shooter.

We went like that for two minutes. The girls worked hard, yelling encouragement to one another, slapping high fives. They were efficient and smooth.

The tallest girl, the one I'd now

targeted as the best player on my end, yelled for them to switch sides and they sprinted to the other side of the key, dashing around me, maintaining their lines. I shifted to the other side of the basket.

The first shooter, who I'd identified as the weakest player in the group, caught her pass with her feet in the wrong position, putting her off balance. She hoisted up an ugly looking shot and stumbled backward as her defender boxed her out.

I grabbed the ball as it careened off the rim, started to pass it to the next girl, then stopped.

“Wait,” I said, not sure why I was talking. “Girl that just shot. What’s your name?”

She tugged at her shorts. “Uh, Kristin.”

“Kristin. Your feet are all screwed up.”

Several of the girls in line snickered and Kristin’s cheeks reddened. I couldn’t tell if it was my use of the word “screwed” or because I had embarrassed the girl.

Nice work, Tyler.

“What I mean is this,” I said, walking to where she’d shot. “You’re catching the ball with your feet in the wrong spots. They need to be reversed.” I looked at her. “You’re right-handed, correct?”

Kristin looked at several of her teammates, then back at me and nodded.

“Then your left foot is your drive foot, which means it should be back,” I said, showing her what I meant. “Your left foot was out front and it puts you off balance. Left foot back, right foot just in front of it, catch and shoot.” I spun the ball back into my hands, exaggerated my

feet hitting the floor the way I wanted hers to look and arched a jumper. It dropped softly through the net.

Several whispers went through the two lines. The jumper impressed. I had their attention.

“Do it again,” I said, backpedaling to my spot under the rim. “Left foot back, right foot out front.” I bounced the ball to the girl on the block. “Go.”

The passer snapped the ball to Kristin. She caught it like I’d shown her, got the shot off and watched it drop through the rim.

“There you go,” I said.

She nodded quickly, a brief hint of a smile shadowing across her face as she cut down to the defender line.

My heart pounded hard against the inside of my chest, part anxiety and part pride in showing her something and being right about it. I didn't know what Chuck's reasons were for coaching high school basketball, but the little high I'd just experienced—teaching someone to do something and then watching them execute it successfully—made me want to stick around awhile longer.

SIXTEEN

The practice lasted another hour. Kelly ran them through a series of drills, exhorting them to continue working. I played a dummy defender in one drill and rebounded again in another.

They were serious, intense, tight as a group. I didn't see any divisions. They were supportive of one another, critical when it was called for and there was no bitching about any of it. They moved precisely, found the spots they were

supposed to and more often than not, did what they were needed to do and did it well.

I thought back to my high school days and couldn't recall a single day where I went after it with the same intensity these girls did. I thought at the time that I was lucky, that I was pretty good without having to practice too much at it. Give me the ball and let me go. If some coach had stopped me mid-drill and corrected me, like I had done with Kristin, I probably would've smirked with the arrogance of a teenage boy and continued doing it my way, rather than the right way.

These girls, the way they listened to their coach, the way they sprinted their butts off, were only interested in doing it the right way.

After running them through a short five-on-five scrimmage, Kelly Rundles clapped her hands and brought the team to center court. The girls, breathing hard, sweat pouring down their red faces, watched her like she was going to give them the answers to every important question in life.

Kelly offered them some criticism of what she'd seen, then backed it up with a little bit of praise. The girls nodded at both.

Then she looked at me. “And let’s thank Coach Tyler for filling in today. Maybe we can get him back here again soon.”

The girls clapped and whooped and I felt like I’d just won an ESPY. I nodded, held up a hand in thanks and tried—unsuccessfully, I’m sure—to look cool about it all.

Kelly held her hands up high and the girls collapsed to her like buzzards to a carcass. The girl I’d pegged as the best in my group, who I’d learned was named Meg, turned and looked at me. “Get in here, coach.”

I took a couple of steps forward and awkwardly put my hand in with the rest of theirs.

From the middle of the pack, Meg said “Play hard on three. One, two, three.”

The gym walls echoed with the entire team’s scream of “Play Hard!” My voice chimed in loudly with theirs.

The girls scattered toward the outside hallway and Kelly came over to me.

“You’ve coached before?” she asked.

“I haven’t.”

“Really? Well, you did a nice job. Getting on Kristin about her feet was sharp.”

I was surprised she’d noticed from the far end of the gym, but realized she didn’t seem like the type to miss much of anything. “Thanks. It was fun. They’re a good group.”

Kelly nodded. “They are. And I was serious about getting you to come back. You’re welcome anytime. I always have such a hard time finding coaches to work with the guards.”

“If you’ve got time to talk about Chuck, I’ll come back here tomorrow,” I said.

“I was going to talk to you anyway,” she said, backpedaling slowly. “But I’ll take that offer. Meet you outside in ten minutes.”

I walked outside, letting the cool, ocean-tinged breeze wash away the warm gymnasium air that clung to me. A group of players huddled together, laughing and talking. They stopped as soon as they saw me

Meg stepped outside the small circle. “Are you coming back tomorrow?”

She was maybe five-ten, most of it arms and legs. Her long blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail that had swayed wildly from side to side when she'd run up and down the court. She had a gray sweatshirt on over her practice jersey, red mesh shorts and rubber sandals on her feet. She was confident, not cocky. She knew she could play but didn't wave it in the other girls faces.

She was their leader.

"Think so," I said, sitting down on a concrete wall that lined the walk. "We'll see what your coach says."

“Do you know Coach Winslow?” she asked.

The other girls—three of them whose names I couldn’t recall—watched me intently.

“I do,” I said. “He’s a friend.”

Meg nodded, like that was alright. “I liked him. We all did.”

The girls behind her nodded.

“Where’s Meredith?” I asked, wondering what kind of reaction I’d get. “Why wasn’t she at practice?”

The girls behind Meg flinched as a group, almost taking a step back, like they needed to get away.

Meg just shrugged. “She’s taking a couple of days off. Until she feels better.”

“Friends with her?”

“We all are.”

“She pretty good?” I pointed a thumb back over my shoulder. “Can she play?”

“Best player we have,” Meg answered. “We need her.”

“Think she’ll be back soon? To play?”

Meg adjusted the canvas bag on her shoulder. “Are you just trying to get answers out of me? Because you’re an investigator or whatever?”

In real life, word travels fast. In a high school, word traveled at Internet speed. Still, I was surprised she knew about me.

“Someone saw you at school today,” she said, shrugging, reading my expression. “Heard you at the desk, talking.”

Internet speed.

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess I am trying to get answers out of you. Only because I want to help my friend and Meredith, though. If you know something, or anybody knows something, I’d like to know about it.”

A cobalt-blue Ford Mustang roared up to the curb behind the girls. Meg glanced over her shoulder, then back at me. “Gotta cruise. I don’t know anything, Coach. If I did, I’d tell you and so would any of the other girls on the team.” She held up a hand. “Later.”

She slapped hands with her teammates. They followed her to the curb and scattered around the Mustang to their own cars. Meg opened the car door and slid into the passenger seat, then leaned across and kissed the boy driving it before she shut the door. They tore out of the lot.

The boy hadn't seen me.

But I'd seen him.

My buddy Matt, the one who had been tailing me in Seaport Village.

SEVENTEEN

Kelly Rundles emerged from the gym in a hooded sweatshirt, a huge duffel bag on her shoulder. She convinced me that I was as hungry as she was and I followed her to a coffee shop over on Orange.

After we ordered, she looked at me over her Diet Coke. “So. I’m probably not supposed to be talking to you.”

I dropped a straw in my soda. “Don’t

see why not. Your A.D. didn't ban me from campus."

"Yeah, but the man who matters probably wouldn't be very happy."

"Jon Jordan?"

Her mouth twisted up with irritation. "And probably most of the other parents, too."

"I don't want you to lose your job," I said.

"Oh, I won't," she said. "The team is winning. Trust me. That supersedes just about everything around Coronado.

They might tell me they aren't happy about it, but they won't do a damn thing as long as we're winning games."

"Wasn't like that when I went there," I told her. "People barely cared. May have had something to do with us not being very good."

She smiled in a way that told me she'd experienced that, too. "That'll make people not care in a hurry."

I felt like, maybe, I'd finally made a solid connection with someone who might be able to help. "The girls said Meredith's taking a couple of days off?"

Kelly sat back in the booth, concern and anxiety filtering into her features. “Yeah. She’s been through a lot. She needs to get herself right before she comes back. But I’d expect that to be just another day or two.”

“Tough kid?”

“The toughest,” she said, stirring the straw in her soda. “Plays her ass off.”

“Meg told me she’s the best player on your team.”

Kelly nodded. “She is. Easily. She’s carried us the last two years. Being recruited by a lot of West Coast

schools. Not that she needs a scholarship with her family's money, but she's that good."

Our food came and as the waitress slipped the plates in front of us, I asked "Outside of basketball, what kind of kid is she?"

Kelly pulled her napkin down into her lap. "Smart, sharp, solid. One of the ones I don't have to worry about." She held her fork above her salad. "That's why it all seemed so odd."

"It all?"

She shoved a forkful of lettuce into

her mouth, chewed and nodded. “When she filed the complaint against Winslow.”

“You didn’t buy it?” I asked.

“Wasn’t about buying it,” she said. “I was stunned that she’d be the kid in the middle of something like this.” She laid her fork down. “I don’t know what it was like when you went here, but I’ll bet it was different. These kids? They don’t act fifteen. They act like yuppies. A lot of the girls date college guys. Seems like they all drive cars that are worth what most people would like to put down on a home. Dress like they’re always going clubbing and that’s

because, half the time, they *are* going clubbing.” She picked up the fork again. “So I’m not surprised that a girl at Coronado might get mixed up in something. I was just surprised that it was Meredith.”

“Did you believe her?” I picked up my sandwich but didn’t take a bite.

She hesitated, pursed her lips, then nodded. “At first, yeah. Like I said, she’s a sharp kid. No bullshit in her, you know? I know her better than Winslow, so I immediately believed her.”

“Chuck wouldn’t hurt a kid,” I said,

feeling the need to get it out there as to where I stood.

“After I talked to him, I believed that, too,” she said. “They both seemed like they were telling the truth. So I don’t have a clue as to what happened.”

“Were they close? Chuck and Meredith?”

She picked at the lettuce with her fork. “Yeah. But he was good with all of the girls. He’s this giant, good-looking guy who can play. He’s like a god to them. They immediately gravitated toward him.” She set her elbows on the table and jabbed at the air

with the fork. “And he could coach. Didn’t matter the position. He knew how to teach.”

It again surprised me to hear that about him. I never saw him as a mentor. It made me want to see him doing that in action. And somewhere in those thoughts, I felt a twinge of guilt because maybe I had missed some change in Chuck’s life.

“And Meredith’s one of those kids who never wants to quit playing,” Kelly continued. “Always wants to shoot after practice, always wants to work out a little more. From day one, Winslow was willing to stick around and work

with her. I stuck around, too, at first, to make sure things were cool.”

“What do you mean?”

“An older male in a gym with teenage girls,” she said, as if it was a no-brainer. “A guy I didn’t really know. I needed to be comfortable with that. After I watched him for a week or so, I was. No problem at all with it.” She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment, thinking. “But they were spending a lot of time together.

My conversation with Jon Jordan flashed back through my head. “Stricker told me that he OK’d Chuck’s hiring

after Jordan recommended him. Did Jordan know him?

“No. He did that as a favor,” she explained. “It kind of went roundabout. A friend of mine recommended Winslow to me. After I met him, I wanted him, but it’s hard to get someone who doesn’t teach here on the coaching staff. They like everyone to be on campus full-time. I knew I needed an extra push. So I went back to my friend and asked her to get Jordan to make a phone call.”

“Your friend knew both Chuck and Jordan?”

“Yeah. She actually works for

Jordan. Not sure how she and Chuck met.”

“Can I ask her name?”

Kelly took a drink and set the glass on the table. “She’s Jon Jordan’s bodyguard. Gina Coleman.”

EIGHTEEN

Gina intimated knowing Chuck when she'd laid me out in Jon Jordan's driveway, but she hadn't explained. I was officially confused.

“Gina and I have been friends for a long time,” Kelly explained. “She said she knew this guy, that he knew basketball and that he might be able to help. She knew I was looking for a volunteer assistant.”

“Any idea how they knew each other?” I said, thoroughly mystified at what I was hearing.

“Isn’t Winslow your buddy?” A confused grin spread across her face.

“Yes.” I didn’t offer anything else.

She waited, then shrugged. “Gina said they went to school together. A long time ago.”

It would have been before high school, I thought. I’d met him freshman year.

None of that was making sense so I

switched gears.

“How long have you known Gina?” I asked.

“Since high school, up in Orange County,” she said. “We played ball together. We both came down here for college and stuck around.”

“What did she do before she worked for Jordan?”

Kelly pressed her lips together and shook her head. “I’ll talk about Winslow. I’m not going to talk about Gina. She’s a friend and you can ask her yourself.”

I nodded. “Okay. Bottom line. You’ve spent time with both Chuck and Meredith. Who do you believe?”

“I told you. I don’t know.”

“Make a choice. Go with your gut. Who’s telling the truth?”

Kelly shifted in the booth, like she was trying to get comfortable and couldn’t find the right spot. “If I have to choose, I choose Meredith.”

My stomach sank. “Why?”

She thought about that for a long

moment before she answered. “I’m not sure. Chuck looked me in the eye and denied it. Didn’t get outraged, didn’t throw a tantrum, no dramatics. Just looked me in the eye and said he didn’t do anything to Meredith. It seemed genuine.” She looked away for a moment, her eyes searching the diner. She brought them back to me. “But there was something in Meredith. Hurt, pain, I don’t know. I don’t think she was lying.”

It wasn’t what I wanted to hear, but it forced me to start thinking about everything from a different perspective. I could keep saying that Chuck wasn’t capable of doing the things he was being

accused of, but if I was going to figure out what happened, I was going to have to admit to at least one thing. These people had been around Chuck a lot more than I had in the previous few years. And I needed to start listening to what they were saying.

“I know why Chuck would lie,” I said, the words feeling funny as they came off my tongue. “No one would want to admit doing that. But why would Meredith lie?”

“I don’t have an answer for that,” she said, looking genuinely confused. “Like I said before, it’s not like her.”

Which put us right back where we started. Right smack in the middle of nowhere.

She saw my frustration. “Sorry. It’s all I’ve got.” She looked at her watch. “I need to get going.”

I looked at the check, threw some cash on the table and we walked outside. Fog shrouded the bridge, the muted lights casting an eery glow over the water.

“Have you talked to him?” Kelly asked. “How’s he doing?”

“Someone beat the shit out of him,” I said. “He’s in the hospital,

unconscious. He's a mess."

She stopped. "You're serious?"

"Unfortunately, yeah. So I haven't gotten to talk to him yet."

She shook her head, clearly shaken. "Jesus."

"She have a boyfriend?" I asked as we started walking again. "Meredith?"

Kelly nodded. "Yeah. A kid I don't care for all that much. Remember I said how Chuck looked me in the eye? This kid never looks me in the eye." She grimaced. "I hate when kids are like

that.”

“Know his name?”

She pulled her keys from her bag and opened her car door. “Sure. Derek Weathers.”

NINETEEN

It wasn't a coincidence that Meredith's boyfriend shared the same name with the kid that had been tailing me in Seaport Village. I was sure of that. Not when I'd already spotted Meg, her teammate, with Matt, who'd been Derek's sidekick in following me.

The next morning, I stopped by the hospital. Chuck's eyes were still closed, he wasn't moving and the doctor told me there'd been no change. I pulled

a chair up next to the bed and sat, holding his hand, feeling awkward and unsure of what else I was supposed to do.

Doubts were creeping into my head, like feathers brushing my skin. Why had he been spending so much time with Meredith Jordan? It was one thing to work with her on her game, but both Stricker and Kelly Rundles indicated they had at least considered the thought that something else was going on between them. I didn't want to believe that Chuck put himself in that kind of situation. I felt guilty for considering it, but it was getting harder to ignore the possibility.

I squeezed his hand, willing him to wake up and tell me the truth, tell me what he'd gotten himself into.

But he didn't, and after awhile, I left.

I left a message for Jane Wiley, letting her know that I was still plugging away and asking her to call me if she knew anything more about either Chuck's assault or the charges the Jordans had made. I didn't tell her that the plugging hadn't gotten me anywhere yet.

I decided to head back to Jon Jordan's

home. I wanted to know how Gina Coleman knew Chuck and why she'd recommended him for the coaching job.

The huge gates were in place and I pressed the button on the intercom.

"I promise not to hurt you this time," Gina Coleman said over the speaker. I could tell she was smiling.

"Thanks."

I waited at the gates for a couple of minutes until she arrived in her BMW. The gates opened like a bird's wings and she got out of the car. She was in workout clothes and covered in sweat. I

might've found her attractive if she hadn't dropped me to the pavement the first time we met.

“Wanna shake my hand?” she asked, smiling.

“Not really.”

“Then why are you back?”

“You gonna call Jordan and tell him I'm here?” I asked. “He threatened me with much bodily harm.”

“He does that. A lot.” She shook her head, disapproving. “But he's not here right now, so you're alright.”

“But if he drove up here in the next ten seconds...”

“I’d do what he told me,” she said. “I work for him. Bottom line.”

“Great guy.”

“No. Great salary.”

Figured I couldn’t argue with that.

“Why didn’t you tell me you knew Chuck?” I asked.

She leaned against the hood of her car, the sweat on her forehead and arms

sparkling in the sun. “Didn’t know I was supposed to.”

I didn’t say anything, letting my silence tell her that answer was worthless.

She stared at me for a moment, then looked down at her shoes, pretending to inspect the laces. Finally, she caved. “I work for Jon. It wasn’t my place to start telling you things.”

“You do know Chuck, though?” I asked.

She thought about it, then nodded.

“How?”

She looked away from me, then looked back and said, “Park your car on the street.”

When I hesitated, she said, “Don’t worry. He’s out of town today. It’ll be fine.”

I did as she said. She swung up next to me in the BMW and I got in the passenger side. The car smelled like brand new leather and clean carpeting, as if it had just arrived from Germany. Gina smelled like a mixture of salt and soap.

She hadn't answered my question, though.

“How?” I repeated.

She made a U-turn and we headed thru the gates and onto the Jordan property. “We went to elementary school together,” she said. “Then junior high.”

I never thought of Chuck having had a life before I'd met him and it was odd to hear someone say they knew him when I hadn't.

“His dad was at the air station at El Toro. Then he was moved to Coronado.”

“El Toro? In Orange County?”

She drove us down a winding, hilly road lined with thick shrubbery. “Yeah. We lived in San Clemente. He lived across the street from me.”

“I didn’t know he lived up there,” I said, as much to myself as to Gina. “He never mentioned it. I knew his dad was transferred to Coronado, but I just assumed they’d always been in San Diego.”

The road forked amidst a grove of massive eucalyptus trees and she veered to the left. “We used to play together at

the park across the street from our houses. Every afternoon, we'd come home from school and head over. I'd go down the slide and he'd jump off of it."

Now that sounded like Chuck.

We pulled up to a single-story ranch house with a terracotta roof and walls of expansive windows. She shut off the engine and we got out.

Chuck took me to our seventh grade dance," she said, smiling, walking toward the front door. "It was a big deal. First junior high dance and all." She paused, put her hand on the door. "And he was my first kiss."

I was trying to picture Chuck as a gawky seventh grader, figuring out how to put the moves on the girl he liked. If the situation had been different, I would've burst out laughing.

Gina pushed opened the door and we stepped inside. It wasn't Jon Jordan's house. It was a gym and the only thing it was missing was a membership desk. Lots of gleaming dumbbells and high-end machines, mirrors on the walls. Cool air-conditioning washed over me as I shut the door.

"I was in the middle of lifting when you showed up," she said. "You mind if

I finish?”

I shook my head.

She slid onto a bench and lowered herself beneath a bar that held a large plate and a small plate on each end. A hundred-and-ten pounds by my count. She wrapped her fingers carefully around the bar. “When he told me they were moving, it was like the end of the world. You know, everything is bigger and exaggerated at that point in your life and it was awful. He was my best friend, my first boyfriend and it broke my heart.”

She lifted the bar out of the rack and

went up and down with it eight times, the muscles in her arms and shoulders expanding and contracting with each movement, quiet grunts of exertion echoing in the room. She wasn't doing it for show, but I was impressed.

“So you stayed in touch over the years?” I asked.

She set the bar back in the rack, but kept her hands on it and exhaled several times, staring upward. “Not really. When he first moved, we called each other and stuff the first couple of weeks. But then it was just...different. High school and everything. There was no email or IMs back then. Neither of us

could drive and it felt like he was a million miles away.” Her hands tightened around the bar. “Then about three months ago, he called me. Don’t know how he found me, how he got the number and I didn’t care. It was like we picked up right where we’d left off.” She lifted the bar out of the rack and held it high. “And that’s silly, because it was junior freaking high. But still, I heard his voice and he didn’t even have to say his name. I knew it was him.”

It was strange to hear about Chuck’s life from someone else. We’d been best friends for twenty years, but hearing her story made me feel like I’d only known a fraction of him.

She knocked out eight more reps, set the bar back in the rack and sat up, her face pink. “It was really good to see him.” She nodded again, reaffirming her words, and took a deep breath, staring at her hands. “Really good. We started hanging out, dinner, things like that.” She glanced in my direction. “He told me about you. About Lauren and Elizabeth.” She paused. “I’m sorry.”

The familiar awkwardness and hurt hit me square in the stomach. “Thanks.”

She stood and pulled the plates off the bar, re-stacking them on the pegs on the side of the rack. “He really missed

you,” she said. “He understood, but he missed you. And he looked for Elizabeth, too.”

Something jabbed in my gut. Lauren had said the same thing.

She placed smaller plates on the bar. She adjusted the back of the bench upward, so instead of flat, it was on an incline. “Every morning. Checked websites, message boards, things like that. I think he really wanted to be the one to call you and say he’d found her.”

My mouth went dry. I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Anyway, he was working construction, but he was bored,” Gina said, sliding onto the inclined bench. “He wanted to do something else, but he wasn’t sure what. I had just talked with Kelly and knew she needed a coach. I thought he’d be perfect.”

“And he liked it?” I asked, happy to steer the conversation away from me.

“No,” she said, grabbing the bar and lifting it out of the rack. “He loved it.”

TWENTY

Gina spent twenty more minutes working her way around the gym, her intensity constant as she moved from machine to machine. I watched her, sitting there quietly, still thinking about Chuck, wondering what had caused him to call Gina out of the blue and what had caused him to fall in love with coaching. The questions were forming in my head by the second, but I couldn't clear my mind enough to ask the right ones.

When Gina was finished, she grabbed a towel from a table beneath one of the windows and buried her face in it.

“I haven’t spoken to Meredith,” she said, shooting me a look.

“Doesn’t she live at the house?”

“She does,” she said. “But Jordan’s been keeping her away from everyone and that includes me. And it’s a big house.”

“Jordan know about your relationship with Chuck?”

She shook her head. “No. He stays out of my personal life.”

“If you asked Jordan to get Chuck the coaching spot, why hasn’t Jordan fired you?” I asked.

She sat down on the floor, her legs out in front of her and reached for her feet. “I think it’s crossed his mind. But, Jon is...brutally rational most of the time.”

“What does that mean?”

She pressed herself downward, nearly touching her nose to her knees. She arched her back and came up slowly. “It means he knows that he’s better off with

me than without me.”

“You’re that good?”

She smiled but it looked more like a cringe. “I’m better than good. I’m not saying I’m safe, though. Things don’t turn out the way he wants, I could very well find myself out on my ass. As rational as he is, he will lash out.”

“How long have you worked for him?” I asked.

“Long enough to know that talking with you is a risk,” she said, glancing at me. “He might be willing to overlook the fact that I brought Chuck to the high

school, but he wouldn't be pleased if he thought I was working for the other side."

"What do you think happened with Meredith?" I asked

She didn't respond for a few minutes as she went through a series of stretches, twisting and contorting her body in ways that looked uncomfortable to me. She started to speak several times, but bit off her words. Finally, she took a deep breath and leaned back on her hands.

"Ies Nfm not sure," Gina said. "But I've known Meredith a long time. She's a good kid. And she's never once lied

to me.”

“So you think he did it?” I said, irritated. “You think he hurt Meredith?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Might as well have.”

“They were spending a lot of time together, Tyler,” she said, glancing at me. “A lot. You’ve probably already heard that. More than any normal coach spends with one of his players.”

I held up a hand and turned away from her gaze.

“I don’t wanna think he did it,” Gina said. “I don’t. But I think something weird was going on between them.”

“Like?”

“Like I don’t know. But something.”

“So you and Chuck were dating or whatever the hell you’re doing, after he looked you up. You give me this big story about how he meant so much to you as a kid,” I said, letting it all build up. “But then you’re hanging him out to dry here? Just so I’m clear?”

Her cheeks flushed and she didn’t say anything.

I stood and walked toward the door, my anger and confusion simmering in my gut. No one was on Chuck's side. I remembered that feeling. Everyone looked at you with a raised eyebrow, a question in their expression.

Until I knew different, I would stay on Chuck's side.

Gina followed me outside. "I'm not sure if Chuck hurt Meredith or not. My head tells me that it's possible, but my heart tells me it's not. But knowing it and being able to prove it are two different things. And if you're going to go up against Jon Jordan, you better be

able to prove it.”

That kind of logic baffled me. If you were loyal to a friend, you were loyal. End of story.

“I can’t prove it,” I said, backing away from her. “But fuck Jon Jordan. Chuck is lying in a hospital bed because Meredith is full of shit. And just because some asshole walks around swinging a big hammer doesn’t mean it’s okay to duck.”

Gina didn’t say anything. She kept her eyes away from mine, the confidence I’d seen in her posture before now gone.

I shook my head. “If Chuck wakes up, I’ll let him know what a fantastic girlfriend he’s found for himself.”

TWENTY-ONE

My foot was heavy on the accelerator as I drove away from Jordan’s home. There was something about refusing to stand up for a friend that angered me more than maybe anything else in the world. In Chuck, I had a friend who had never backed away from me, even when it would’ve been easy to do. I had no

doubt that if any of these other people had been accused of the crime, Chuck would've been shouting from the rooftop in their defense, regardless of how the circumstances appeared. The fact that they wouldn't return the same show of faith was garbage.

That anger was percolating inside me when my cell rang. I barked hello into it.

“Joe?” Lauren said. “Are you alright?”

My ex-wife's voice caught me off guard and sapped the anger for the moment. “Hey. Yeah. Sorry. I'm

okay.”

“How’s Chuck?”

“The same. I saw him this morning. No change.”

She didn’t say anything and the line buzzed with white noise.

“Lauren? You still there?”

“Yeah,” she finally said. “So I was thinking...you wanna have dinner tonight?”

I guided the car over to the side of the highway. Between my anger and

Lauren's surprise phone call, I was the last person in the world who needed to be driving. Having dinner with her would no doubt bring up things I wanted to avoid, things I'd spent the past few years avoiding. It was hard enough being back in San Diego physically, but I'd managed to keep the mental things in check. Sitting down with Lauren would be a good way to uncheck them.

But I knew that it must've taken a lot for her to ask and being afraid just didn't feel like a good enough reason to turn her down.

I took a deep breath. "Um, sure. I guess."

“I don’t suppose you’d wanna come to the house?”

My fingers folded tighter around the phone. I cleared my throat. “I’d rather not.”

“I figured,” she said. I couldn’t decipher what else I heard in her voice.

“I’m staying across the bay,” I said, and told her the hotel. “You wanna come over and we’ll eat somewhere there?”

“Sure,” she said. “Around seven?”

I said that was fine and we hung up.

The car idled quietly beneath me as I sat there for a few minutes, staring out the window, watching the traffic and memories fly by.

TWENTY-TWO

“I can’t say that I’ve missed you,” Lauren said, laying her napkin on the table.

We were in an Asian restaurant on the main level of the hotel. We’d spent an hour eating and saying things that were safe and meaningless. Lauren finished her meal and apparently decided it was time to change that.

I set my fork down on top of my

plate. “Stop flattering me.”

She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and pulled on her earlobe for a moment, oblivious to my attempt at humor. “I mean, I haven’t missed the person you became.”

“I understand. No one would.”

She rested her elbow on the table and set her chin in her hand. “But I have wondered what you’ve been doing all this time.”

I wadded up my napkin and laid it on the table, my appetite gone. “Just moving around. Helping people when I

can.”

“How do people know about you?” she asked, her thin eyebrows coming together. “Do you know what I mean? How do they find you?”

I took a drink of water from the half empty glass. “Message boards, referrals, I don’t know. People whose kids are missing, they exhaust all avenues trying to find them. I had some good luck shortly after I left here finding a couple of kids. People who get their kids back, they wanna help others. They’re grateful and they know what it’s like. There’s lots of networking.” I shrugged. “My name comes up.”

“Do you like it?” she asked.

I thought for a moment. “It’s good to be able to bring kids back home, to see them with their parents, to have helped. But I’m not sure like is the right word.”

“Have you found any that weren’t...”
Her voice trailed off.

“Alive?” I held up my index finger.
“One. A girl. Two years ago. Last month, I heard that they finally found the guy who killed her.”

Lauren raised an eyebrow. “You don’t stick around for that part?”

I shifted in the chair. “No. I go to find the kid. That’s it.”

Lauren blinked several times and I knew there was a different question coming. She would’ve made a terrible poker player. I’d known her for half my life and any time those eyes fluttered, I knew a serious question wasn’t far behind.

“Do you think she’s alive, Joe?” she asked.

Our waitress appeared at the table, cleared our plates and asked if we wanted coffee. We both nodded

silently. I didn't say anything again until our cups were in front of us.

“No,” I said. “There’s a tiny thread somewhere inside that still hopes. But realistically?” I shook my head. “No. I don’t think Elizabeth’s alive.”

Lauren cupped the mug so tight, I expected it to shatter. Tears pooled in her eyes, tears I knew she didn’t want me to see. “I didn’t expect you to say that. Last time I saw you, you couldn’t say that.”

“She’s been gone eight years.” I stared at the coffee. “I’m not so fucked up that I can’t be realistic about it.”

“Three years ago.”

I looked at her. “Three years ago what?”

She had regained her composure. “That was the last time I saw you. You were singing a different tune then.”

She was right. I’d still been convinced that Elizabeth was alive. I’d come back to San Diego, following a lead that came my way. I woke every morning, thinking that day would be the day she’d be found. She’d come home and we’d all go back to being a family. The lead, like all of them before and

after, hadn't panned out and I'd taken off again, leaving San Diego in my wake.

“What changed?” Lauren asked.

The coffee had turned lukewarm, almost cool. I set the mug down on the table. “I learned a little more, I guess. The more I do this, look for kids, the more I learn.” I swallowed hard, forced myself to say it. “Hope almost always loses to statistics.”

She stirred her coffee with a spoon. Physically, she hadn't changed much in three years. Still had the runner's physique. There were no lines on her tan forehead or around her green eyes.

Her auburn hair was still long and shiny. I felt ten years older than my forty years, but she looked ten younger than hers.

Nothing had changed physically about her, but I wondered if anything else had.

“Do you still blame me?” I asked.

She picked up her mug, then set it down without drinking. She folded her arms around herself like some cold wind had gusted into the restaurant. She stared at me.

“I don’t want to,” she said. “And most days, I don’t. I really don’t, Joe. I

know you weren't responsible. And I know what people suggested about you afterward was horrible. I never believed any of that. I hope you know that." She shifted in the chair. "But there are some days that I need someone to blame."

Tears threatened again in her eyes. Her shoulders and neck stiffened, filling with tension. Her mouth drew tighter. She couldn't look at me.

"And then all I can think about is you and Elizabeth out in the yard," she said, her voice breaking.

Her words weren't anything I hadn't

heard before but they stung like I was hearing them for the first time and my gut rolled.

“I’m sorry,” she said, wiping at her eyes. “I know how unfair that is. But I...” Her voice trailed off.

“It’s okay,” I said. “I understand.”

I understood because most days I felt the same way.

All I could think about was standing out in the yard with Elizabeth.

TWENTY-THREE

It was two weeks before Christmas and Elizabeth and I were standing in the front yard, trying to figure out where to put Santa.

“By the bushes?” I suggested.

Elizabeth rolled her eight-year-old eyes in a gesture borrowed from her mother. She brushed her dark brown hair from her forehead and wrinkled her nose at me. “Daddy. The cars won’t be

able to see him.”

She was already frustrated with me in that we were a week late in getting the decorations out. Lauren was an attorney and had been gone the previous two weekends on business. I had been too lazy to pull them out of the garage in her absence. When it's December and seventy-five degrees out, it's tough to find the motivation to string lights and find the best place for a light-up Santa Claus.

Elizabeth gathered the four-foot Santa in a bear hug and awkwardly walked him out to the middle of the lawn. She set him down, put her hand on her hip,

then nodded.

“Right here, Daddy,” she said. “This is where he goes.”

I knew better than to argue with her. She was as stubborn as her mother and when she made up her mind, it was done. She'd been that way since she was a baby.

I held up an extension cord. “We’re gonna need another one of these.”

She shrugged and smiled, her newly minted braces glistening in the sun. “Okay.”

I dropped the cord in the grass. “You watch Santa. I’ll get another cord.”

She gave me a mocking salute. “Ay ay.”

I shook my head and walked into the house and called for Lauren.

“I’m in the kitchen,” she said.

She stood at the counter next to the sink, a wooden spoon in her hand. She was covered in flour and sprinkles and cookie dough.

“Are we opening a bakery?” I asked. The aroma of freshly baked cookies

made my stomach growl.

“Might as well.”

“We have another extension cord?”

“Why?”

I planted a kiss on the back of her neck before reaching into the fridge for a bottle of water. “Because your daughter has found the perfect resting place for Santa and that place requires another six feet of cord.”

She smiled and shook her head. “Kid likes Christmas.”

“Kid likes everything.” I twisted the top off the bottle and took a drink. “But, yes, she really likes Christmas.”

“Check upstairs in the closet.”

“Ay ay.”

“What?”

I trailed my fingers from her shoulder to the middle of her back and felt her shiver beneath my touch. “Nothing.”

I walked back to the front door. Elizabeth was sitting cross-legged next to Santa, adjusting him ever so slightly.

“Mom says there’s one upstairs. Be right there, doodle.”

She gave me a thumbs-up. “Gotcha.”

I jogged up the stairs to the closet at the end of the hallway, between Elizabeth’s room and the spare bedroom. Her room was a disaster. Stuffed animals piled high in several corners, clothes littering the floor, an unmade bed jumbled with sheets and twisted-up blankets. She’d promised to pick up her room before we went outside and I’d forgotten to check.

I paused for a moment, thinking I should go down and bring her inside.

Have her follow through on her promise before we finished. But, like I often did, I let it go. Elizabeth was a good kid. Easy going, even temperament, generally happy. She had her down moments—she was eight—but by and large, she was a really good kid. If the worst she ever did was fail to pick up her room after saying she'd do so, then we'd have a pretty easy time of it.

It was the weekend and she could clean it up when we were done.

I opened the closet and found the extension cord on the shelf next to several shoe boxes. I closed the door and went back downstairs.

“Find it?” Lauren peeked her head around the corner.

I held up the bundled cord. “Santa will now be properly placed.”

She smiled. “Awesome.”

I walked outside and squinted into the sunshine.

The Santa stood in the center of the lawn. Alone.

TWENTY-FOUR

Lauren and I walked slowly through the hotel's main level, aimlessly wandering through the long corridors of stores and restaurants. We used to walk like that a lot when we were together, quietly, holding hands. Now, both of us had our hands jammed in our pockets, a safe distance apart.

“Are you making a living?” Lauren asked.

I nodded. “Enough of one. I only take the money if I end up being of help.”

Her eyes flitted in my direction. “But you usually end up being of help?”

“Yeah.”

“Have there been any you haven’t been able to help? You said you found the one girl who wasn’t alive. But have there been any you haven’t been able to find?”

My hands pressed tighter against my legs inside my pockets. “No.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Really?”

Every job you've taken, you've found their child?"

A smile emerged on my face and it hurt, as if someone was pulling back the corners of my mouth with sharp hooks. "Irony, huh? The only one I can't find is our daughter. Anyone else, I can help them." I swallowed the smile, didn't want it near my face when I was talking about Elizabeth. "I just can't help us."

We walked for a few more minutes in silence.

"What are you doing now?" I asked.

"I'm still at the firm," she said, her

eyes straight ahead. “After you left, I took a six- month leave. I traveled a little, but basically did nothing.” She smiled a bit in my direction. “I put on almost thirty pounds.”

“You’re kidding.”

She shook her head. “Stopped running and just ate. Watched a lot of shitty TV.”

Lauren played volleyball in college and had always been one of the fittest people I’d known. She’d run two marathons before Elizabeth was born and then settled in to doing a couple of half-marathons a year after that. She’d

been intrigued by the idea of doing an Ironman triathlon if she could ever find the time to train for one. I had never known her to be able to sit still long enough to watch shitty TV.

“Then I realized that I didn’t want to be some fat slob feeling sorry for myself,” she said. “I sold the TV.”

“You sold it?”

She nodded and laughed. “I hated that thing by the time I got to that point. So I sold it to some kid going away to college. Then I started running again. When I dropped the weight, I almost felt like me again.” She cleared her throat.

“Then I went back to work. I’m a partner now.”

“Wow. That’s great.” I wasn’t surprised. She had always been good at her job. She’d been good at everything.

“Keeps me busy,” she said, staring ahead again. “Doesn’t give me a lot of down time. To think about things.” She glanced in my direction. “I just couldn’t stay locked on that day, Joe. It was killing me. Literally, I think.”

I knew that. More than anything, that was what had slowly chipped away at our marriage. She was just as confused and angry and sad as I was, but she

finally reached a point where she had to let go, at least to some degree.

I had yet to reach that point.

“Have you ever learned *anything*?”
Lauren asked.

I shook my head. “A few false starts.”

“What about three years ago? When you came back?”

“A complete waste. It was nothing.”

It had been a man who I later learned had done the same thing to several other

parents, claiming he knew the whereabouts of their child and that he wanted to help. He had details that I thought were solid. Whether he was that good at fooling me or whether I just wanted to hear what he was saying, I wasn't sure.

Turned out he was just a freak who thought he'd found a way to come up with some quick cash, living in a rusted-out trailer in Santee that smelled of menthol and cold medicine. He wanted five hundred bucks up front and I handed it to him. When I pressed him for details on Elizabeth, it was clear to me that he just wanted more cash to fund his meth business and that he had lied to me over

the phone, probably cobbling together information from old news articles and the Internet.

I broke his jaw with three punches, picked up my money off the floor and left.

“Like I told you,” I said to Lauren. “If I found anything, I would’ve called you.”

We walked for a while longer before she pointed at a small coffee shop near the hotel entrance. For a moment, I was back in time, before Elizabeth had been born, when we were dating. I’d never been a coffee drinker before I met Lauren. She rarely drank anything but,

and she had slowly converted me. We hadn't been walking more than half-an-hour since we'd finished the coffee at dinner and she was already jonesing for more.

We ordered and collected our drinks. We found a table by the window that looked out toward the Gaslamp Quarter, the neon lights of the trendy clubs glowing in the dark.

“Have you figured anything out about what's going on with Chuck?” she asked.

The cup was warm in my hands. “Not really. Most people are coming down on the side of the girl.” I told her what

little I'd learned.

“But you don't believe them?”

“No,” I said. “It's weird that he was spending so much time with a teenage girl. It doesn't look good, for sure. But I can't buy into the idea that he was doing something like sleeping with a high school kid.” I shook my head, trying to shake any doubt I had from my thoughts so that my words were true. “Has to be more to it. Has to be a reason they were spending so much time together and has to be a reason this girl is lying. I've been hanging around the school, but I haven't been able to talk to her yet.”

We sat in silence, watching the people walk by outside the window.

“It’s good to see you, Joe,” Lauren finally said.

“You too.”

“I wasn’t sure it would be,” she said. “But then you walked into that hospital room and I realized how much I missed you.”

I nodded, unsure of what to say.

“I never thought I’d be apart from you.”

I nodded again. “I know. Me either. Some days, I turn to say something to you. But you aren’t there.”

She smiled at me, nodding in a way that told me she’d done the same thing.

I pushed the coffee mug away. “But I haven’t moved on, Lauren. I’m still stuck on that day. I’m the same guy I was at the end of our marriage. Maybe a little more reasonable, maybe more realistic, but I’m still the guy that sucked the life out of us.” I paused. “Elizabeth is the first and last thing I think about every day. I’m not sure that’s ever going to change.”

She studied me for a moment. “I know. I can see it in your face. I saw it the second you came into Chuck’s hospital room.”

I always assumed I hid it well. I cut people off when they began to pry. I didn’t talk about my daughter with anyone. I tried to compartmentalize the hurt. But maybe Lauren simply knew me too well.

“I’m not saying I wanna be married to you again, Joe. I can’t go back to that,” Lauren said, her eyes bouncing from me to the window and then back to me. She reached over, laid her hand on top of

mine. “But I think I’d like to spend the night with you tonight.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Nine beers and a couple of tequila shots.

Those were my thoughts as I pried open my eyelids and squinted into the sunshine that seemed to be burning a hole through my hotel window. That's what I remembered drinking at the hotel bar. I was pretty sure I'd put away more than that, but those were the numbers that stuck before the rest of the night went hazy.

I pushed myself out of bed and stumbled toward the window. I pulled the curtain closed, shutting out the bright light that threatened to scorch my retinas. The floor wobbled beneath me and I teetered back into the bed before it spun me out of control. I placed my hands flat against the sheets, bracing myself, and looked at the clock. It was ten in the morning. I couldn't recall the last time I'd slept that late. Couldn't recall the last time I'd had that much to drink, either.

A nice, rhythmic pounding started in my temples and the aroma of stale beer cloaked the dark room. I rolled out of

the bed, stumbled to the shower and turned the water on.

Cold. Full blast.

I stood under the icy water for a minute, letting the low temperature shock me back to life before turning the water up to a more tolerable degree of warmth. Slowly, the pounding subsided, my tongue shrunk from the size of a rug to its normal size and I got out, feeling almost normal.

I stood at the mirror, the towel wrapped around my waist, my hands on the cold marble counter and wondered how angry Lauren was with me now.

“Not a good idea,” I’d said when she brought up spending the night together.

She’d blinked several times and pulled her hand away from mine. “Why not?”

“Come on, Lauren.”

“What?” she asked, anger sweeping across her face. “You think someone’s gonna find her while we’re fucking and you’ll miss the call?”

I held up a hand. “Don’t do this.”

The anger intensified and her eyes lit

up. “Do what? Admit that our relationship didn’t end for me just because you left? That it didn’t end for me because someone took our daughter?” Her mouth puckered up in disgust. “Sorry, Joe. I guess I just didn’t love her like you did.”

“Whatever, Lauren,” I said. “I’m not having this conversation.”

I stood and walked out of the café.

She came out on my heels. She grabbed me by the arm, her nails digging into my skin. “The hell you aren’t. You owe me at least that.”

“I don’t owe you anything.”

Her eyes widened. “Are you serious? You seriously believe that?” She gripped my arm harder. “You were half a day away when you called me to tell me you weren’t coming back. And you don’t think you owe me anything?”

People walking past were giving us a wider berth.

I yanked her hand off my arm. “Our marriage was over, Lauren. We both knew it.”

“*You* knew it,” she said. “You knew it and by default, it was over for me.

And you ran away like a scared little kid. You think it didn't hurt me to see her empty room every day?" She hiccuped on sobs as she spoke. "You think you were the only one torn apart by that? My God! I told you that I still sometimes blame you. But even with that, I wasn't ready to give up our marriage. You didn't come back, so I had to." The anger melted from her face and her mouth opened. Her eyes were unfocused, like she was trying to come up with an answer she didn't have. "I mean, how did you just stop loving me? How did it change overnight? How did..."

"I saw her," I said, cutting her off.

Her expression froze.

“Every time I looked at you,” I explained, the words coming out of my mouth like they contained jagged edges. “I saw Elizabeth.”

She took that in, started to say something, then stopped. Then she pivoted and walked off in a rush.

I didn't go after her, just stood there as still as if I was standing in front of the mirror after a shower. I'd told her the truth. It had become too much to look at my wife every day and see my daughter. I held no illusions that that was my

problem and no one else's. But I hadn't figured out a way to fix it and that was one of the reasons why I had stayed away from Coronado for so many years.

Seeing Lauren at the hospital, at dinner and in the café, I knew that nothing had changed for me.

Every time I looked at her, I saw my daughter who wasn't there.

TWENTY-SIX

I dressed and went downstairs. I found a deli counter, bought the last bagel they had and drove back to the island so I could push Lauren out of my head and focus on Chuck.

I had purposely avoided looking into Chuck's assault because I knew that was going to take me to the Coronado Police Department. If my old home was number one on the list of places I did not want to visit, CPD was number one-and-

a-half. But if I was truly going to help Chuck, there was no way I could get out of it.

I'd been an officer in Coronado for nine years when Elizabeth had disappeared. It was my dream job. I'd gotten my degree in criminal justice from USD and then gone right into the academy with no intention of working anywhere else. I'd grown up on the island and it was a small enough place that the police officers were actually a part of the community rather than people who passed through it.

It was a tough post to pull because if you wanted to be a cop in San Diego,

there was no more idyllic place. The residents were happy to see you, the department was well-funded and you rarely had to deal with more than drunks on the beach. But it was a small department and the open spots were limited and much coveted.

So I worked harder at the academy than I'd ever worked at anything else and graduated at the top of my class. Along the way, I made sure that the CPD brass noticed me. It was the only job I wanted, the only job I interviewed for and the only job I held as a cop.

It just hadn't ended the way I'd envisioned.

I parked the car across the street from the CPD offices and paused on the sidewalk, taking in the building.

It looked nothing like a police headquarters. Single story, open archways, smothered in towering palm trees. It resembled a rec center more than a government building and blended into the rest of the architecture of the island. I used to love going into that building every morning, ready for the tight camaraderie of a small department.

As I crossed the street and opened the glass door, I knew that I'd still feel the tight camaraderie.

I just wouldn't be a part of it.

I didn't recognize the desk sergeant, a guy in his early thirties with close-cut brown hair, squared-off shoulders and a friendly smile. "Morning, sir. How can we help you?"

"Detective Lorenzo in?"

He glanced down at the desk log, then shook his head. "No, I'm sorry, he's out this morning. But maybe I can help?"

He was pleasant, eager, happy to be of service, the same way I had been trained to treat the island's citizens. The

department wanted the residents to feel comfortable around the police officers and it had been drilled over and over into us that we served the community and our jobs were to help them in any way possible.

I realized I was tapping my foot to a silent beat and I pressed my foot to the floor to make it stop. “Is Lieutenant Bazer in?”

The sergeant hesitated for a moment, probably sizing me up more closely now. “I can certainly check. May I have your name, sir?”

“Joe Tyler.”

He did an excellent job of trying to hide his recognition. He nodded like it was a normal request, punched in an extension on the phone pad and told whoever was on the other line that I was inquiring as to whether or not Bazer was available. But he tried to sneak in a quick glance at me, as if he wanted to make sure he wasn't seeing a ghost, and I knew he knew who I was.

He averted my eyes and waited for a moment, the phone still to his ear. Then he raised an eyebrow, said "Okay" and hung up.

A tight smile emerged on his face.

“The lieutenant will be with you in just a moment.”

“Thanks.”

I turned away from him, not eager to watch him continue to steal glances at me. I stared out through the glass doors, the palm trees bouncing softly in the breeze. The last time I'd been in the station, I'd tossed my badge and gun on Bazer's desk and dropped every profane word and phrase I knew on him. I never anticipated being back inside, needing to speak to him again. I thought I was through with him that day when I'd pushed through those glass doors.

Just one more thing I'd been wrong about.

“Joe?”

The voice paralyzed me for a moment, my breath catching like someone had a hand around my throat, my heart stuck in mid-beat. I waited for a long second until my heart fired again and the invisible hand released my throat, letting me breathe. I turned around slowly.

Lieutenant Thomas Bazer hadn't aged much in the years since I'd last seen him. Tiny threads of gray had invaded his razor-cut chestnut hair, a wrinkle or two had worked its way into his

forehead, but otherwise he looked just like the guy I'd told to fuck off seven years before. Eyes that were aware of everything in the room no matter where he looked, a physique that belonged more to a college wrestler than a sixty-year-old cop and wearing a uniform that looked as if it had been pressed onto his body.

He extended his hand. "Nice to see you."

I kept my hands in my pockets. "You got a minute?"

If he took offense, he didn't show it. He motioned for me to follow him back

to his office. The desk sergeant snuck one more look at me as I went past him down the hallway.

Flashes of old conversations ricocheted through my head as I followed Bazer. The Coronado Police Department was the only place I'd worked as an adult and as much as I wanted to shut out the memories of having worked there, they forced their way into my mind like morning sunlight through the blinds. There was an ache in my gut and I couldn't tell if it was because I hated the place or because I missed it.

Bazer's office was a small, square

room, devoid of any personality. Metal cabinets, a desk that housed a computer, a wire basket and not much else. The smell of Lysol permeated the room. He didn't motion for me to sit in one of the two chairs opposite his desk, but I did so anyway.

Bazer shifted the papers on top of his desk. "How are you, Joe?"

"I'm okay."

"Have to say I'm surprised to see you. Heard you were back but didn't expect to hear from you."

"I'm back just temporarily."

He nodded like he understood that and I wondered why I'd felt compelled to say it.

"I'm helping out Chuck Winslow," I said.

Bazer kept his hands on the papers, creating a neatened stack. "He seems to be in need of help. On a couple of things."

I couldn't tell whether it was a dig at Chuck or a statement of fact. "I'm trying to help on both."

Bazer leaned back in his chair.

“We’ve got it covered, Joe.”

“Who jumped him on the beach?”

The lieutenant studied me for a long time. “What are you doing here, Joe?”

“I told you. I’m trying to help Chuck.”

“And we’ve got guys on it.”

“I’m an investigator. His attorney hired me to help.”

“I know Jane hired you,” he said, his tone measured. “I’m aware of that. But it doesn’t mean we’re going to include you in our investigation. You wanna

work around the edges, I'll let you do that."

"I don't need your permission."

Bazer took a long, deep breath and leaned forward, placing his hands flat on the desk. "Are you here to fight with me, Joe? Because if you are, it would save us both a lot of time if you would just say so."

"I'm here to help a friend," I said, telling him half the truth. I probably did want to fight with him, but I wasn't going to admit it. "I was hired as an investigator..."

“And since you used to work for this department, you should have no trouble recalling our policy in working with investigators,” Bazer said, his calm demeanor cracking a bit as he pointed at me. “So you should also know I’m willing to cut you a break to let you work around the edges. Because if you were anybody else, I’d tell you to get off my island. I don’t want anyone near my cases except my officers.”

“That your way of making things up to me?” I asked.

A humorless smile took residence on his face and he chuckled quietly, tapping his fingers on the desk. “So you did

come to fight with me.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

Elizabeth had been gone for exactly twenty days the last time I'd been in Bazer's office.

I dropped a newspaper on his desk. "What the fuck is this?"

Bazer ignored the paper and stared at me. "Sit down, Joe. You look exhausted."

I was beyond exhausted. I'd slept

maybe twenty hours in the twenty days since Elizabeth had disappeared. I'd barely been able to stomach food. Showering had become a near impossible task. I was fried and I knew it.

But that morning's paper had lit a brand new fire under me.

I sat, my hands shaking. "What the fuck is going on, Lieutenant?"

He scanned the newspaper and his mouth set in a firm line. "I can't control the media, Joe."

"You didn't deny that I'm a suspect in

my daughter's disappearance." My voice cracked on the accusation, my throat dry and raw. "You told me I wasn't. Did you lie to me?"

Bazer set the paper down and folded it in half, as if hiding the article would make it go away. He could have set it on fire and eaten the ashes and I knew that I'd never forget that paper for the rest of my life.

Lauren and I had agreed—we wanted media coverage of Elizabeth's disappearance. We felt that the more people were talking about her, the more times her face was seen, the better the chance that we would see her again. We

also knew that doing so would open us up to scrutiny, but we were prepared for that. We hadn't done anything wrong and we just wanted our daughter back.

But that morning's story had rattled me.

"I told you," Bazer said. "You are not a suspect. We know that you didn't have anything to do with Elizabeth's disappearance."

I stood, slamming my fist on his desk so hard the floor rattled. "Then why didn't you say that?"

The paper had quoted Bazer as saying

in direct response to a reporter's question regarding my status: "The investigation is ongoing and no one has been ruled out as a suspect." The article reiterated that I was an officer in the Coronado PD and that Bazer, when pressed, declined further comment.

"You know how it works," Bazer said, nudging the paper in my direction.

"Yeah, I do know how it works," I said. "And you didn't clear me when you had the chance. So what the hell is going on?"

Bazer rubbed at his chin, eyeing me. "Sit down, Joe."

“No.”

“That’s an order, Officer Tyler,” he said, his face icing over. “Sit.”

I did.

“Have you given any more thought to what we talked about a couple of days ago?” he asked.

My mind was like a blender, a million things running through it at once and I couldn’t sort any of them. “Any more thought to what?”

“To stepping down while we look for

Elizabeth.”

“No.”

“I need you to think about it, Joe, because...”

“I meant, no, I’m not taking a leave of absence, Lieutenant.” I was adamant.

He’d approached me a week earlier, suggesting that I take some time off. I’d immediately rejected the idea. I’d gone ten straight days without working from the moment Elizabeth disappeared and I quickly learned that every free moment was an invitation to drag a razor across my wrists. I’d flooded my mind with

theories, second thoughts and nightmares and the last thing I needed was more idle time.

“Joe, I really think...”

“I’m fine, Lieutenant. I don’t want time off. I’m fine.”

“You know that I can make the decision myself, don’t you?” Bazer said, tilting his head, squinting at me like I was difficult to see. “I can send you home right now and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it.”

“I’m fine.” I knew I sounded like a broken record.

“If I suspend you, do you know what that will look like?” Bazer continued. “Do you understand how that will look for you?”

I shifted in the chair, placing my hands on my thighs, willing them to stop shaking. “I am fine, Lieutenant.”

“I’m trying to help you, Joe.”

I didn’t want to keep repeating myself, so I didn’t say anything.

Bazer blinked several times and rubbed harder at his chin. “I saw you arguing with Elizabeth.”

The ticking clock on the wall suddenly intensified, sounding like a jackhammer. “What?”

“Two weeks before she disappeared,” he said, watching me. “At the beach. I was driving by. Early evening.”

I thought hard, mentally flipping through recent images of Elizabeth like there was a rolodex in my head. I stopped on one and the muscles in my stomach clenched.

She and I had gone down to the beach for a walk, waiting for Lauren to get

home for dinner. Elizabeth had run ahead of me, a little further than normal, then detoured into the surf. I didn't mind her stepping into the water, even in the colder months. Like me, she loved the water and had a high tolerance for low temperatures.

What I did mind was that she went out further than she was allowed and had been immediately taken off her feet by a strong rip current.

I sprinted down the beach, bounded into the water and fished her out before the current yanked her out into the bay. I carried her up the sand to the sidewalk. She was a shivering, crying mess and I

should've waited to reprimand her. But seeing her go down in the water had scared the shit out of me. My adrenaline was up and I was mad at her for being so reckless.

I stood her up on the sidewalk and unloaded my anger, the water and her tears forming a puddle on the concrete.

One more moment that I wished I could have back.

I pulled myself back to the present. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Papers get hold of that," he said

slowly. “It’ll spin the focus toward you and the department and it’ll take the focus off of finding Elizabeth.”

My fingertips tingled and my body felt light, like I might float out of the chair. “What the hell are you saying?”

“I’m saying I want you to take some time off. It’ll be good for everyone.”

The ticking clock became a jet engine as I replayed our conversation in my head. Then, the lightbulb went off. “This isn’t about me, is it? It’s about the department.”

He hesitated. “I didn’t say that.”

“Yeah, you did,” I said, nodding. “You don’t like the attention my daughter’s disappearance is bringing to your department.”

Bazer stayed quiet.

“And you tried to leverage me into stepping away by pointedly not clearing me as a suspect.” My gut rolled and my fingers dug into thighs. “And now you’re threatening me, not even fucking around. I don’t leave, you tell some reporter that ‘an anonymous’ source saw me having it out with Elizabeth shortly before she disappeared. Maybe spice it up a little, too? Maybe I hit her? Maybe

throw that out there?”

If Bazer was moved by anything I'd said, he didn't show it. Just knotted his hands on top of his desk. “I think a leave would be good for everyone.”

I unclipped the badge from my shirt and dropped it on the desk. I unbuckled my belt and let it and my weapon fall to the floor. “Fuck you, Lieutenant.”

I walked out of his office.

And the story about me screaming at my daughter before she vanished showed up in the next morning's paper, anyway.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Bazer was right.

I probably had come to fight, the anger that I'd had toward him only building over the years since I'd dropped my badge and gun in his office. Seeing him in person was like adding gasoline to the fire.

But if I wanted to truly help Chuck, I needed to smother the flames.

“Chuck was jumped on the beach?”

Bazer nodded. “Far as we can tell.”

“You’re connecting it to the Jordan case?”

“Not yet. Keeping them separate as for right now.”

“They’re connected.”

Bazer shrugged. “We’ll see. We’ll do the legwork and we’ll see.”

Do the legwork. It was an expression he used often. He was methodical and he expected his department to be. It was

something I learned from him. It was part of the reason I was a good cop and why I had become a good investigator.

But now the words sounded hollow and fake.

“Can I see your case files?” I asked, choking down my anger.

Bazer studied me for a long moment, his eyes hard and still. “Where are you staying?”

I told him.

“I’ll have both files sent over this afternoon.”

There was no reason he couldn't just photocopy and give them to me right then, but he was letting me know he would control what came my way. And he could deny that he was paying me back in some minimal way for hanging me out to dry, but I knew better. There was absolutely zero chance he would've let me near those case files unless some part of him still felt guilty for what he'd done.

“Fine,” I said and stood.

“Stay out of the way, Joe,” Bazer warned. “I mean it. You aren't a cop here anymore. Don't try acting like

one.”

A smile that nearly hurt curled my lips. “So I shouldn’t tell bullshit lies to reporters? Isn’t that what cops around here do?”

He stiffened but didn’t say anything.

“That was out of line,” I said, holding up a hand. “That’s not what cops around here do.” I stared at him, the smile falling away from my face. “That’s just what you do.”

TWENTY-NINE

I was back at the hotel, picking at lunch in a café downstairs and waiting for the case files to show up when two familiar faces approached my table.

Meg, wearing a purple T-shirt and a denim skirt, slid into the seat across from me. Matt, in a polo shirt and shorts long enough to be pants, loomed behind her, looking just as uncomfortable as he had when I'd caught him following me.

“Hi,” Meg said, smiling.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” I asked, running a napkin across my mouth. I glanced at Matt. “Both of you?”

“We’re off this period,” Meg said. “It’s an open campus.”

“Right,” I said. “And you knew I was here how?”

She glanced at Matt.

He shrugged. “Word gets around.”

Apparently so. I just wondered who was spreading the word.

“What’s up?” I asked, leaning back in my chair.

“I think there’s something you should know,” Meg said.

I glanced at Matt, then back to her.
“Okay.”

She twisted the silver bracelet circling her wrist, being careful not to look at me. “Things aren’t right with Meredith and her dad, okay?”

I looked at Matt again. He was staring down at Meg’s back.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She brought her gaze back to mine and sucked on her upper lip for a moment. “I think he might’ve been the one that hit her.”

Finally. Someone not afraid to call out Jon Jordan.

“Why do you think that?” I asked.

“Things she’s said to me.” She moved her hands to her hair and pulled it back. “He’s not a good guy.”

No kidding. “What has she said to you?”

She dropped her hands and her hair fanned out on her shoulders. “Just stuff.”

I shook my head. “That isn’t gonna get it done for me, Meg. You want me to believe you? I need more than that.”

She glanced up at Matt, who finally moved his eyes to me.

“He’s hit her before,” he said, his voice low, almost like he was tired. “I was there when it happened.”

“You were there?”

He gave a short nod. “Yeah. She

goes out with my friend.”

“Derek?” I asked.

Surprise started to cross his face, but he put it together quickly. “Yeah. We were at her house. She and her dad were arguing out in the pool house. He came storming out, totally pissed off. Derek went in as soon as her dad left. They came out and Meredith’s face was totally swollen. He’d slapped the hell out of her.”

I looked down at my hand. It was clenched into a fist. I unclenched it and looked at Matt. “What did she say about it?”

“Nothing, to me,” Matt said, resting his hands on the back of Meg’s chair. “Derek told me later that night. She told him that it wasn’t the first time her father hit her.”

“You ever seen anything else?” I asked. “Either of you?”

Matt shook his head.

“A bruise on her back,” Meg said, wincing at the memory. “Like the size of a football, right in the middle of her back. We were changing after practice at the end of last season. I didn’t say anything because I figured it was just

from practice or something. She's always driving, getting knocked down and hitting the floor, getting pretty banged up. But after they told me about the thing with her dad, I don't know. I've just assumed it wasn't from practice."

My fingers folded back into my palm. "What about her mom? You guys ever see anything weird with her?"

"She's hardly ever around," Meg said, shaking her head. "Never comes to games or stuff like that. She's nice when I do see her at the house sometimes, but I've never seen anything."

Matt nodded in agreement.

Maybe Jordan was hiding his wife to hide the bruises. I was making a leap but it made sense to me.

“So why would she blame Chuck?” I asked them. “Why him?”

Meg shook her head again, a perplexed look on her face. “I don’t know. I thought she really liked him. Because we all did.”

“She’s probably afraid of him,” Matt said. “Her dad. Everybody else is.”

“Then why would they even file a

report?” I asked, thinking more out loud than expecting an answer. “Why even acknowledge it?”

“Her face was pretty messed up,” Meg said, wincing again. “I don’t know how they could’ve hidden it.”

That seemed reasonable and possible, but it still felt odd to me.

Meg turned and glanced up at Matt. I couldn’t see her face, but I could see his. He was frowning at her, shaking his head.

“What?” I asked.

They held each other's gaze for a moment longer, then Matt shrugged and looked away.

Meg turned back to me. "There's something else...but it's kind of weird."

I didn't say anything.

"There's always been this...rumor," Meg said.

"What kind of rumor?"

"About Meredith," she continued, choosing her words carefully. "I've never believed it and I've never seen anything to make me believe it. And I

never asked her about it because I just figured it was jealous bullshit from other kids who didn't like her."

"What's the rumor?" I asked, trying to keep a handle on my patience.

"It's stupid," Matt muttered, turning around, like he couldn't bear to watch.

Meg took a deep breath, then let it out, her words tumbling out in a rush. "That Meredith was a hooker."

THIRTY

“Excuse me?” I said, wondering if she was using some sort of teenager lingo I wasn’t familiar with.

Matt turned back around. “Told you it was stupid.”

Meg was the one to frown now. “I know it’s stupid, Matt. But I just thought I should tell him.”

“People say she’s a hooker?” I asked.

“A prostitute?”

“Not people,” Matt said, a disgusted smirk on his face. “Dumbass chicks at school. Fucking useless.”

“I’m not saying I believe it,” Meg said, defensive now. “I’m just saying people have been saying it about her for a long time now.”

“She ever say anything to you about it?” I asked.

“No. Not once. I’ve never believed it,” she said, her cheeks flushing slightly with embarrassment. “I just...I’m worried about her. She’s my best

friend. I thought you should know.”

The thought of an eighteen-year-old hooker wasn't that far out of the realm. But one that was a star athlete and came from a wealthy family pushed pretty close to the limits of believability. I remembered high school. If rumors weren't flying, it meant the day hadn't started yet.

“It's okay,” I said, not wanting Meg to feel stupid for having told me. “You were right to say something.”

She sat up a little straighter and tried to smile. Her concern for Meredith seemed genuine.

“Come on,” Matt said, tapping Meg on the shoulder. “We need to get back.”

Meg stood and slid her hand into Matt’s before looking at me. “You coming to practice today?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Is Meredith?”

“I saw her this morning,” she said. “Told me she’d be there, that she was ready to go.”

I nodded. I’d be ready to go, as well.

THIRTY-ONE

My first inclination was to find Jon Jordan, throw him out in the street and drive over him a couple of times.

But aside from making me feel better, I wasn't sure what that would accomplish. It would ultimately take Meredith to straighten everything out. I was better off going to her. My main goal was to get Chuck off the hook and I didn't want to lose sight of that.

I found the hotel's business center and went to work on the Internet, checking out Jordan.

What I found left me frustrated.

Jordan, by all accounts, was a model citizen. Not only was he richer than rich, but the man gave a lot of money away to multiple charitable organizations. He also gave his time, serving as a board member for several of those groups. The irony that both he and his wife served as board chairs for a local battered women's shelter did not escape me. But there wasn't anything that made me think less of Jordan. If anything, it muddled even further who he

was.

After two hours of finding nothing incriminating, I gave up and, after changing into gym shorts, headed to Coronado for basketball practice.

The team was already in the gym when I got there. I spotted Meredith shooting with Megan at the far end of the gym as I walked in. Meredith glanced in my direction, said something to Megan, then went back to dribbling the ball.

“You made it,” Kelly Rundles said, coming up the sideline to meet me.

“We had a deal.”

She nodded. “Yes, we did.”

“To be fair, though, you should know you may take some heat for having me here.”

She didn’t appear surprised by that. “I’ll be fine, but thanks for the warning. I’ve got some paperwork I’ll need you to fill out after practice. Just background check stuff. You ready?”

I eyed Meredith at the opposite end as she spun to the basket. “Sure.”

Kelly followed my eyes to Meredith. “You wanna talk to her afterward, that’s

fine. But not during practice. Clear?”

“Crystal.”

She blew the whistle and the girls hustled to the middle of the floor. She gave them some preliminary instructions and then the girls broke into lines at the far end of the floor.

“Can you run this?” she asked, referring to the drill they were about to start.

“Yeah.”

“Good. Get in line and run with them.”

I thought she meant *run* as in supervise, not *run* as in run, but I jogged down to the end of the floor, aware of the girls giggling and whispering as I took my place at the end of the middle line. Meredith avoided my eyes, bending down and messing with her shoelaces.

The drill required a player in each of the three lines to sprint to the other end where two other players waited as defenders. The shooter from the original three then backpedaled on defense, facing the two defenders as they came back down and attempted to score. It simulated the fast break and having to

get back on defense. A fantastic drill.

If you're in shape to run it.

After five minutes, I was gassed and covered in sweat. I'd clanked a ten-footer and been beaten badly back on defense twice.

As I panted, trying to get my breathing under control, I marveled again at how well the girls on the team played together. They communicated constantly, yelling at one another at every opportunity. They moved the ball with ease and always seemed to know where their teammates were supposed to be.

I was up again, a girl named Theresa on my left and Kristin, the girl whose footwork I'd corrected the day before, on my right. Meredith and Megan waited for us on the other end on defense.

Theresa broke hard for the basket and I bounced the ball to her beneath Meredith's hands. Theresa whipped the ball over Megan's head to Kristin. Meredith rotated down quickly to guard Kristin, so she fired the ball back to me at the top. I buried the jumper and sprinted back to the other end.

Meredith had the ball on the right and

Megan flared out to my left as they pushed forward. Smart. Spread the floor, attack from both sides and make me choose. It was a subtle thing, but that kind of movement usually separated the better players from the rest.

Meredith's eyes were impassive as she approached, the ball bouncing rhythmically beneath her left hand as she came down. She quickened her pace and came right at me. I stepped up to meet her. She flicked her eyes to her left, looking for Megan. I took another step up and shaded that way to see if I could deflect the pass I thought was coming.

But there was no pass.

Meredith switched the ball to her right hand and accelerated past me before I could recover. She laid the ball up off the backboard and it dropped softly through the net.

Kelly blew the whistle and yelled “Stations!” and the girls sprinted in groups of three to the side baskets.

I stayed on the baseline, my hands clasped behind my head, waiting for my breath to come back.

“You alright?” Kelly asked, coming up by my side, her eyes scanning the

floor.

“No,” I said. “I’m about to die.”

“You’ll be fine.” Then she laughed. “Meredith destroyed you on that last play.”

I nodded. “She’s good.”

“You just wait,” she said. “That was nothing.”

And Kelly was right. Over the next two hours, Meredith dominated the practice. If a shot needed to be made, she made it. If the defense needed to make a stop, she found a way to the

ball. She out-shined all of her teammates in every drill, in every way, and when they scrimmaged for the last ten minutes, she demonstrated how superior she was to every other girl in the gym by scoring at will, and anticipating everything the opposing five wanted to do.

And she did it all with ease and with an expression that gave away nothing.

Kelly adjourned the practice and cornered me as the girls trickled off the floor. She handed me a piece of paper. It was the background check she'd told me about.

“Get that back to me tomorrow,” she said. “You have a sport coat?”

“Excuse me?”

“A coat. You’ll have to wear a coat on the bench tomorrow night for the game,” she explained.

“You want me on the bench?”

“You’re a coach, aren’t you?”

I didn’t know what I was. “You gonna clear that with Stricker?”

Subtle contempt settled on her face. “I’ll handle Stricker.”

I took a deep breath and my heart settled down to a manageable rhythm. “Then I’ll find a coat.”

She nodded and walked away.

I picked up my bag and walked out into the hallway between the gym and the lockers. Meredith came blazing out of the locker room and, like before, crashed into me.

She backed up, not looking me in the eye. “Sorry. Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I said, turning to block the door. “But we need to talk.”

“I can’t,” she said. “Not right now.”

The bruise on her face had faded to a pale yellow.

“Come on, Meredith,” I said. “My friend’s in the hospital, waiting to go to jail and he doesn’t deserve to be. Does he?”

She looked up from the floor. The steely gaze from the gym was gone, replaced by the expression of a scared teenage girl.

“I can’t,” she said. “I have to go.”

“Is it your dad?” I asked. “Is he the one that did this to you? And now you’re scared of him?”

Her expression shifted, somewhere closer to confusion, but I couldn’t tell if it was because I was right or wrong.

“I have to go,” she said and pushed past me.

I took a step after her, then stopped. Chasing her wasn’t the right thing to do. She was scared and I didn’t want to make it worse.

She shoved open the glass doors and disappeared outside.

THIRTY-TWO

The next morning, I faxed the background check to the school and I walked over to Horton Plaza to find that sport coat. I was thinking that I needed to call Lauren, too. I thought maybe I'd been too harsh with her and that maybe talking some more about us and about Elizabeth might be good for both of us. I still wasn't sure about spending the night with her, but I was wrong in saying that I didn't owe her anything. I did owe her something. I just wasn't sure what that

was.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket as I walked, but couldn't get myself to dial her number. I'd been alone for a long time and I wasn't used to sharing my thoughts with anyone. Elizabeth was always on my mind, but I kept her to myself. She wasn't something I shared. In hotel rooms and on long walks, I would talk to her. But I rarely talked *about* her and the prospect of doing so, even with the one person who missed her as much as I did, wasn't enticing.

I shoved the phone back in my pocket and kept walking.

Horton Plaza was much as I remembered it. Downtown's only shopping mall, with the avant-garde design, crowds of shoppers and homeless people seemingly intermingling at the fringes of the complex.

I found a sixty-dollar navy coat on a clearance rack in one of the department stores. Because I hadn't packed anything other than jeans, shorts, and a couple of shirts, I found a pair of dress pants, a button-down shirt and some black dress shoes to complete my coaching ensemble. I might not know what I was doing, but I'd look the part.

As I exited the store, I glanced at the reflection in the glass doors and picked up two guys following me. Two guys I'd already met.

I stopped, turned, and looked directly at Trevor Boyle and James Hanley, Jordan's men.

I held up the bag full of clothes. "Sale. Couldn't turn it down."

The friendly pretense they'd carried out before was gone. Both wore decidedly unfriendly expressions on their faces.

"Let's go," Hanley said, nodding

toward the walkway.

“I like it better here. And I’m not done shopping.”

“We could carry you out,” Boyle said.

I stared at him. He was maybe six feet tall, on the south side of two-hundred pounds. Not quite as big as me and not nearly as angry with the world.

“You could try,” I said.

Hanley pulled back his coat far enough so I could see the nine-millimeter tucked into his waistline. “Let’s go.”

We started walking. We were on the west side of the mall, near the parking structure, away from the crowds. The sunlight was bright, almost blinding, after being inside in the artificial light.

“Where is she?” Hanley asked.

“Who?”

Boyle moved and jabbed me in the kidney with a fist.

I grunted and dropped my bag to the ground. He moved again and I stepped to the side, grabbing his shirt collar. I swung him around and sent him to the

pavement.

Hanley's hand moved toward his waist. I stepped into him and grabbed his wrist, pushing it in against his body. I swept my right leg behind his knees and knocked him off balance. I threw my right elbow into the center of his chest. The air whooshed out of him as he fell back. I yanked the gun out of his pants as he fell toward the ground.

Boyle was crouching, ready to jump at me. I pivoted and stuck the gun on his nose. "Don't."

Boyle's eyes narrowed to the gun. I swung my foot forward and kicked him

in the balls. He fell back, clutching at his groin, his eyes rolling up in his head.

I turned back to Hanley who was now sitting up. “Who?”

Hanley was rubbing his chest. “What?”

“You said ‘Where is she?’ Who is ‘she?’?”

Hanley’s eyes dropped down to slits. “Meredith Jordan, you asshole.”

Meredith’s name was like a hammer to my chest and it took me a moment to process it. “Meredith?”

“She didn’t come home last night,” Hanley said, still massaging his sternum. “We need to find her.”

“And Jordan sent you after me?” I asked.

Hanley nodded.

“Did he report her missing?”

“I don’t know. He just told us to find you.”

“Why didn’t he send Gina?” I asked.

He frowned. “I have no clue, man.

We work for Mr. Jordan. We don't ask questions. We do what he tells us."

The color was coming back in Boyle's face now, but his hands were still glued to his crotch. He wasn't in any condition to come at me.

"Jordan really thinks I took his daughter?" I asked, not believing even he was that stupid.

Hanley shrugged. "I don't know. But he's pretty crazy right now. She didn't come home from school and he can't find her."

Crazy probably didn't describe it. I

remembered the feeling all too clearly and I wasn't sure there was a word that captured it.

“I don't have her and I don't know where she is,” I said. “So leave me the fuck alone.”

I started walking away.

“My gun?” Hanley whined. “Hey, come on, man. That's mine.”

I dropped it in the bag with my clothes. “Tell Jordan to buy you a new one.”

THIRTY-THREE

As I walked back to my hotel, the urge to go look for Meredith Jordan kept poking at me. I'd spent the last several years looking for kids exactly like her and it was as if someone had turned my switch on.

But I had no idea where to look and I needed to remember that while she may have been the key to getting Chuck free, she wasn't the reason I returned to Coronado. I didn't need to be picking

up random causes along the way. My obligation was to help Chuck and I would find a way to do that without her if I had to.

I grabbed lunch on my way back to the hotel, found an iron and ironing board in the closet of my room and managed not to burn myself or the clothes as I worked the wrinkles out of my new outfit. After a half hour of flipping channels, I dressed and headed to the high school.

Robert Stricker was the only one in the gym when I walked in.

He lifted his head in my direction. "Coach. You're early."

“Nothing else to do.”

He nodded at the stack of chairs against the wall. “You’re in luck. I got things for you to do.”

“This where you tell me what my salary’s gonna be?” I walked over to the chairs.

“Yep. You’ll love it. Gotta bunch of zeroes in it. Unfortunately for you, it starts with a zero.”

I put my hands on a couple of the chairs. “You don’t have a problem with me coaching tonight?”

“Kelly’s without an assistant,” he said, not looking at me. “You’re background check cleared. She wants you to fill in. She’s okay with it, I’m okay with it.” He glanced at me. “Long as you behave.”

I pulled two chairs off the wall and added them to the row that he’d begun. “You hear anything about Meredith Jordan missing?”

He froze before he could set the next chair down. “What are you talking about?”

“Those two...associates that escorted

me out of your office? They came to see me this morning. Jordan's gone off the deep end because she didn't come home last night."

He set the chair down. "Hadn't heard that. If she wasn't at school today, she can't play tonight." He tilted his head to the side. "And if that's the case, you guys are seriously screwed."

"Why's that?"

"Because Episcopal is as good as we are. When Meredith's playing. Without her, we're gonna be hurting."

"So you're more worried about the

game than the fact that she's disappeared?"

His face clouded with a shot of anger and he kicked the chair into place. "That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?"

He folded his massive arms across his chest. "Look, the kids here? They aren't like kids at other schools. They've got a lot of money and when I say a lot, I mean more than you or I have ever dreamed of. You've seen the cars in the lot, seen this campus. They are living in Fantasyland."

He was saying the same things Kelly Rundles had told me. I grabbed two more chairs from the wall and let him continue talking

“And their parents?” He chuckled, but there was no humor in his tone. “They treat these kids like adults. No rules, no discipline, no supervision. Let them run loose like college kids on spring break.” The humorless smile on his face hardened. “So it’s not like a student here hasn’t disappeared for a night or three. Maybe they should check the resorts in the Caribbean. Or the penthouse at The W.”

He shook his head and grabbed a

couple more chairs.

“But doesn’t her situation make it a little different this time?” I asked. “With everything that’s happened to her?”

Stricker set the chairs down and unfolded them, taking a deep breath. “I don’t know. Maybe. But if we called 911 every time one of them spent a night away from home, we’d wear out emergency dispatch.”

I positioned the last two chairs at the end of the row. The seats for both teams were in place now. “I’ve heard, though, that Meredith is a pretty good kid. Maybe different from the others here.”

He pointed a finger across the gym to the bleachers and motioned for me to follow him. “She is a good kid. So, yeah, maybe it’s a little different.”

He stuck a key into a small panel on the wall. A small whirring noise started up behind the tall wooden bleachers and they slowly began to creep outward.

“You ever get a weird vibe from her father?” I asked.

“I get weird vibes from a lot of people.”

“I mean, anything weird going on with

his daughter,” I said.

“You mean sick weird?”

I nodded.

“No,” he said, shaking his head.
“Doesn’t seem like him. He’s got issues, but not like that.”

“What kind of issues?”

The bleachers locked into place and the whirring died. Stricker pulled the key out of the wall and looked at his watch. “I’m gonna go check attendance, see if she was here today. Like I said, if she wasn’t, she’s not playing.”

“Jordan can’t control that?” I asked, thinking of parents I’d known that would skirt any rule for the sake of their child. “If she shows up, not something he can do to get her eligible?”

Stricker’s face darkened as he headed for the exit. “I follow the rules. And Jordan doesn’t control me.”

THIRTY-FOUR

Kelly Rundles showed up a few minutes later, dressed sharply in a navy pant suit and carrying a giant bag of basketballs over her shoulder.

I asked her if she'd heard anything from Meredith and her mood took a nose dive.

“No.” Her mouth puckered like she'd bit into a lemon. “Why are you asking me that right now?”

I told her.

“Shit,” she muttered. “We need her tonight.”

Her concern was different than mine. I was thinking about all the things that might be going on with Meredith. Kelly, as any coach would, was thinking about the game.

She un-puckered her lips and shrugged her shoulders. “Oh well. If she’s not here, she’s not here. Nothing we can do about it. Still gotta play the game.”

Again, she was smart. She wasn't going to fret over something she couldn't control and she certainly wouldn't show any frustration over it to the other girls.

Stricker came in through the doors at the other end of the hall, his jaw tight and his cheeks sucked in.

“Recorded as absent,” he said. “Even if she shows, she can't play.”

“Okay,” Kelly said.

“I'm sorry, Kelly,” Stricker said, shaking his head. “Nothing I can do.”

She set the bag of balls down. “Not

your fault. She knows the rules. So do the other girls. We'll be fine."

But they weren't.

The girls were rattled in the locker room as soon as Kelly mentioned that Meredith wouldn't be playing. Eyes wide, they began to fidget and I could see the anxiety take hold.

Except for Megan. She just stared at her hands and shook her head

They carried the anxiety out on the floor with them. They were disoriented, out of sync, unable to do what they'd been prepared to do. They missed open

shots, threw the ball away, missed defensive assignments. Kelly yelled, screamed, pleaded, all to no avail. I sat there, helpless and mute.

Episcopal, smelling blood early, went ahead and cut open a gaping wound in the Coronado team. They won by thirty two points.

Kelly kept her post game speech short, all of the girls hanging their heads, the collective disappointment clouding the room like the smoke after a brushfire. There was no point in getting on them. They knew they had come out and tanked. Their own knowledge of the failure was far more effective than

anything she could've told them.

She turned to me in the hallway after we'd stepped out of the locker room.

“You going to look for her?”

“I'm not sure.”

“Wouldn't finding her help your case with Chuck?”

“I don't know. She won't talk to me so far. And it's not like her father is a fan of mine. Not my business.”

She perched her hands on her hips, her elbows forming sharp angles at her sides. “I think you should look for her.”

“No offense, but I’m not here to save your program.”

She squinted at me for a moment, chewing on her bottom lip. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Yeah, it is,” I said, not believing her. “You didn’t ask me a single question about her well-being. After I told you about her absence, you went right into game mode. And you’re still in it. You want her back so that you don’t rack up any more thirty-point losses, not because she might be in any kind of trouble.”

She stared at me for a long time, then picked up the bag of balls and slung them over her shoulder. “Fuck you, Tyler. It’s my job to win games, but I care about those girls, too. My job tonight wasn’t to work them up into a frenzy over a missing friend, it was to get them to put that aside and play basketball. What should I have done?”

I didn’t answer.

She raised both of her eyebrows. “Tell me. What should I have done? Had them hold hands in a circle and talk about how much they missed Meredith?” She let the eyebrows come down and shook her head. “Don’t act

like you understand me. I don't care if she ever plays again. I said you should find her because it's the right thing to do and you would seem to know how to do it."

She adjusted the bag on her shoulder. "That's the only reason and fuck you for thinking otherwise."

THIRTY-FIVE

I stood in the hallway for a few minutes, thinking over Kelly's words.

Had I been unfair with her? She hadn't asked if I thought Meredith was alright, hadn't asked if I knew what might've happened to her and she didn't ask any of the other girls if they knew anything.

She'd been focused on basketball.

But over the course of the week, I'd seen her demonstrate genuine concern and empathy for her players, not to mention the conversation we'd shared in the diner. She liked Meredith and not just for her playing ability. She hadn't struck me as one of those win at all costs coaches. I hadn't seen anything to indicate that her win-loss record superseded everything else.

Until she told me she thought I should look for Meredith.

Her timing stunk. It was hard for me to take it any other way when she walked out of a dead locker room after a crushing loss without their best player—

and then asked me to go find that best player. I didn't think she could switch gears that quickly, moving from defeated coach to concerned adult.

But maybe the truth was somewhere in between.

I walked outside and Gina Coleman was waiting for me.

"Tough loss," she said, gesturing at the gym.

I nodded.

"You heard about Meredith, I assume?"

“Still missing?”

“Yeah. Didn’t come home from school yesterday afternoon, no one’s heard from her since.” She hesitated. “In fact, I think you were the last one to see her.”

“How’s that?”

“Couple of the girls said they saw you talking to her in the hall after practice.”

“I tried talking to her,” I said. “But she wouldn’t talk to me. Ran out of here and I didn’t follow her.”

She folded her arms across her chest.
“You didn’t follow her?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“Just checking.”

“Don’t do this, Gina.”

“Do what?”

“Stand here and jerk me around,” I said. “Show up outside the door to the gym and brace me. If you think I have anything to do with Meredith’s disappearance, you’re fucking nuts. I know Jordan sent his guys after me this morning. Those two are stupid. You

aren't."

She rolled her shoulders forward and some of the tension in them disappeared. She uncrossed her arms and tilted her head toward the parking lot. "Come on."

"No thanks," I said. "I've got my own ride."

She took a deep breath, let it out and looked at me. "Jordan wants to talk."

"Tell him to call me and make an appointment."

She blinked quickly several times.

“You’re gonna wanna talk to him, Joe.”

“Doubt that.”

“I’m serious,” she said, leveling her eyes with mine. “And that’s not a threat. You should talk to him.”

“Really? Why’s that? He gonna make more wiseass remarks about *my* daughter?” I shook my head. “I’ll be fine.”

An empty smile settled on her face. “I know you’re pissed. You should be. I don’t blame you. Sending those two ass-clowns after you was a mistake. He knows it now.” She paused. “He wants

to talk to you and it's not what you think."

I didn't see anything that told me she was lying to me. She was serious and she wasn't trying to strong arm me. And other than dumping me on my ass that first night, she'd been straight with me.

"Then tell me what it is," I said.

"Just trust me." She pointed her thumb over her shoulder. "He's out here in the lot. He can tell you himself."

THIRTY-SIX

Jordan was prowling next to a Black Cadillac Escalade, pacing back and forth, wired with nervous energy, his eyes on the ground.

He looked up as we approached.
“What took so long?”

Gina held out her hands. “Relax, Jon.”

He glared at her for a moment before

leveling his gaze on me. “You haven’t seen my daughter?”

“I saw her yesterday afternoon after school,” I said. “That’s it.”

He kept his eyes locked on me. They were bloodshot and tired. I doubted that he’d slept for even a moment the previous night. I remembered those nights.

He glanced at Gina. “You tell him?”

“Just that you wanted to talk to him,” she said, leaning against the back of the SUV.

“Tell me what?” I asked.

Jordan stopped his pacing and ran a hand over his jaw. “I’m going to hire you.”

“You’re going to hire me?”

He started pacing again. “I want you to find Meredith. Find out where she is, what’s happened to her.”

“Have you contacted the police?”

He waved a hand in the air. “She’s eighteen and it’ll be hours before they even finish the paperwork. I’m hiring you.”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“You’ve already started looking into her life,” he said, ignoring me. “Talking to her friends about what happened between her and Winslow. It makes sense.”

“No.”

“And I want you to start tonight,” Jordan said. “Right now.” He stopped in his tracks and looked at me. “You need some kind of retainer or something?”

“You need to listen to me,” I said.

“I’m not working for you. I’m not for hire.”

“Doesn’t matter how much,” Jordan said, staring through me. “Just tell me what your fee is and I’ll triple it to find Meredith.”

I looked at Gina. “Is he deaf?”

She pursed her lips and turned in Jordan’s direction. “Tell him what you’re offering, Jon.”

“I don’t care what he’s offering,” I said, irritated that they were talking around me and not listening to me. “It doesn’t matter. Both of you need to open

your fucking ears. He treats me like an asshole, sends his two gorillas after me, threatens me? Are you kidding me? I'm not working for him." I pointed to Jordan. "I'm not working for you."

Jordan's eyes bore into me. "You find my daughter, your friend walks."

I wasn't expecting that and it caught me off guard.

"Did you hear me?" he asked. "Locate Meredith and we drop the charges against Winslow."

"I heard you," I said, working it over in my head. "But if Meredith is gone,

there's no witness against Chuck. Charges will fall if she's not around to corroborate." I paused. "I don't think I need your offer."

Anger flashed through his eyes and he took a step toward me. "I will make certain that he rots in that prison."

I shrugged. "Good luck."

He started to say something, then stopped, his mouth hanging open. Then it closed. He took a step closer to me, looking at me, like he was trying to get a read on me. "I'd think that with your history, you'd wanna help out a father looking for his daughter," he said,

staring at me. “Or maybe what I heard was true.”

His words sliced like razor blades down my spine. “Do not talk about my daughter.”

His mouth turned into a small sliver of a smile. “They couldn’t find her, right? And a few of the cops, some of your colleagues, what was their theory?”

“Don’t,” I said, feeling it coming up from my gut.

“They think maybe you did it and hid her so well no one will ever find her,” he said, pointing at me. “That this whole

grieving thing is an act.”

I reached out, grabbed his finger and snapped it back. He screamed and I used my left hand to smash him in the jaw. He sagged to the ground and I let go of him.

Gina approached quickly from my right. I blocked her first strike and grabbed her by the throat, feeling her larynx against my palm. Both of her hands went to my wrist and she started gagging immediately. Her eyes bulged. The pulse in her neck beat against my fingers.

And then Jordan started whimpering.

It wasn't just from the broken finger and the punch to his face. It was something else, something distinct and unique, something that forced its way out of your gut because panic and fear and hurt were all merging into something foreign and the body didn't know what to do with it. So it sent it out in the form of a howl, a cry, a whimper.

I recognized that whimpering because it had once come out of me. It had nearly broken me.

THIRTY-SEVEN

I let go of Gina and she fell to her knees, coughing, gasping, clutching at her throat. Jordan was sitting up, his left hand cradling his right, staring at his knees, making that sound. The anger that had erupted so quickly in me was gone. Frustration and emptiness replaced it, none of it the fault of Jon Jordan. He'd just been the catalyst to let it out.

He looked up at me. The menace and arrogance that seemed permanently

etched on his face gone, replaced with the bewildered look of someone who has had a child ripped from his life.

“I just want to find her,” he croaked.
“Find my daughter.”

I helped Jordan to his feet. I reached down to Gina, but she swatted my hand away, getting up on her own. She kept her hand at her neck, rubbing at the bright red marks on her skin. Her teeth were clenched, like she wished my neck was trapped in her jaws.

“You seriously want my help?” I asked Jordan.

He was still holding his right hand in his left. He nodded. “Yes.”

“And if I find Meredith, you drop all the charges against Chuck?”

He hesitated, then nodded. “That’s the deal.”

“You know he didn’t do anything to her, don’t you?” I asked. “Why else would you make that deal? Why else would you want to hire me?”

Jordan let go of his hand and it fell to his side, the finger bent at an awkward angle. “My daughter told me that Winslow assaulted her. That’s not a

lie. That's what she told me and I believe her. But I'll let it go to get her back." His tongue slid over his bottom lip for a moment, then disappeared back into his mouth. "And I'm hiring you because you're supposedly good at what you do."

Jordan was full of shit, of course. He may have been willing to drop the charges against Chuck, but if he really believed that Chuck had harmed Meredith, he'd go after him in a different manner. I wasn't sure if he thought I believed him or if he didn't care, but I didn't for a moment buy that he'd let Chuck walk without some sort of payback.

“If I do it,” I said, looking at Jordan, then Gina. “I do it my way.”

Jordan nodded. Gina kept her teeth locked around my invisible neck.

“No interference from either of you or anyone else that works for you.”

Jordan nodded again.

I stared at him for a long moment. “You really understand what I’m telling you? I’m gonna talk to you, to your wife, to your employees, to her teachers. Anybody I please.”

He stiffened and dissension flitted through his eyes.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” I backed up and waved at him. “No chance. See you later.”

I turned and heard whispers behind me, feet shuffling against the asphalt.

“Wait,” Jordan said. “Okay.”

I stopped and turned around. “Okay what?”

“Your way,” he said, glancing at Gina. “No interference.”

I wasn't sure I believed him, but the chance to get Chuck off the hook legally was worth attempting to find Meredith.

“Alright,” I said. “Tell your wife I’ll be at your home to speak to her at nine tomorrow morning. Alone.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

“I’m not sure how that’s relevant,” Olivia Jordan said, peering at me over a bright red coffee mug.

We were sitting on uncomfortable bar stools at the counter in her expansive kitchen.

I slowly spun my mug on the counter. “Not sure it is, but I’m asking anyway.”

Olivia gave me a thin smile. Jon

Jordan's wife was beautiful. Large, oval blue eyes, strong cheekbones, full-lipped mouth, all touched up with the barest amount of makeup. Her long, thick hair, the color of chestnuts, was held back stylishly with a taupe silk scarf. She looked to me like she was in her early thirties, but given Meredith's age, she was probably a decade older.

The scarf in her hair matched her blouse, which was untucked over expensive-looking denim jeans that flared dramatically at her ankles to expose patent leather pumps.

She crossed her legs and tried to make the smile work. "Jon and I met here in

San Diego.”

“You’re from here?”

“No. Los Angeles originally.”

I took a sip of the coffee. She was dancing around my original question, so I repeated it. “So how did you meet Jon?”

She looked into her mug and thought for a long moment before she spoke. “I was working in one of his hotels. His first hotel, actually. The Zenith. It’s in Las Vegas.” She shifted her eyes to me. “Do you know it?”

I shook my head.

“It’s a little boutique hotel just off the Strip. This was before off the Strip was fashionable,” she explained. “The area was a mess, but Jon thought he could change it. And he did. He built a nice hotel, the clientele followed and so did more nice hotels. Then he spread his empire back here to San Diego.” She smiled. “It’s typical Jon.”

I nodded.

Olivia seemed as if she was waiting for me to say something. When I didn’t, she gave a tiny shrug. “Anyway, he introduced himself to me one evening,

we had dinner and..." She held out her hand. "Here we are."

"How long have you been married?"

She arched a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "Truthfully, Mr. Tyler, I don't see how this is going to help you find Meredith and I don't see why Jon would've agreed to this."

Initially, he hadn't. When I said that I wanted to speak to his wife the previous evening in the Coronado parking lot, he'd once again started to object. But before he completely pissed me off, Gina Coleman interceded and told him that this was part of the deal in hiring

me. He hadn't liked it, but then agreed as long as he could be there.

"I'm not negotiating," I'd said. "I will speak to your wife alone or I won't speak to anyone on your behalf and our deal is off."

I couldn't get a handle on whether he genuinely didn't want me to speak to his wife or whether he just didn't like the fact that he wasn't in control. Regardless, Gina whispered in his ear, he agreed and Olivia was at home, alone, when I arrived to speak with her.

"Do you want to find Meredith?" I asked Olivia.

“What kind of question is that? She’s my daughter. I haven’t slept in two nights.”

“Then trust me. Your husband hired me. He agreed to let me come here and talk to you. Let me do my job.”

She pushed her coffee away as if she’d suddenly realized it contained cyanide.

“Nineteen years,” she finally said. “We were married for a year before we had Meredith.”

“She’s a good kid?”

Some of the tension rolled out of her shoulders. “The best. Good grades, responsible, honest. We don’t have any of those horror stories about raising a daughter. She’s been an incredibly easy child to bring up.”

“Even once she got to high school? I know that can be a tough time.”

“Even then,” Olivia Jordan said, nodding. “Maybe more so. Our home has been devoid of the typical teenage drama, Mr. Tyler. Sure, there have been some tears, but nothing out of the ordinary, nothing you wouldn’t expect.” She fiddled with one of the large rings

on her finger. “She’s a good person.”

“So no reason you can think of that she might run away?”

The tension returned to her shoulders. “She hasn’t run away. Something’s happened.”

“You know that?”

“I know my daughter.”

“Tell me about her boyfriend.”

Something changed in her posture. She reached for her mug again. “Derek. Yes.”

“How long have they been dating?”

“About six months,” she said, then drinking. She set the mug down, but kept her fingers on the handle. “Give or take.”

“You like him?”

“He’s a teenage boy. Not many to like.”

“But do you like him?”

Annoyance briefly crossed through her eyes. “He wouldn’t be my first choice, no.”

“Why not?”

“He’s lazy,” she said. “He’s arrogant. He’s everything Meredith is not.”

“So why’s she with him?”

Olivia Jordan sighed. “Because she’s a teenage girl, I guess. They do irrational things, no matter how smart they are. She finds him attractive, he’s popular. I don’t know. We’ve tried to discourage it without making the decision for her.” She glanced at me. “We want her to make her own decisions and that means we have to live

with the ones she makes.”

“You’ve told her you don’t like him?”

“We’ve tried to be diplomatic, but, yes, I think she knows we don’t care much for him.”

“Are you close to her?”> I asked.

Her gaze shifted to the window. “I like to think so.”

“How about your husband? She’s close with him?”

She smiled. “She’s probably closer to him than to me. She’s our only child

and she's always been daddy's little girl, as trite as that sounds."

I thought about what Matt told me, that there may have been something ugly going on between father and daughter. There was no hesitation when Olivia Jordan answered my question, no deciding whether to tell me something that wasn't true or dress up something that was ugly. Her words seemed earnest, sincere.

"Things between you and Jon are okay?"

She arched an eyebrow. "What does that mean?"

“Your relationship is good?”

She let the eyebrow fall. “I don’t see how that has anything to do with Meredith.”

“I’m trying to get a picture of Meredith’s life,” I said. “I wanna know what was going on around her. She lives with the two of you. And every time you say ‘I don’t see what this has to do with Meredith’ you are wasting time in helping to find her. So please. Stop.”

Olivia Jordan’s face reddened and she started to say something, but caught herself. She brought her hands up and

fiddled with the scarf for a moment before answering.

“Jon and I are alright,” she said.

“Alright?”

“We’ve been married almost twenty years,” she said, her voice flat. “He works a lot, more than I’d like. Do we argue? Do we fight? Yes, of course we do. But if you’re asking me is there some sort of problem or underlying tension that might be affecting Meredith, the answer is an emphatic no.”

I got the impression that her marriage was in more trouble than she was letting

on, but I wasn't sure in what way. I didn't believe whatever problem was there had caused Meredith's disappearance but it did help me get a clearer picture of her life.

“You said she didn't run away, that something's happened to her,” I said. “Why do you think that?”

Olivia studied her coffee mug for a moment,, as if the answer lurked somewhere in the dark liquid. Then she looked at me.

“My husband told me about you,” she said. “I'm sorry.”

I nodded.

“What was your daughter’s name?”

I swallowed hard, felt the familiar dry mouth that arrived any time I said her name. “Elizabeth. Her name is Elizabeth.”

“That’s my middle name,” she said, not quite smiling. “I don’t mean to be insensitive, Mr. Tyler, but when she... disappeared...did you feel something? Something that told you your child was in trouble?”

All of the moisture was gone from my mouth and my throat tightened. I nodded

again.

“A parent knows, right? They know when something’s gone wrong with their child.” Olivia Jordan nodded, affirming her own words. “That’s how I know that something has happened to Meredith.”

THIRTY-NINE

Olivia Jordan gave me a list of Meredith's closest friends. Phone numbers and addresses. I recognized the majority of the names from the basketball team. I considered calling the names I didn't recognize, but knew I'd only reach their parents at home and they weren't the ones I wanted to speak with. Teenagers were an insular group and even the most well meaning ones kept things from their parents. If I really wanted to know what was going on in

Meredith's life, I needed to speak with the kids without any filtering by their parents.

I called Jon Jordan at his office and his assistant put me through immediately.

“You spoke to my wife?” he asked, the familiar edge and tone back in his voice.

“Yes.”

“And?”

“And she answered my questions,” I said. “She was helpful.”

“In what way?”

“In that she didn’t refuse to answer anything I asked,” I said.

“Okay.” There was a pause and I knew he was fighting back the urge to press for details. “So what do you plan to do next?”

“I’m heading over to the school right now. I was hoping you could make sure that I’m welcome on the campus.”

“Hold on,” he said and the line went quiet.

My work in the previous few years

had taken me onto school campuses numerous times and rarely was I received without interference unless I had someone clearing the way. That wasn't a bad thing. Parents and schools were looking to protect the children and that's the way it should be. The general public can't have unfettered access to a school, particularly to juveniles.

But I wasn't someone who was there doing the wrong thing. I was looking to help, not hurt, and that required jumping the hurdles that were in place to protect. Coronado was a public high school, but it operated like a private one, letting parents exert more influence than it should've. I was guessing that Jordan

had the most weight to throw around and could clear a path.

“You’re good to go,” Jordan said, coming back on the line. “Check in at the main desk, they’ll sign you in and give you a pass. You have any issues, let me know.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Know anything else?”

“Your home was my first stop.”

“What should I be doing?”

It was an impossible question to

answer correctly for a parent whose child was missing. They wanted to be active, to help, to search. But when you didn't know where to go, it was a fruitless endeavor.

“Stay by your phone,” I said. “Hope she calls. Think about the last few days. Make notes about anything you can think of. Her behavior, her statements, anything that comes to mind, no matter how trivial or miniscule. Put it all down on paper so that you don't have to keep it in your head. I asked your wife to do the same.”

“Alright,” he said. “I want to meet tonight so I can hear what you've

learned.”

“That’s fine.”

He named a restaurant and we agreed on eight o’clock.

“Eight tonight,” he reiterated. “I hope you have some information for me.”

I was hoping for the same thing.

FORTY

Jordan told me that he'd called Coronado and arranged for a visitor's pass for me. What he didn't tell me was that I'd also find Gina Coleman.

She was sitting in a chair outside the main office, paging through the school newspaper.

She set the paper down when she saw me. "You took longer than I thought."

“You my babysitter?”

“Depends.” She smiled. “Do you need babysitting?”

“No.”

“Then I’m just along for the ride.”
She paused, watching me.

I eyed the turtleneck she was wearing. “How’s your neck?”

She pulled down the collar. There were several finger-sized purple and red marks just to the right of her throat.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She let the collar slide back up her neck. “I’ll live.” She messed with the collar, getting it back in place. “So. How angry are you that I’m here?”

I wasn’t angry. I was expecting something like this. Jordan wasn’t the type to take orders from someone else without pushing back. This was his way of pushing back. If he’d sent one of the two goons, I would’ve been angry. But Gina was competent and had been honest with me thus far.

I shrugged and walked past her into the office.

Lana McCauley was behind the desk. She slid a visitor's badge across the counter to me. "Mr. Jordan arranged this for you, Joseph."

"Thank you."

"Please don't misuse it." Her tone was filled with disapproval.

"I won't. I'm just trying to help." I hung the pass around my neck. "If I need to see a student's schedule, who should I speak with?"

"Me," Lana said, her lips pursed, her thick eyebrows furrowed together. "The student's name?"

“Derek Weathers.”

Lana tapped at her keyboard.

“What are you doing?” Gina asked, coming up next to me at the counter.

I ignored her.

The printer next to Lana’s computer buzzed to life and quickly spat out a piece of paper. She retrieved it and laid it on the counter in front of me. “There you are.”

“I need a couple of others,” I said.

Her lips pursed some more and her eyebrows furrowed deeper. “Joseph, I’m not sure...”

“I’m trying to help find Meredith Jordan,” I said. “Nothing else. I can have Mr. Jordan call and confirm that again, if you’d like. But I want the schedules.”

She tried to hold my gaze, but couldn’t. I didn’t like putting her on the spot and undermining what she saw as her domain. But I was hired to find Meredith and to help Chuck. I couldn’t worry about ruffled feathers.

She shifted her eyes away from me

and began typing. “Names?”

I gave her the ones I wanted and thirty seconds later, the printer produced several more sheets of paper, She pushed them across the counter to me.

I took them. “Thank you, Mrs. McCauley.”

She gave a curt nod in dismissal.

Gina and I stepped out into the hall.

“You were kind of rude to her,” Gina said.

I paged through the papers in my

hand. “She wanted to have a pissing contest. If it was her kid that was missing, you think she’d give a shit about printing out a couple of schedules?”

Gina shuffled her feet, but didn’t respond.

When looking for my own daughter, I’d learned immediately to be direct with people, to put the onus on them. Most people didn’t understand the urgency in looking for someone that was missing. It wasn’t my job to make them understand. It was my job to get the information I wanted. If people got their feelings hurt, that wasn’t my problem. I wasn’t looking to make friends. I was

looking for a teenage girl no one else could find. That was the only thing that mattered.

“You know the layout of the school?” I asked. “Where the classrooms are?”

“I know it well enough,” Gina said.

I held out Derek Weathers’ schedule. “I wanna start with him.”

FORTY-ONE

Derek Weathers was in Room 246, studying AP English with a teacher named Mr. Ridley. The room was at the end of a long, wide hallway lined with classrooms and blue and red lockers. Painted signs hung on the walls in between the classrooms, exhorting various sports teams. The carpeting that lined the floor appeared to have just been vacuumed. It was quiet.

We reached the end of the hallway

and stood across from the classroom door. I was expecting a bell to signal the end of class, but instead it was a series of chimes that sent the students streaming out into the hallway, turning the quiet into an eruption of voices and laughter.

Derek was one of the last students out of Room 246. A blue baseball cap sat backward on his head and a pencil was stuck behind his left ear. He wore a black Rolling Stones T-shirt that showed off the muscles in his chest, tattered cargo shorts and flip flops. A textbook hung from his right hand.

He saw us immediately and froze in

the doorway. His buddy Matt nearly ran up his back.

“The hell are you doing, dude?” Matt asked, annoyed, chucking him in the back of the shoulder.

Derek didn’t answer and Matt followed his gaze to us.

“Got a minute?” I said to Derek.

Derek’s face settled into the same cocky sneer I’d witnessed at the hotel. “Not really, bro. Got history now.”

I held up the papers in my hand. “We got you a pass. Bro.”

He shrugged.

I motioned for the door at the end of the hallway and he started that way. Matt followed behind him.

“I didn’t get you one,” I said to Matt. “Take off.”

Matt’s face reddened. He pivoted and headed down the hallway, glancing back at us once before he disappeared around a corner.

Gina, Derek and I walked through the glass door at the end of the hallway and stepped outside. The air was still cool,

a slight breeze blowing across the athletic fields toward us. Moisture on the grass glistened in the sunlight.

“Make it quick, alright?” Derek said, frowning at us. “I don’t wanna miss—”

Before I could say anything, Gina grabbed his left arm and swung him hard into the building. His back thudded against the brick façade, the book flew from his hand and he grunted.

“Don’t be an asshole, Derek,” Gina said, right in his face, a hand pressing against his chest. “I know it’s a challenge for you. But do your best.”

He tried to put the sneer back on his face, but he was missing the arrogance he needed to make it work.

“You know where Meredith Jordan is?” I asked. “And before you answer, think about this. If you lie to me, I’ll find out.” I stepped in right behind Gina. “Then I will break both of your arms. That isn’t an idle threat just meant to scare you, to make me seem tough. If you lie to me, I will find you and I will fracture your forearms.” I took his left arm in my hand and pressed my thumb into his ulna. “Right there is where I’ll do it. I’ve done it to guys a lot bigger than you. It will hurt like hell and you’ll cry and you’ll have trouble jerking off

for six to eight weeks.” I stared at him.
“So think before you answer.”

He yanked his arm out of my grasp and pushed Gina’s hand off his chest. He looked back and forth between us several times. Indecision and fear lined his face.

“I don’t know where she is,” he finally said.

Neither Gina nor I spoke, waiting to see if he had anything else to add.

He kept his mouth shut.

“Who would know where she is?” I

asked him.

He licked his lips, trying to regain some composure. “Megan’s her best friend. If anyone would know, it’d be here.”

“She doesn’t know.”

He shrugged. “Then I don’t know, dude.”

“Tell me about the time you saw her father hit her.”

He couldn’t hide his surprise. “How’d you know about that?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

He blinked several times. “Fuckin Matt, right?” He waved a hand. “Doesn’t matter. Yeah, I saw it.”

“What happened?”

“Matt and I had gone over to pick her up,” he said, shifting his weight from his left foot to his right. “We were going camping for the weekend, out near Julian. Nobody answered the front door, so we went in. We went out back and her dad was yelling at her in their pool house. We didn’t know what to do, so we just waited. Couple of minutes later her dad comes storming out, doesn’t say

shit and goes right by us into the house.” He looked at Gina, then back to me. “I went into the pool house to get her.” He pointed to the left side of his face. “He nailed her. Entire cheek looked like a tomato.”

I took a deep breath. “What were they fighting about?”

“She wouldn’t tell me right then,” he said. “Just wanted to grab her stuff and get out of there for the weekend. So we got her stuff and the three of us bailed.” He shook his head. “She told me later that he was pissed off about a grade on a test or some shit like that.”

I thought about what Megan had told me, about the bruises she'd attributed to basketball. "Had he done it before?"

He hesitated, then nodded. "I think so. She's never said anything, but...I've seen other stuff."

I glanced at Gina. Her face was blank, fixed on Derek.

"If you don't know where she is, who would?" I asked.

He started to say something, then stopped. "I'm done."

"Excuse me?"

“You’re not a cop,” he said. He looked at Gina. “And neither are you. I don’t have to say shit to you.”

“You don’t care that your girlfriend is missing?” Gina asked.

“My dad’s an attorney,” he said, the surliness I’d seen before returning in full effect. He produced a cell phone and held it up like a trophy. “You wanna talk to me anymore, you run it by him.”

He stared at me for a long moment, then looked at Gina. Satisfied that he’d stymied us, he chuckled and slipped the phone back into the pocket of his shorts.

“That’s what I thought.” He picked up his book and gave each of us one last look. “Later.”

He walked back through the door and into the high school.

FORTY-TWO

We stopped back in the main office so I could ask Lana McCauley to print me out one more thing. She did so without uttering a word.

Gina and I walked outside into the courtyard at the front of the school. There was a large stone fountain in the middle of it and water trickled quietly.

“Off the record,” I said to her. “Jordan seem like the type of guy who’d

hit his daughter?”

“I’m not sure what that type is.”

“What have you seen, Gina?”

She took a deep breath and sat down on the edge of the bench that encircled the fountain. “If I hadn’t seen anything, I’d tell you that, no, he’s not capable of it. He’s a good father. He’s got a brutal temper, but he’s a good father.”

I sat down next to her. “But you have seen something.”

She bit down on her bottom lip for a moment. Fine wrinkles rippled across

her forehead. She brushed her hair back away from her face.

“That thing he was talking about back there?” she finally said. “The camping trip? I remember when she came back. It was a Sunday night. Jon and Olivia left that morning, went to Chicago to meet with some investors. I drove him to the airport.” Her mouth twisted aimlessly for a moment. “Olivia went into the airport first. Jon hung back. He gave me an envelope to give to Meredith when she got home. He told me they’d fought before she left and he felt bad about it. He wanted me to make sure I gave it to Meredith the moment she came home.”

The sun was hot on my neck. The breeze from the other side of the school where we'd spoken to Derek was nonexistent. I kept listening.

“She came home late,” she continued. “About nine or so. I went up to her room and gave her the envelope. She was unpacking her bag. She opened it right in front of me, started crying as she read it.”

“Any idea what it said?”

“None,” she said, shaking her head slowly. “Not my place to ask and Meredith didn't say.” She looked at

me. “But her face was still swollen and I could see a faint bruise on her cheek. It was almost gone, but I could see it. Didn’t seem like anything at the time and I hadn’t thought about it again until that asshole mentioned it.”

I twisted around and watched the water in the fountain. Pennies and dimes lined the bottom. A big piece of pink chewing gum rolled into a perfect ball rested next to a quarter.

I turned back around. “Ever see anything else?”

She shook her head. “Not once. Nothing even close. That’s why I never

thought about that night as anything out of the ordinary.”

I’d struck Elizabeth once, when she was four. She’d been testing my patience all day, challenging everything I asked her to do, trying to assert her independence. We’d owned a dog then, a thirteen-year-old yellow Lab named Bob and she’d kicked him hard enough in the face that he’d yelped.

I spun her around and spanked her. She’d burst into tears, grabbing at her rear end as she ran to her room.

I was immediately sorry for doing it. Lauren and I were against any sort of

physical punishment and though we'd been tempted previously, we'd managed to get through four and a half years without a spanking until I'd broken that afternoon.

I went to her room, lay down on the bed with her and hugged her for an hour as she kept telling me she was sorry, that she loved both Bob and me.

I never touched her in anger again and though I knew better, I couldn't imagine anyone hitting their child in anger on a regular basis.

I felt Gina's hand on my shoulder, heard her say something that I couldn't

make out.

Tears began to sting the corners of my eyes. I never knew exactly when they'd appear and rarely could I stop them when they did. My heart started beating faster and my gut ached. I was breathing loudly through my mouth.

Gina's hand pressed harder against my arm. "Joe? Are you alright?"

I stood, wiped at the tears that continued to fall. "Let's go get some lunch."

FORTY-THREE

“What about Olivia?” I asked.

“What about her?” Gina asked.

“Anything,” I said. “Tell me about her.”

We were sitting in a diner near the Hotel Del. The car ride over had been silent after my mini-breakdown. She was working her way through a turkey sandwich and I was ignoring a

hamburger.

She took a bite of the sandwich and wiped at her mouth with the paper napkin. “She’s alright. I don’t really know her. All of my dealings are with Jon. Seems a little aloof, but that’s not unusual.”

“How’s that?”

She let her tongue roll over her teeth and shrugged. “Jon thinks he needs a security director and he overpays for me, so I’m happy to do the work. But most of these guys who decide they need security greater than a home alarm system? It’s not really warranted, you

know? They do it because their rich friends are doing it. There is no great threat out there.”

“Could be.”

“Sure, could be and my job is to spot one if it shows up. But I’ve worked for Jon for three years and you’re the first guy I’ve had to get physical with,” she said, a small smile creeping onto her face. “And we both know I didn’t need to get physical with you. But you were a stranger showing up on Jon’s property at night and I was looking to send a message.”

I nodded.

“Nobody’s out to get him,” she explained. “People aren’t lurking in the bushes, waiting to accost him. There aren’t Hollywood bozos with paparazzi trailing them, blocking their path. There isn’t much for me to do.” She shrugged. “So it’s not like he sends me out with her when Olivia goes shopping or anything like that. For as wealthy as they are, they keep a fairly low profile, save for their charity stuff. She can go out in relative anonymity.”

“She isn’t a big socialite?” I asked. “With the charities and what not?”

Gina shook her head. “No. She

doesn't do the trophy wife thing. No women's groups, no planning committees, none of that juvenile bullshit where she has to wear a funny hat and gloves and drink tea just so everyone can compare their husbands' wallets. She doesn't have a lot of friends. She does her own thing. Like I said, I don't know her very well, but I've always kind of liked that about her."

She ate more of her sandwich. The waitress refilled our waters and I picked at the fat French fries next to the hamburger.

"What about the relationship?" I asked. "Between them?"

“Seems okay. No different than any other married couple other than they’re worth close to a billion dollars.”

“Other than that.”

Gina thought for a moment. “If you’re asking me if they get along, I’d say yes. But they don’t spend a ton of time together. And that’s again not unusual in a wealthy marriage. The wealth usually means sacrificing the marriage. They argue, sure, but it’s nothing I’d think that you wouldn’t see in any married household.”

“Which one is closer to Meredith?”

“Jon. Easily.”

“Why?”

She finished off the sandwich and pushed the plate aside. “He’s the one more involved in her life. Always at her games, always at school functions. He doesn’t miss a thing that has to do with her. He’ll cancel meetings at the last second if he has to. She’s priority number one.”

“But she’s not for Olivia?”

She squinted. “I wouldn’t say that. It’s not that she’s not a priority for

Olivia, but it's not obvious with her like it is with Jon. She's not at every basketball game, she doesn't schedule everything around Meredith the way Jon does. Olivia is independent and does her own thing. It's just different."

That didn't come as a complete shock. I'd noticed a distinctly different attitude in each of them since Meredith had gone missing. Jordan was panicked, wired with worry, ready to do anything, unable to sit still because he felt like he had to be doing something.

While Olivia was clearly rattled, her anxiety was controlled, managed. She didn't share her husband's same

delirium over the whereabouts of their daughter and I found that unsettling. I remembered Lauren's behavior the second we realized Elizabeth was gone. She lost all rationale and was never the same again. That's how it was with most parents.

“Can I ask you something?” Gina said, holding her water glass to her mouth.

I nodded.

She took a drink and set the glass back on the table. “Why do you do this?”

I didn't say anything.

“I mean, I can’t imagine what happened with your daughter. I can’t imagine what it’s like for Jon right at this moment.” She put her elbows on the table. “But I’d think that every time you try to help someone find their kid, it would be like living it all over again for you.”

The waitress came, cleared our plates and dropped the ticket on the table. I waited another couple of minutes before I answered.

“It is living it all over again,” I said to Gina. “Almost exactly. But there are three reasons I do it.”

Gina stared at me, listening.

“One, I would’ve ended my own life if I hadn’t found something to occupy my time,” I said. “I spent nine days in bed, in a motel room, drinking myself into oblivion. I’d bought every over the counter pill you could buy and stared at them all day long, wondering when I was going to drop them into my stomach with the alcohol and go away.” I folded my hands together on the table. “But I couldn’t because I didn’t know for sure where Elizabeth was. There was this tiny voice inside my head that was warning me that if I killed myself, she’d show up at my funeral. So I couldn’t do it. But I needed something to occupy my

time.”

I held up two fingers. “Two, I learned how to look for someone that’s missing. I devoted three years of my life to looking for my daughter, every day, every hour, every second. It wrecked my life, wrecked my marriage, wrecked my friendships, but I learned how to do it.” I took a deep breath. “And every time I agree to look for someone else’s child, I learn something new, something that I missed in looking for Elizabeth. There’s always something. In my screwed up way of thinking, I always convince myself that the thing that I learn might be the key to finding Elizabeth, the thing that’s been missing all these

years.” I smiled and it hurt. “It never is, probably won’t ever be, but you never know.”

Gina nodded, the same sympathetic look on her face that I’d seen on thousands of others for eight years.

“And three,” I said, pulling my wallet out. “I’m good at it. I find kids. Can’t find mine, but I can find everyone else’s, for better or for worse. It’s not always a happy ending, but there is an ending. I’ve never gotten that ending, that finality. But providing it for someone else gives me hope.” I pulled out a twenty and tossed it on the ticket.

“Hope?” Gina asked, watching me as
a I stood up.

I nodded and took a deep breath.
“Hope that some day I’ll have what they
have.” I smiled and it hurt much worse
than the previous one. “An answer
about what happened to my daughter.”

FORTY-FOUR

“Here’s what’s wrong with Derek’s story,” I said to Gina, handing her a piece of paper as we stood in the parking lot.

She studied it. “Meredith’s transcript.”

The transcript was what I’d asked Lana McCauley to print out right before we left.

“Yeah. Tell me what you see.”

She leaned back against her BMW and read through it. “She’s smart. We already knew this, though.”

“Look at it,” I said, pointing at the paper.

She read through it again and frowned. “She gets good grades. That’s not a surprise. I don’t get it.”

“She doesn’t get good grades,” I said. “She gets perfect grades.”

“She always has.” She glanced at the paper. “GPA of four-point-four. How

the hell do you get a four-point-four?"

"It's a weighted scale," I said. "She's taking AP classes and killing them. Four-point-four means she has gotten an A in every class she's taken in high school."

"Again. Not a surprise. She studies hard. Jon stays on her about her grades, even though he knows he doesn't need to."

I nodded. "Right. So what Derek said doesn't make sense to me."

She stared through me for a moment, then refocused. "He said Jon got on her

about a test grade.”

“Exactly.”

She glanced at the transcript, then back to me. “Maybe she got a B plus or something. Jon can be anal like that.”

I shook my head. “She doesn’t get B’s. That transcript shows it. Not even on tests. A perfect GPA means she’s perfect in the classroom. One B would bring it down.” I shook my head again. “There are no poor test grades to get on her about.”

“So it was something else. Or Derek got his story wrong.” Gina cocked an

eyebrow. “Not like he’s in the same class of genius as Meredith.”

“I agree. But whatever happened in that pool house, it wasn’t over a grade. I don’t buy that for a second. Meredith may have told Derek that, but if she did, she wasn’t telling him the truth.”

She handed me the transcript back. “So how do we find out?”

“I’m having dinner with your boss tonight,” I said, folding the transcript up and putting it in my pocket. “I’ll ask him.”

FORTY-FIVE

I drove back to my hotel and showered, pulled on a pair of shorts and sat down at the desk near the far window. I wanted to make some notes about what I knew so far about Meredith Jordan.

It took me an hour and a half to record the details of every conversation I'd had involving Meredith. I created a timeline, both for my conversations and for what it looked like had taken place in

Meredith's life. I marked things I thought were important, underlined things I had questions about. I read through them again to make sure I hadn't missed anything.

And after all that, I still wasn't sure what I was looking at.

I called down to the concierge and asked if they had a business office where I might be able to use a computer. Five minutes later, a laptop was brought to my room with a portable printer and a ream of paper. I took another hour typing up the notes I'd made and printing them out. I spread them out on the bed and looked through them again.

Reading through my notes just confirmed something I'd already figured out. Nobody knew Meredith Jordan as well as they thought they did, which wasn't that unusual with teenagers. They put out one image for their friends and family to see, while keeping other things to themselves. It was the unusually confident kid who could be his or herself to all people all the time. The people in her life wanted me to believe that Meredith was one of those unusual kids, but my notes were portraying a normal teenager who hadn't been honest with everyone.

As I dressed for my dinner with Jon

Jordan, my thoughts drifted to my own daughter, as they often did when I was in the midst of the menial tasks of every day life.

I wondered what Elizabeth would've been like at Meredith's age. It was a fruitless exercise, trying to turn a child into an eighteen-year-old, but one I played often. She was a confident little girl, always nodding her head with authority when asked if she was okay or if she was hungry. She was happy to explain when she was upset, often placing her small hand on her hip and wagging her index finger. Even though the gesture was impolite, it was one that always made her mother and me stifle a

laugh.

She was terrible at soccer, loved to dance to Springsteen, giggled when people smiled at her, cried when we got upset with her and I wasn't sure how all that would've translated into her teenage years. I wanted to believe that all those idiosyncratic personality traits would've merged to form one of the greatest human beings ever created, but reality told me that she would've been as frustrating to us as every teenage daughter was to her parents. There was some kernel, though, some fraction of intuition that resided inside of me that insisted that Elizabeth would've been special, that I would've been proud of her, that she would've

been different.

What that intuition couldn't tell me, however, was what had happened to my daughter.

FORTY-SIX

Jon Jordan's fork froze in mid-air.
“Excuse me?”

“You heard my question.”

He set the fork down, anger slowly flooding his features. “Yes, I did and I think it's fucking inappropriate.”

We were in the back corner of a steakhouse several blocks from my hotel. I'd been ushered in ahead of the

forty-plus people lined up inside a velvet rope along the exterior of the restaurant. The nearest tables to the one we were sitting at were empty, giving us a buffer of privacy. The table was covered in stark white linens, with simple black plates and stainless steel flatware.

I'd ordered the smallest filet on the menu and Jordan, though he'd never ordered, was brought a large porterhouse. A bottle of red wine was already on the table, but I'd stuck with ice water. We discussed what I'd learned as we ate and we were nearly finished when I asked him if he believed that Meredith was sexually active.

“It’s completely appropriate based on what I’m hearing from her friends,the I said.

He stared at me across the table, his skin flushed, his eyes intense.
“Explain.”

“Answer the question first.”

“Explain,” he repeated through locked teeth.

I leaned into the table. “You aren’t paying me to be appropriate. And every time you ask why I’m asking a question, you are wasting your daughter’s time.

How many times do I have to say that?"

Jordan didn't flinch. His face stayed stone-like. I leaned back in my chair and let a long breath out between my teeth. I could outlast him if I needed to.

"Yes, she is sexually active," he finally said, unlocking his eyes from mine.

"How do you know?"

His nose twitched and he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "She spoke to Olivia about birth control a year ago."

"Spoke to?"

“Asked for,” he said, glancing across the table at me. “She went to Olivia and asked for it.” He started to frown but caught himself. “I didn’t agree with it, but Olivia said it was the right thing to do.”

“Did you talk to her about it?”

He fumbled with the napkin for a moment. “No. It wasn’t something I was comfortable discussing with her. Like I said, I was against it. And I didn’t want to make things worse.”

I could understand that. There was no easy way for a father to discuss sex with

his daughter. No matter how open a parent wanted to be, it was going to be an emotional conversation. More so when the conversation was between father and daughter.

“What do you mean make it worse?” I asked.

He set the cloth napkin next to his plate. “I’m not crazy about her boyfriend and it’s been a...challenge.”

“Weathers?”

Jordan nodded. “You’ve met him?”

“I have.”

“And?”

“And I think he’s the kind of kid I wouldn’t want around my daughter.”

A cold smile froze on his mouth. “Derek is a prick. First class. Give me ten guys in her class and he’d be the eleventh I’d choose for her to date.”

“Would you ever approve of anyone she dates?”

He thought for a moment. “No, but there will be some I can tolerate. But Weathers?” He shook his head. “He’s an asshole.”

The waiter came, removed our plates and asked if I wanted coffee. I did and he returned momentarily with large cups for both of us.

“So, what?” I asked. “You were fighting about him?”

Jordan blew on the surface of the coffee. “Yeah. Constantly. I didn’t want them together. Period. Meredith, of course, didn’t like it.”

“You do anything about it?”

“I tried,” he said. “At first, I just let her know that I didn’t like him and that I

didn't like the idea of them dating. She didn't listen. So then I got involved a little."

"What's that mean?"

He sipped at the coffee. "Took her cell phone away so she couldn't talk to his dumb ass. Made her go to a couple of functions with Olivia and me so she couldn't go out with him. And I had him pulled out of her classes at Coronado."

"School let you do that?"

He raised an eyebrow, as if it wasn't even an issue. "I paid for a lot of the buildings on that campus. I didn't ask

for anything in return. I stay out of the way. But this was something I wanted done.”

The coffee was scalding and I burnt the tip of my tongue. I wasn't sure about the heavy-handed approach, but it made sense. For him. He was used to getting what he wanted.

“But none of it worked,” Jordan said. “We were just screaming at each other all the time and she was still finding ways to be with him.” He rubbed at his chin, the defeat not sitting well with him. “Olivia convinced me to back off. So I did.”

We stayed quiet for a moment, drinking the coffee and not looking at one another.

“As far as you know,” I finally asked. “Has she had sex with anyone else?”

His shoulders stiffened. “I don’t believe so, no.”

I wasn’t entirely sure how to bring up the prostitution rumor with him. I had no doubt he’d deny it immediately, then follow it up with some sort of angry eruption. And I wouldn’t blame him for that. Hearing that your daughter may have been trading sex for money would’ve been devastating to any

parent.

There was something in his demeanor, though, that told me if Meredith was involved in prostitution, her father didn't know. The uneasiness with which he spoke about getting her on birth control told me a lot. It wasn't a subject he talked a lot about and probably tried never to think about. There were no signs that sex for his daughter was anything other than a normal parental concern.

So I brought up something else that I knew was going to piss him off.

FORTY-SEVEN

“Have you ever hit Meredith?” I asked.

The coffee mug was at his lips when I asked. He watched me over the porcelain edge, his eyes trained on me as he drank. He swallowed, set the cup down carefully, adjusting it to the position he wanted it in. The waiter returned to the table and asked if there was anything else we needed. Neither of us said a word and he quickly stepped

away.

“Fuck you,” he said.

“That’s not an answer.”

“Fuck you for asking,” he said, laying his hands flat on the table, the tips of his fingers beginning to dig into the linen tablecloth. “I’ve never touched her.”

“Sure about that?”

“Fuck you, Tyler. Where is this coming from?”

“Something I heard.”

“From where?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

His hands flinched on the table, like they wanted to grab more than just the tablecloth. “The fuck it doesn’t. You accuse me of hitting my own daughter, it matters. Because whoever told you that is a lying piece of shit.”

He was defensive, as anyone would be. But I didn’t see anything that indicated he was lying. He wasn’t avoiding my eyes, he wasn’t squirming in his chair. His eyes were locked with mine and he was rock solid across the table, waiting for an answer.

Which confused me.

“You remember an argument you had with her?” I asked. “Couple months back?”

“I can remember a lot of them,” he said through his teeth.

“On a Sunday? Out in your pool house?”

His eyes flickered.

“She was going camping?” I said.

“I remember,” he said, quietly.

I didn't respond.

With a concerted effort, he brought his hands together, forcing them into a tight knot on the table. "She wanted to quit basketball."

That was completely opposite from what Derek told us and, even though it shouldn't have, it took me by surprise.

"Came out of nowhere," Jordan continued. "I still don't know where it came from. But she told me that she was thinking about quitting, that she just didn't want to play anymore."

“Why?”

He shook his head. “She never really gave me a reason. She just said she was tired of it and was going to quit on Monday.”

Maybe she’d had a bad week of practice. Maybe she was exhausted from the demands of playing. But I had seen nothing that indicated she was finished with basketball the day I saw her in practice. She was energized, enthusiastic and playing like someone who was going to play forever.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“I blew up at her,” he said. “Lost it completely. I told her I wouldn’t allow it, that she’d put too much time and effort into the sport, not too mention that it would be letting down her teammates and coaches.” He shook his head slowly. “I was not going to let her quit this year.”

“This year?”

Jordan ran a hand through his hair, thinking before he spoke. “I told her she had to finish out this year. She started it and she had to finish it.” He tilted his head to the side. “But I told her that if she was truly serious about quitting, she could quit after the season. She doesn’t

have to play in college if she doesn't want to."

I watched his face. "But you still want her to, don't you?"

He thought about it, then shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. I enjoy watching her play. She's good. Better than good. She's busted her ass for years to be this good. So I'd hate to see her trash it all. But it's her choice. I'm not one of those maniacal parents trying to relive my own shortcomings through her." He smirked. "I hated sports as a kid and I don't have a real love for them now. But I love seeing my daughter do something she's good at and something that she's said

she's always loved. That's why I don't want her to give it up, particularly when she couldn't give me a reason."

I believed him. He didn't have that insane look about him that made sports parents so easy to identify. He just seemed like a father concerned about his daughter.

Except for one thing.

"So when you blew up at her?" I asked. "Is that when you hit her?"

Everything about him went rigid. "I told you. I didn't hit her." He leaned across the table. "I've never hit

Meredith. I was furious with her, but I did not touch her. Ever.”

He was either a terrific actor or telling the truth.

I believed the latter, which confused me.

We sat there uneasily for a few moments, Jordan’s words hanging between us. He finally relaxed and sat back in his chair.

“Your turn,” he said. “Why are you asking me this?”

I was running the scenario through my

head, trying to figure out which pieces to the puzzle didn't fit. "When you saw her that day, in the pool house. Was she okay?"

"Physically?"

I nodded.

"Yes, fine," he said, frowning at me.

"No bruises or marks on her face, anything like that?"

His frown intensified. "You don't think I would've noticed that?"

I did think he would've noticed that.

And that was the problem I was trying to rectify.

FORTY-EIGHT

Jordan pressed me for what I'd learned. I gave him a rough replay of my interview with Derek, leaving out the part where Derek said Jordan hit her. Jordan wasn't stupid. If I gave him an exact recount of our conversation with Derek, he would've put two and two together. Fact was, I still thought Jordan would even without that info. Jordan getting in the way, though, would be counterproductive because I didn't trust him to get to the heart of things. Without

doing that, I wasn't sure we could find Meredith.

I fended him off for the rest of dinner. I knew he thought I was holding information back from him and I had no doubt he'd go immediately to Gina to find out what I'd left out.

I was fine with that because it gave me time to find Derek on my own.

The address on the sheet that I'd gotten at the high school listed the Weathers' address on the north side of the island, near the Navy base. It took me twenty minutes with traffic and the GPS in the rental to find the split-level

stucco home, tucked onto one of the streets that looked back across the bay. The lawn was well-manicured, the hedges trimmed and the sidewalks clean. A stark white GMC Yukon was parked next to a red M-class Mercedes in the driveway.

I drove past the house, circled back and parked on the opposite side of the street, a block away with a good view of the home that Derek Weathers lived in.

My initial inclination was to knock down the door, kick the shit out of anyone who got in my way, then drag Derek out of the house by his balls before I kicked the shit out of him.

There was a nagging feeling in my mind that he had been lying when Gina and I spoke to him earlier in the day. I couldn't put my finger on it then, but after talking to Jon Jordan, I thought I'd figured it out.

I resisted that initial urge to man-handle Derek because I wasn't sure that would get me all the info I needed. Besides, I really wasn't sure whether or not he knew where Meredith was. But I thought he was a good place to start.

I'd been in the car about half an hour, hearing the radio, but not really listening to it when he finally came out of the house, dressed in baggy jeans, an

untucked button-down shirt and a baseball hat turned backward on his head.

He wasn't alone.

The distance prevented me from getting a good look at her face, but she didn't appear familiar. She looked a little older than he was, long blonde hair, brushed out and glossy. She wore a denim jacket with a tight tank top beneath it. A short skirt revealed long, athletic legs in spiked heels.

Derek put his arm around her as he walked her to the passenger door of the Yukon, whispering something in her ear

that made her giggle. He opened the door and helped her up into the SUV, his eyes settling on her ass when she wasn't looking. He shut the door and hustled around to the other side.

My fingers wrapped tightly around the wheel. The kid's girlfriend was missing and he was already moving on without missing a beat. I had about sixteen reasons now to knock the crap out of Derek Weathers.

He backed the SUV out of the drive and headed out the way I'd come in. I let him put a decent amount of distance between us before I started the car and followed.

We wound our way off the island, over the bridge and headed north on the five. He quickly exited into downtown and I followed him west right to one of the massive hotels near the convention center, maybe a mile away from where I was staying. Derek turned the Yukon into the parking garage. Two cars followed in quick succession before I pulled in after him. He parked on the ascending ramp of the third floor of the garage and I quickly steered past and parked at the end of the row of spots. The spaces in between us filled in and as I got out of the rental, Derek and his new girlfriend were almost to the entrance of the hotel, his arm wrapped

tightly around her waist.

I followed at a safe distance.

Derek and his friend navigated the merchant area on the ground floor toward the opposite side of the hotel and a bank of elevators. When they reached the elevators, though, they didn't get in one. Instead, Derek unwrapped his arm from the girl's waist, produced a cell phone and made a call.

I watched from behind a window in a gift shop.

Derek snapped the phone closed, said something to the girl and she nodded.

They stood there for a moment, whispering to one another.

The girl's posture and demeanor had changed. If I hadn't been watching her since she stepped out of the house, I wouldn't have noticed. When she'd gone to the car with Derek, she was relaxed, languid, moving easily. Now as she stood there whispering to him, there was a subtle amount of tension in her shoulders and in her stance. She wasn't angry with him and it didn't look necessarily like anxiety.

But something had changed in her body language and I didn't think it was for the better.

Derek watched people as they exited the elevators. After several minutes, he perked up at the sight of a single man stepping off the furthest elevator. The guy was tall, a bit too skinny, dressed in an open neck collared shirt and jeans that seemed smaller than necessary. His dark hair was swept straight back, held there by gel or mousse or some other concoction. He smiled at both Derek and the girl.

He and Derek shook hands and Derek's hand went immediately into his pocket when they let go. They exchanged a few words, the guy held his right arm out at an angle and after an

awkward pause, the girl looped her arm in his and they stepped into an open elevator. Derek offered a little wave as the doors shut.

FORTY-NINE

I slid into the chair across from Derek and said “You’re a fuckin’ pimp.”

The hamburger, a massive concoction oozing mayonnaise and ketchup, froze halfway to his mouth.

I’d watched him leave the bank of elevators and circle the perimeter of the lobby, talking on his phone the whole way. He’d stopped in front of a small open-ended cafe and sat down at a table

near the entrance. His food had just arrived and the server had just walked away as I slipped in across from him.

“A fuckin’ pimp,” I repeated.

He blinked once, then set the burger down on the plate. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“And you’re a stupid fuckin’ pimp,” I said. “You passed her over, inside the hotel, to the john, by the elevators. Full view of maybe a dozen cameras.”

He blinked again and glanced back toward the elevators.

“And you took the guy’s money,” I said, shaking my head. “Right here. In the hotel. On camera.”

His eyes flickered nervously. “I didn’t take anyone’s money.”

“Really?” I resisted the urge to rip the pocket off his jeans. “Empty your right front pocket then. I’ll bet everything I own that you’ve got more in that pocket than I’ve got in my wallet.”

His lips pressed together and his cheeks flushed. “Fuck off.”

“Here’s what we’re gonna do,” I said. “We’re walking out of here right

now.”

“Fuck you.”

“Either you stand up and go with me or I’ll march your ass to security right now and invite them to review the last twenty minutes of tape on their elevator cameras.” I leaned across the table. “You think they’re gonna call the cops? Wrong, Derek. They’ll take you into some backroom or some tunnel beneath this place and make sure you understand that you are never to walk in here again and fuck around publicly like that. I’d be surprised if you ever walked without a limp again.”

I had no idea if that was true. We weren't in Vegas. But it worked. Fear crept over his face, his eyebrows close together, his eyes a little wider, the muscles around his jaw twitching.

“Get the fuck up and walk, Derek,” I said, standing up.

He stared at me for a long moment, then pushed back from the table and stood.

“Back to the parking garage,” I said. “Now.”

He took a couple of tentative steps in that direction, then elongated his stride,

maybe thinking about running or trying to lose me. I stayed even with him.

We exited the hotel and walked up the ramp toward his car. I put my hand on his back and pushed him past the Yukon toward my rental and walked him around to the passenger side.

“Hey, man,” he said, turning toward me. “I don’t know...”

I punched him in the side of the neck and he swallowed his words. His entire body sagged, but I caught him under the arm. I opened the door and shoved him into the car, drilling him in the kidney as he fell into the seat.

His mouth opened, but nothing came out. His face was bright red, as if he was choking on something.

I shut the door, walked around to my side and slid in.

He was coughing now, one hand at his side, the other on his neck. I let him cough it out and the color slowly returned to his face.

When the coughing subsided, he looked at me without turning his head in my direction. “Where are we going?”

“Back in the hotel,” I said.

He turned his head now. “What?”

“We’re gonna go back in and get that girl out of whatever room you just sent her to.”

“That’s now how it works,” Derek said, sitting up a bit. “The guy already paid...”

I slapped him with my left hand, then grabbed him behind the neck with my right and brought his head down on the dash.

“Derek, if you haven’t figured it out, I’m kind of irritated,” I explained to

him. “You lied to me about Meredith and now you’re selling out girls for sex. You are a piece of shit.” I leaned down and put my mouth right next to his ear, my voice a controlled whisper. “I don’t care that you’re a kid. Done with that, okay? Groan or something if you understand.”

He made some sort of howling noise that I took for a yes.

“Do not tell me no again unless you like being hit,” I said. “Because I could hit you all day and I think you’ve figured out that I’m capable of kicking your ass with no problem.” I paused. His breathing was rapid fire and his neck

was perspiring beneath my palm.
“We’re going to go get that girl and you
are going to stop lying to me.
Understood?”

He mewled again.

He wasn’t completely stupid.

FIFTY

The room was on the 23rd floor near the elevators. Derek hesitated, glanced my way, then knocked on the door. A muffled voice said something behind the door and Derek looked my way again. I shook my head and knocked again on the door, staying out of range of the peephole.

Footsteps padded toward the door from the other side. The locks clicked and the door opened.

“Hey, man.” It was the guy from the elevators. And he wasn’t happy about the interruption. “My time’s not up yet and I don’t appreciate...”

I stepped into the doorway, shouldering Derek out of the way and slamming my palm into the guy’s chest, sending him tumbling backward onto the carpet. I grabbed Derek by the arm and pushed him into the room ahead of me, pulling the door closed behind me.

I put the guy somewhere in his early forties. The swept back hair was now out of place, sticking up in all the wrong places. His black silk boxers, the only

clothing he wore, were a sharp contrast to the cream-colored carpet he lay sprawled on.

“What the hell?” he said, his eyes moving from Derek to me.

“Get up and go sit on the bed,” I said, nudging Derek into the room.

Anger flashed through the guy’s eyes and he started to push himself up off the floor. “I don’t know who you are, but I paid my fucking money and...”

My foot caught him beneath the chin and his head snapped back sharply. He fell flat to the ground with a thud, out

cold.

“Derek?” A girl’s voice said from around the corner. “What’s going on?”

The voice sounded familiar, but I couldn’t immediately place it. Derek turned to me, anxious, all of the arrogance I’d witnessed the previous few days gone. I stepped over the guy and into the main area of the room.

The girl was on the bed, her back pressed up to the headboard. She wore a black lace bra, one strap looped low around her arm. The bedding was pushed to the edge of the bed and she’d placed a pillow over her lap.

“Oh my god,” she whispered.

The makeup and clothing had fooled me. I'd been right in that she was a teenager trying to look much older than she was. Sitting on the bed, awkwardly trying to shrink from view, she easily could have passed for someone in her twenties who charged for sex. But I still recognized her as the girl with the bad footwork from the Coronado practice.

“What's he doing here?” Kristin asked, looking at Derek, her eyes wide.

“Get dressed, Kristin,” I said, looking away, more embarrassed for her than I

was at seeing her out of her clothes.

The bed squeaked and groaned as she scrambled off it.

“All Coronado girls, Derek?” I asked.

Quiet, then “What?”

I stared out the window, my eyes trained on the floating lights of sailboats still out on the bay. “All of the girls that hook for you. All of them go to Coronado?”

He was behind me and I knew he was exchanging glances with Kristin.

“No,” Derek said, his voice unsteady. “This was a one time deal. Kristin just needed some money, I knew the guy...”

I pivoted on my right foot and threw a hard left hook into the side of Derek’s face. He crashed into the television armoire, then hit the ground in a heap.

Kristin stood near the bathroom, her hands over her mouth, her eyes ricocheting between Derek and me.

My left hand throbbed. The skin was torn across the knuckles, small threads of blood filling the tears in my flesh. I unclenched my fist and stretched my fingers.

There was nothing heroic or strong about hitting a teenage kid. Hitting anyone, for that matter. Seeing him on the floor, the bright red imprint of my fist on his face, didn't make me feel good. I wasn't trying to prove anything.

But I was angry. For eight years, I had been angry. Ever since my daughter disappeared, anger was the only real emotion I carried with me and the only way that I got rid of it was through violence. I would hold it in for as long as possible, but when I found an outlet, I let it go. I'd been in more types of fights than I could count and I couldn't recall losing one. I had yet to meet anyone

who carried the kind of anger I did.

That anger was the only thing I had and I used it often.

I motioned at Kristin. “Hurry up.”

She looked at the floor and finished pulling on her clothes.

I knelt down and pulled a handful of hundred dollar bills out of Derek’s front pocket. I dropped the money on the still out cold guy’s chest and yanked Derek to his feet. His eyes were glazed over and he was looking around like he didn’t know where he was.

Kristin adjusted her denim jacket, running a hand nervously through her hair.

“We’re going to go downstairs and walk out of the hotel,” I said to her. “You’re going to drive his car to your house. I’ll be right behind you in my car. When you get to your house, stay in the car until I come to the car. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

“Give me your purse,” I said.

She hesitated. “If I’m going to drive, don’t I need my license?”

“Give it.”

She handed it to me. I took her cell phone and put it in my pocket. I opened up her wallet and looked at her license. I closed the wallet, shoved it back in the purse and handed it all back to her.

“I looked at your address, so I know where we should end up. I’ll give you your phone back when we get there,” I told her. “Drive straight to your house, no stops. I’ll be right behind you. Don’t pull any shit with me.”

I motioned Kristin to the door. I grabbed Derek by the arm and we

followed her, stepping over her still snoozing would-be john.

“What about me?” Derek asked, his words slurred and heavy.

“You’re riding with me,” I said.

FIFTY-ONE

“About a year,” Derek said.

We were following Kristin back to her home. He was slumped in the passenger seat next to me, his posture due more to the fact that he'd been caught than the punch I'd hit him with.

“Your idea?” I asked.

He stared out the window, the downtown skyline a blur as we made

our way back to the island. “Pretty much.”

“What does that mean?”

He shifted in his seat, trying to get as far away from me as possible. “Matt knows.”

When Meg hinted that Meredith might be a hooker, Matt had claimed it was just a stupid high school rumor. At the time, I’d thought he was probably right. Now I knew he had just been throwing me off the track.

“He’s involved?” I asked.

“He handles the website,” Derek said. “He set it up. I don’t understand any of that crap, so he designed it and routed all the emails to me.”

“There’s a website?” I couldn’t hide the disbelief and disgust in my voice.

Derek hesitated, then nodded. “Easiest way to set things up. Guys wanna hook up, they send an email with contact info. I get the email then call or text them.”

I let out a long, slow breath. “I asked you back in the hotel room. All Coronado girls?”

“Mostly,” he said. “A couple of their friends from other schools, but mostly Coronado girls.”

“Why would they do it?” I asked, glancing at him. “How do you get them to do it?”

He cleared his throat. “It’s not that hard. Not like the girls are virgins or anything. Most chicks at Coronado are having sex.”

My hands tightened on the steering wheel involuntarily.

“And they make a shit load of money,” he continued. “These guys that I set them

up with? They've got money out the ass. Businessmen in town for meetings and conventions, not scumbags off the street. They're clean. Good guys."

My hands nearly snapped the wheel. "Anyone paying for sex with a teenage girl is a scumbag. Not to mention the kid that pimps them out."

"Whatever," he said, confidence finding its way back into his voice. "These guys pay big bucks, nobody gets hurt and the girls make some money."

I resisted the urge to punch him again. "And how much do you get?"

“Sixty forty split. I get forty, the girls get sixty. I figured I shouldn’t get more than they do.”

Incredibly gentlemanly of Derek. Kristin turned right and we followed.

“Of all the things you could’ve done to make money, why this?” I asked. “Dress it up any way you want, but it’s still prostitution and you’re the pimp. It’s dangerous and illegal. Why?”

He stayed quiet for a moment. The brake lights on the Tahoe in front of us flashed and Kristin moved to the curb. I pulled in behind her, killed the engine and looked at Derek.

“It’s easy,” he said simply, avoiding my eyes. “I just make a bunch of phone calls, take the girls to the hotel, hang out until it’s over and then drive the girls home.” He shrugged. “You think that isn’t better than working some shit restaurant job or lugging people’s crap up to their room at the Del?”

It was clear that he’d learned to rationalize the whole operation and I didn’t have time to lecture him on how screwed up he was.

I watched the Tahoe. Kristin remained dutifully in the driver’s seat. “When did Meredith start?”

“Few months ago.”

“She wanted to or you wanted her to?”

He blinked several times and shifted again in the seat, like he couldn't get comfortable. “I don't know. Mutual, I guess.”

“You don't mind other guys sleeping with your girlfriend?”

He met my gaze, his eyes blank. “It's just business, man. Not like Meredith loves them or anything. And she's hot. She's getting more than most of the other

girls.”

I hadn't had the opportunity to get to know my daughter as a teenager and even though I spent most of my days looking for her and for other kids, I didn't spend much time around high school kids. But I heard things, things that sounded jaded and old school. Kids weren't like they used to be. They were more selfish, less respectful of authority, more about finding easy ways to do things, less likely to listen to adults who offered them good advice.

I saw all of those things in Derek's eyes. He'd turned his girlfriend into a sexual commodity and it hadn't occurred

to him that there were a thousand things wrong with that decision.

“Wait here,” I said, pulling the keys out of the ignition.

“I don’t know what high school was like for you.” His tone made it sound like I’d gone to a one-room schoolhouse. “But it’s different now.”

“Lot more assholes, it sounds like.”

He laughed and all of the arrogance and nastiness from the previous few days was back. “Right. Whatever. I’ve been called worse.”

“No doubt.”

He stared at me, the fact that I'd wiped the floor with him not thirty minutes ago a distant memory. “We're different now. High school is stupid. Classes? Stupid. Nothing in it for us.” He let a slow smile spread across his face. “Your daughter, if she was around, would tell you the same thing.”

My fist slammed squarely into his nose and mouth. His head snapped back and hit the window with a crack. His eyes closed and blood leaked from his nose and mouth, shades of red and pink discoloring his smile.

FIFTY-TWO

I opened the door to the Tahoe and Kristin jerked away, startled. The thick mascara on her eyes was smudged and smeared, the result of too many tears during the drive.

“Check the glove box for some tissues,” I said.

“I’m fine.” Her voice shook.

“Check.”

She sighed and reached across the passenger seat. She came back with a handful of Kleenex. She looked at me, unsure of what to do.

“Clean yourself up,” I said, nodding at the mirror. “We’ve got time.”

She blew her nose and turned her attention to the mirror, dabbing the tissue around her eyes. “You’re going to tell my parents?”

“No.”

“You’re not?”

“You are.”

She froze. “No.”

“Yes.”

She turned from the mirror to look at me, tears streaming down her face again. “You don’t understand...”

“You’re right,” I said, cutting her off. “I don’t understand. So explain it to me. What the hell were you thinking?”

She sobbed for a minute, pressing her chin down into her chest, her body shaking. Her perfume wafted out of the car, too strong and too sweet. I wasn’t

sure if it was an act or if she was waiting for me to comfort her and tell it would it be okay.

I stood there, silent.

Gradually the shaking stopped and she managed to gather herself, blotting her face with the tissue. The makeup was nearly all gone.

“You saw me at practice,” she said in a raspy voice.

I nodded.

“I’m not that good. I don’t start. I barely play.”

I nodded again.

“Everything is like that for me,” she said. “Everything. Sports. School. Boys. I’ve never been good or popular or whatever.”

She balled up the tissue and clutched it in her fist. “And it sucks. It *sucks*. My friends start on the basketball team. My friends are going to Ivys. My friends all have boyfriends.”

She let the wadded up tissue fall to the ground and she looked skyward, shaking her head. “It’s like I’m a part of the group, but not really. And I hate that

it bothers me, but it does. I just wanted to actually be a part of the group.”

She dropped her chin and leveled her eyes with mine. “And you know what? I got dressed up, put on the makeup and I was better than them.” She smiled. “Way better than them.”

“You’re proud of being the best hooker?” I asked.

“No. You don’t get it.” She narrowed her eyes. “I don’t know who was the best at sex. But I do know that I was getting the most requests. Guys were seeing my photo on the website and requesting me. Way more than

anyone else. Way. More.” She held up her index finger. “Finally. I’m the best. I’m the leader.”

I couldn’t begin to untwist her logic. There was a thread in her explanation that I could probably pull on and make some sense of. Her desire to fit in. Every high school kid, girl or boy, had that same desire. Maybe she had issues at home, too. Longing for affection, an unavailable dad. But the way she was feeding those desires were so screwed up, I wouldn’t have known where to start.

“It’s over,” I said. “It’s over as of right now.”

She stared hard at me for a moment, then gave me one of those patented teenaged shrugs.

“Do you know where Meredith is?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No.”

“Are you sure?”

She looked me in the eye. “I don’t know where she is.”

I motioned for her to get out of the car and she slid out of the seat. She ran a hand over her skirt, smoothing it out.

She brushed the hair from her face. Her eyes were red and her cheeks flushed. She looked exactly like what she was.

A lost teenage girl.

I followed her up the lantern-lined path to the front door of her home. Kristin stopped short.

She glanced over her shoulder. “Are you going in with me?”

I pushed the doorbell. “No.”

She turned her neck a fraction, trying to get a better look at me.

The door opened and an older version of Kristin stood there, looking confused.

“Kristin?” she said, looking first at her daughter, then at me. “I thought you were studying at school.” Her eyes ran up and down her daughter. “Why are you dressed like that?”

“Your daughter has some things she needs to tell you,” I said.

Her mom zeroed in on me. “And who exactly are you?”

“She’s made some mistakes,” I said. “Some mistakes she’s going to talk to you about.” I looked at Kristin. “But

she's a good kid. Just a little confused."

Kristin's head jerked around, surprised at my words.

Her mother took her by the arm and pulled her inside, away from me. Kristin took one last look at me and disappeared inside the house.

"You didn't answer my question," her mother pressed, her arms folded across her chest, every protective instinct she had radiating from her posture.

"Just talk to your daughter, ma'am," I said, backing away from the door. "She needs you."

“Who *are* you?” she asked again.

“Nobody,” I said, turning back to the street. “Nobody.

FIFTY-THREE

We were about five minutes away from Kristin's house when Derek woke up from his fist-induced nap.

He pushed himself up in the seat. "Where are we?"

"In a car," I said.

The blood had dried like smeared lipstick around his mouth. I threw a box of tissues at him. "Clean your face."

He fumbled with the tissues, pulled down the sun visor and muttered something at his reflection.

I watched him out of the corner of my eye as he tried to clean up his bloody face. I was done trying to understand the rationale behind a high-school prostitution ring. After talking to both Derek and Kristin, it was clear to me that I wasn't going to find a reasonable explanation for what they were doing. Whether it was because I was that out of touch or because this was an entirely different type of group of kids I was dealing with, it didn't matter. I wasn't there to solve their problems or help

them realize how screwed up they all were. Their parents could deal with that.

I was there to find Meredith and to help Chuck.

“Let’s get one thing clear,” I said to Derek. “You mention my daughter again and you won’t walk normally for a very long time. I don’t care who you are or how old you are. You even think about making a remark about her, you won’t know what hit you.”

He flipped up the visor and dropped the tissue into his lap. He shot a quick glance in my direction. “Okay.”

I let that hang in the air between us, as much to settle myself down as it was to reinforce it with Derek.

“Do you know where Meredith is?” I asked.

“No. I swear.”

“Last time you saw her?”

“At school.”

“When?”

“Two days ago.”

“When exactly two days ago?”

He threw up his hands. “Dude, I don’t know.”

“Think. When exactly?”

He let out a frustrated sigh and turned toward the window. I waited him out.

“Fourth period,” he finally said. “Government class. Right after lunch. She was waiting for me. Walked to my locker with me, then she went to English. That was the last time I saw her.”

“Talk to her after that?”

“No.”

“Emails? Texts? IMs?”

“No. Nothing.”

I stayed quiet for a moment as we drove, waiting to see if he offered anything else. He didn't.

“You guys fight a lot?”

He shrugged. “Not really.”

“Not really?”

“We argued, I guess. But nothing that

wasn't normal.”

“What’s normal?”

He sighed. “I don’t know, man.”

He massaged his cheek where I’d hit him the first time. His nose was red and swollen where I’d hit him the second time. He had to be hurting, but it seemed as if he was thinking about something other than his face.

“What happened in the pool house that day?”

He jerked in my direction.

“I know her father didn’t touch her,” I said. “You went in there after him, but he hadn’t touched her. You hit her and then lied to Matt and Megan, telling them she’d already been hit when you got in there. Why?”

He shifted in the seat again, so he was looking straight ahead. I let him get his thoughts in order.

“She said she was going to quit,” he said slowly. “She was done. I said that was fine. Honestly. But then she said she wanted me to be done with it.” He shook his head. “I said no way. I was making too much money. I was staying in.” He glanced at me. “So she said she

was going to tell everyone about the whole thing. I snapped. I slapped her in the face.”

There was no reason for him to lie to me at this point and I believed him. He was scared of me, he had nowhere to go and there was something different in his voice now.

“I apologized about a hundred times,” he said. “I’d never hit a girl before. And I haven’t since. I just freaked out. Took the whole weekend before she said anything to me again. She said she forgave me, but I’m not sure she really did.”

I stopped at a red light. “I’m confused. So she quit then?”

He shook his head. “No. That was the weird thing. When she started talking to me again, she said she didn’t really want to quit. I was afraid to argue with her anymore, so I let it go. She’s been working since then.”

The light turned green and we started moving again. There was something about the last thing he said that made me think he hadn’t finished his thought.

“Derek,” I said. “No more lying. Remember?”

“I’m not lying.”

“Then what aren’t you telling me?”

He pulled his hand away from his face and took a deep breath. “I’m not lying. She’s been working again ever since that day. She’s never said anything again about quitting.” He paused, glancing in my direction. “But she started working for someone else, too. She went from wanting to quit to working nearly every night.”

My jaw tightened. “What the hell are you talking about?”

His facial features softened. He

didn't look like the mastermind behind a prostitution ring. He just looked like a confused teenager. "She was freelancing."

FIFTY-FOUR

“Jon’s getting impatient,” Gina said as we walked up the stairs to Meredith’s bedroom.

I’d dropped Derek off at home the night before with a stern warning to keep his mouth shut and to not get cute and try to disappear. He’d rubbed the last spot on his face where I’d hit him and promised he wouldn’t do anything stupid. Then I’d called Gina and arranged to meet her at the Jordan

residence early the next
morning.

“I’m sure he is,” I said to her. “He can always go to the police, like I told him initially.”

“I think he already has.”

“Meaning?”

“Not officially. But he’s got some friends. I think he’s put out some quiet feelers, asked them to keep an eye out.”

I immediately wondered who he’d gone to. Meredith was eighteen. Normally, the cops would take a report

and wait a few days before they moved on it. Maybe with Jordan's name, though, they might move a little quicker. If he'd tossed my name out, it was hard to tell how they might've reacted.

Gina pushed open the door to a room at the end of a long hallway. A queen bed under a lavender comforter was centered against the far wall beneath a collage of photos of Meredith and her friends. A window seat ran the length of the wall opposite the door, drawers built into the bench from one end to the other. A large desk sat opposite the bed, a laptop and several framed photos artfully arranged on its surface. The carpet was vacuumed and, save for the

photos, there wasn't much that indicated it was a room inhabited by a teenage girl.

“This is her room,” Gina said. “Now tell me why we're in here.”

I went over to the desk and sat down in the chair. I glanced at the pictures. A family portrait, Meredith and her parents dressed in white, standing in front of a Christmas tree. A picture of Meredith and Meg, lounging on the beach. A formal picture of her and Derek at a dance, both of them with flushed cheeks and glassy eyes.

“You have any clue that Meredith was

a prostitute?”

“That’s not even a little funny, Joe.”

“You’re right. Wasn’t meant to be.”

I popped open the laptop and hit the power button.

“What are you talking about?” Gina asked.

“So you didn’t know then?”

She came up next to me at the desk.
“If you’re telling me that Meredith has sex for money, then no, I didn’t know that. Is that what you’re saying?”

I nodded.

“How do you know this?”

I told her about Derek and his entrepreneurial endeavors.

Gina listened to me, but the expression on her face told me that she didn't necessarily believe me.

“He told you all this?” she asked.
“And he's the pimp?”

The computer booted up. A picture of Meredith and Megan, hugging, served as the background on the screen. “Yep.”

“How do you know he’s telling the truth?”

“Because I saw it in action.”

“You saw it?”

I told her about what I witnessed in the hotel. About going up to the room.

She stayed quiet.

“But there’s another piece,” I said.

Her expression went from concerned to dour. “What’s that?”

When Derek said freelancing, I assumed he meant Meredith was working without a pimp, going out on her own. But I was wrong.

“There’s somebody else,” Derek had said as we pulled up at his home. “She’s working for somebody else besides me.”

“Who is it?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t even supposed to know. I saw an email on her computer for a set-up that I knew wasn’t from me.” Derek slumped in his seat. “At first, she tried to play it off like it was something else. But then she

told me. Yeah, it was for another set-up and it was none of my business. She said she wanted to make some more money and there was nothing I could do about it. I got pissed and left. When I saw her at school, I told her I was sorry for getting pissed. She blew me off, said it was okay. I tried to get her to tell me who was setting her up, but she wouldn't. Said if I asked her again, she'd never talk to me again. So I didn't ask."

"How long ago was this?" I asked.

"About three weeks ago," he said. "I'm not sure how long it was going on before I found out."

Gina digested all of that, her eyes growing wider by the second. She had not been feigning ignorance when she said she didn't know about Meredith.

“So I wanna try and get in her email,” I said, clicking on the email icon on the lower part of the screen. “See what I see.”

“You have to tell Jon,” she said.

“I know that.”

“He's going to...I don't know what he's going to do.”

“Which is why I want to get as much information as possible.”

Gina let out a long breath. “He won’t believe you.”

“Which is also why I want to get as many hard facts as I can before I talk to him.”

The email program loaded up on the screen and asked for a password. “Shit.”

“What?”

“She’s got her email password protected. Think Jordan would know

it?”

“She probably has it protected *because* of him.”

“Doesn’t mean he doesn’t know it.doesn’/p

“We can ask him,” she said. “And I might know someone who could break it.”

“Who?”

“Let me worry about that.”

I shrugged and scanned through the files on the computer’s desktop. Mostly

school projects and some other random but meaningless files. If she was smart enough to protect her email account, any files that might help us were probably on a portable hard drive. With her. But I couldn't imagine what she'd have in any sort of digital file. Email addresses or text messages, those would be the things that might help us.

I snapped the laptop closed. "Let's ask him about her phone records, too. Take a look at those."

Gina nodded, but something crossed her face and she looked hesitant.

"What is it?" I asked.

“Meredith’s a smart kid,” she said. “You saw that with her grades. If she wanted to hide something, she’d figure out how to do it.”

“So you don’t think we’ll find phone numbers or emails that might help us? That she would’ve covered her tracks that well?”

Gina thought about that. “Yeah. I think that’s accurate.”

I stood and looked around the empty room. It seemed so sterile, so generic. Teenaged rooms usually had their own personality, their own vibe. Meredith’s

did not and it made me feel sorry for her.

“You’re probably right,” I said to Gina. “But we need to check anyway.”

We walked out of Meredith’s room, down the long carpeted hallway and out of the massive Jordan home.

“I’m going to see Chuck,” Gina said, as we walked down the steps to our cars.

“Oh yeah? Good.”

“This afternoon.”

“Good.”

She wanted something else from me, but I wasn't sure what. I stayed quiet.

“Is he any better?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“What you said...” She glanced away from me. “The other day, about not really giving a shit about him. It's not true. Oh y

“Okay.”

She moved her gaze back to me. “I'm serious. I care about him. A lot.”

“Okay.”

“Stop saying okay,” she said, irritation pinching her face.

I started to say exactly that, then caught myself and didn’t say anything.

The irritation faded in her features. “I don’t think Chuck did anything to Meredith. I don’t. All of that came out wrong. Yeah, they were spending a lot of time together, but I know there has to be an explanation for that.”

“I believe that, too,” I said.

“And what I said about Jordan, about

being sure of what you know before you go up against him?" she said. "That's the truth. You do need to be sure about taking him on." Her mouth twisted and untwisted. "But you and I? We're on the same page. Because I'm sure about Chuck and if I've gotta choose between him and Jordan, I'm choosing Chuck. Every time." She waved her hand in the air between us, like she was shooing a fly. "And I just wanted you to know that."

The morning sun was warm on my neck as I studied her. I wasn't much into trusting people any longer in my life. Trust had disappeared the day Elizabeth did. But Gina seemed sincere in her

words and she hadn't given me a reason to distrust her.

“Is it okay to say okay now?” I asked.

A thin smile forced itself onto her lips. “Yes.”

“Okay.”

She took a deep breath, seemingly relieved to have cleared the air. “Have you learned anything else about Chuck? About what happened?”

Before I could answer, my phone vibrated in my pocket and I pulled it out. I looked at the number on the

readout and my breath caught. The familiar cold and dread I felt every time that number showed up on my phone consumed me like a bitter cocktail forced down my throat.

I waited a moment until my breathing found its rhythm again.

“I haven’t,” I said to Gina, then held the phone up in her direction. “But this might help.”

FIFTY-FIVE

A couple of times a year, just when I'm beginning to think the pain is subsiding from suffocating to tolerable, I get a phone call that goes like this.

“Joe?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Hey Mike.”

Mike Lorenzo is a cop, was my mentor and we have known each other now for a dozen years. I would

recognize his voice if it was one in a thousand.

“Got a call,” Mike says.

The familiar fluttering begins in my stomach. I would use every ounce of my strength to crush it, but it is Pavlovian now and there is nothing I can do to quell it.

“Oh yeah?” I say.

*“Similar description,” Mike says.
“Enough for me to take a look.”*

*Sometimes it's a description,
sometimes it's an unidentified victim,*

sometimes it's something else.

“Okay,” I say, even though it is anything but.

“Just wanted you to know,” Mike says. “Didn’t want you to catch wind of it elsewhere.”

“Appreciate that, Mike.”

“I’ll let you know.” Mike will pause. “You doin’ alright?”

He never asks where I am, what I’m doing, what my plans are. Just if I’m alright.

“Yeah,” I lie. “I’m okay.”

“Good to hear,” Mike says. “I’ll be in touch if it’s anything.”

We hang up and I know he won’t be in touch because it won’t be anything. It never is. Not once in eight years has it ever been anything. The only time he will call will be the next time he gets something that tells him to take a look. The fluttering will stick around for a day and then slowly die off until the next time it’s summoned.

She would be sixteen now, my daughter. A junior in high school, driving, dating boys and spending too

much time on the phone. Every high school, every unsteady driver, every surly teenage male and every cell phone reminds me of that.

But she is gone. No matter how many times Mike calls me, I know that she is gone. If I hadn't accepted that, I would be dead, gone in a much different way than Elizabeth.

So I can't look for her anymore. I let Mike do that.

Instead, I look for other people's children. I try to help them. Because I know what they are going through, how excruciating it is, to experience the

disappearance of a child. I know how to do it now and looking keeps me occupied.

Because I know Elizabeth's not coming back, won't ever call me on the phone and say "Dad. I'm okay. Come get me."

That call won't come for me.

But sometimes I can make it happen for others and I pretend that is enough for me right now.

It has to be.

Because I have nothing else.

FIFTY-SIX

“You look good,” Detective Mike Lorenzo said.

“You’re a liar,” I answered, squinting into the sun. “But thanks.”

We were sitting in the left field pavilion at Petco Park, the Padres playing an afternoon game, getting run over by the Cardinals. The stadium was maybe a quarter full, the city once again demonstrating their apathy for a team

that had always played second fiddle to the Chargers. Mike had always been one of the few who saw them as a first fiddle.

He'd gotten the message I'd left for him at the station and when he called at the Jordan home, he'd asked me to meet him at the park not just because he loved baseball, but because he knew it was probably the most private place we could get together. Not that he was doing anything wrong meeting with me, but we both knew being seen on the island would get too many tongues wagging.

Mike dug into the bag of popcorn in

his lap. “Fine. You look better than I thought you might.”

“Must’ve thought I’d look like shit.”

“Just about,” he said, before shoving a handful of the popcorn into his mouth. “Thought I got your message wrong when I read it.” He glanced my way. “Shoulda known you’d come back for your buddy, though.”

I shrugged.

“Bazer left me a message, too,” he said, brushing the salt from his hands and smiling wryly. “Said I should steer clear of you.” He set the bag of popcorn

on the ground between his legs and the smile grew. “Oops.”

I laughed.

Mike was the only detective on the Coronado force and had held that title for almost twenty-five years. My intention had been to get in line for that spot when he retired and I’d told him that my first year on the job. He’d been unimpressed, having heard it too many times before, but after a few months of my pestering him, he began to take me seriously and we became close friends, despite the fact he was old enough to be my father.

And being the only detective on the island, he'd drawn my daughter's case.

"Here's what I know, Joe," Mike said, keeping his eyes on the field. "Two guys jumped your buddy. Based on the doctor's report, he never saw them coming." He pointed to the back of his head. "Took a shot back there with something pretty heavy. Crowbar, bat, I don't know, but definitely something other than a fist."

"Something smaller if they caught him on the beach," I said, seeing the game but not really watching it. "Be a little tough to run down a guy in a public place with something big."

Mike nodded. “Yeah, most likely.”

The crowd feigned enthusiasm for a Padres two-out single. “You said two guys jumped him. Jane told me there were no wits.”

“Officially, there weren’t,” Mike said. “But I got a guy who saw a little bit.”

Probably a kid messing around with drugs on the beach. Mike was like that. No reason to ruin a kid for smoking a joint where he thought he wouldn’t get caught. But somehow Mike tracked him or her down, promised to keep him out

of it if he or she could convey what they saw. It was one of the reasons he was good at his job. He had no taste for the stuff that didn't matter. His ego didn't need it.

“Any description?” I asked.

“Generic stuff. Big, but not huge. Athletic.”

“Could he I.D. if he saw them?”

Mike paused. “Maybe. You further along on this than me?”

The crowd groaned at a weak pop fly that ended the inning. “Where are you?”

“All I got is a guy who, off the record, saw two other guys jump your friend,” he said. “That and a handful of nothing.”

I smiled. “I’m not much further. Let me think on it before I pass anything along.”

Mike watched me for a moment, then nodded. He waved at the soda guy and bought one for each of us. He handed me mine.

“Based on what I’m hearing,” he said, taking a long drink from the paper cup. He wiped his upper lip. “You think this is tied to the Jordan girl.”

“You think correctly. Were you in on her report?”

Mike shrugged. “Not much to be in on. I saw the complaint, thought it was a little foggy, didn’t figure there was much to it. Either he hit her or he didn’t.”

“He didn’t.”

He crunched on a piece of ice. “Whatever. Why do you think the two are tied together?”

As we watched the game, I gave him the basics of what I’d learned over the previous couple of days. An entire

inning passed before I was done.

Mike set down his now empty paper cup. Something crossed through his expression that I couldn't read.

“You’ve been busy,” he said.

“I don’t like to waste time,” I answered. “Learned that from you.”

He grinned. “Makes me feel old when you say shit like that.”

“You are old.”

He laughed. “Doesn’t mean I like to be reminded of it.” He paused. “You

realize that if the Jordan girl is hooking, it's not gonna help your buddy."

"How's that?"

Mike frowned as a blast of music thundered through the park for a moment. He waited until it was done. "You said yourself that he was spending a lot of one-on-one time with the girl."

"So?"

"So the first thing that's gonna be tossed out there is that he may have been using her...services. Would be the very first thing I'd look at it, if it were me."

It was typical Mike. Finding things in the cracks before I'd even found the crack. I wondered if I'd stuck around if I ever would've been as good of a cop as he was.

“Not saying that was the way it was,” Mike said. “But it'd be one more thing in the column against your friend.”

“I get it,” I said.

We watched the game for awhile. The Padres couldn't score, loading the bases with no one out, then ending the rally with a pop out and a double play. Some things hadn't changed in the years I'd been gone.

“The prostitution thing sound real?” I asked.

Mike hesitated, then nodded. “Probably. Rich kids with too much free time and small brains.”

“Anything ever cross your path?”

“Not officially. I’ve heard whispers, but nothing solid.” He started to say something, then stopped. The same look I’d seen before flitted through his eyes.

“What?” I asked.

He glanced at the scoreboard. “Come

on. Let's go. And I'll tell you something."

"Tell me what?" I asked, standing.

"Tell you something about the Jordan family that you don't know."

FIFTY-SEVEN

“You meet Mrs. Jordan yet?” Mike asked as we walked out of the stadium gates.

“Yeah.”

“What’d you think?”

We walked around a slow-moving family, a toddler dragging a Padre pennant behind him. “Trophy wife. But not dumb. Gave me only what I asked

for. And she wasn't nearly as concerned about her daughter as her husband is."

Mike nodded, pulling out a Blackberry, scrolling through it, then jamming it back in his pocket. "She's a big deal around here. Lots of charity work, volunteer shit. The whole I'm-rich-and-sharing-it-with-the-world kind of thing. Does it quietly, not publicly. But everyone knows."

"Their house on the island is a buy in, isn't it?" I asked.

Mike raised an eyebrow. "Is it? I don't know. Hadn't heard that."

I told him about the island house I'd driven by and the Rancho Santa Fe compound.

“Sounds about right, I guess,” he said. “Not enough room to show off, probably.” He glanced at me. “Not illegal, though, and not unheard of, right?”

I nodded.

We crossed the street against a red light and a car had to slam on its brakes to avoid hitting us. Mike smiled at their angry faces, waving at them like they were old friends.

“You ever think your buddy was the ringmaster?” he asked.

“What?”

“The one in the hospital,” he said, stepping up on the curb and pointing toward a crowded parking lot off to our right. “You ever think maybe he was this girl’s pimp?”

“No,” I said immediately.

He gave me a small smile. “Think about it, Joe.”

That was what he’d always said to me when I was a cop. He’d show me a file,

ask me what I thought and when I'd give him an off the cuff—and inevitably wrong—answer, he'd tell me to think about it, to slow down and to look for what I wasn't seeing. The more he said it, the more I anticipated it and the better I got at giving him the right answer.

But another thing he'd taught me was to stick to my guns when I thought I was right. “He's my best friend, Mike. Not possible.”

Our pace slowed, as we worked our way through a maze of cars.

“We've got a girl who got knocked around,” he explained. “A girl who you

think was hooking. And we've got a guy in the hospital who was spending a large amount of time with her. You say he wasn't using her services." He clicked his tongue. "All I'm telling you is what it'd look like to me if you weren't vouching for the guy."

It was his polite way of telling me he'd be checking out that angle. That was fine. He could look all he wanted. I wasn't buying it.

"The wife," I said. "We were talking about Jordan's wife."

He nodded. "Right. The wife. You remember a cop I used to know up in

Oceanside? Tully?"

I thought for a moment. I recalled the name, but nothing else. "Vaguely."

"Good cop. Good guy. Little bit older than me, didn't like being a cop as much as me," Mike said. "OPD was looking at cutbacks, offered him an early get out and he pulled the pin. Moved out to Vegas and started working security for one of the Strip hotels." He waved a hand in the air. "Bellagio, MGM, I don't remember. But one of the big ones."

We came to the front end of a maroon Chevy Caprice and Mike stopped, turned

and sat down on the front end. The car lurched beneath his weight.

“Anyway, couple of months ago, I went out there for a night, following up on something I was working on,” he said. “He and I got together, had a couple of beers, just shootin’ the shit, that kind of thing. And he asks me if I know Jon Jordan.”

The streams of people were growing now, snaking away from the stadium and toward the parking lots. Game was over.

“I told him I knew of him, but hadn’t crossed paths with him,” Mike

explained. “But somebody like that starts throwing money around Coronado and San Diego and it’s hard not to notice them.”

“Right.”

“Turns out Jordan got started in Vegas. Not exactly sure when, but he got involved in real estate out there and that was how he started stuffing his wallet. Built some condos or something, then invested in some of the off-strip hotels, helped bring them up to speed.”

I knew that from what Olivia told me. “Yeah. Then he came to San Diego and started building.”

“Sure.”

Mike was dragging the story out and it was starting to test my patience. “Okay. So?”

“He met Mrs. Jordan in Vegas.”

I waited. Again, I already knew this from my conversation with Olivia. Mike just smiled at me, his arms folded across his chest, like he’d told me everything there was to tell.

“I don’t get it,” I finally said. “Who cares where they met? What does that matter?”

“He met her in one of the hotels he was invested in,” Mike said.

“I know that,” I said, annoyed.
“Olivia Jordan told me that herself.”

He raised an eyebrow. “She tell you that her work was hooking?”

Several groups of people strolled by us as I processed that.

“Hotel security in Vegas, they keep databases on everything and according to Tully, they’ve got records all the way back to the dinosaurs,” Mike said.
“With more information than you’ll ever

wanna know. Anyway, he's going through the database one day, just checking names and faces, her name stops him because it gave her current address as San Diego. He poked around a bit, got a chuckle out of a Vegas hooker marrying some real estate magnate and them moving off to San Diego to live happily ever after. He made a mental note to ask me. At the time, it didn't mean much to me." He shrugged and unfolded his arms from his chest. "Everybody's got their shit to deal with, right?"

I nodded slowly, working the information over in my head. "And now I'm asking about her missing daughter

and wondering if the girl is a prostitute.”

“Kind of weird, no?” he asked, but I knew the question was rhetorical.

I sat down on the hood next to him. “You think she’s pimping her kid out?”

“I don’t think anything,” Mike said. “There’s nothing to suggest that she’s still in the game or even knows that her daughter might be following in her high-heeled footsteps. As far as I know, Mrs. Jordan hasn’t been in business down here. The charity stuff is for real. I’m just telling you because of what you told me about the daughter.”

He was right, of course. Nothing was concrete. But I wasn't buying the coincidence. The story was odd, but the daughter of a former prostitute turning to prostitution herself seemed like more than happenstance.

Mike eased himself off the car. "I'll check with a couple of vice guys at SDPD, see if anything's there. Like I said, I haven't seen or heard anything on the island. But that doesn't mean it isn't going on elsewhere."

"Thanks."

We stayed there for a moment, seagulls screeching above us, knowing

that an empty parking lot would soon provide them with their own personal buffet.

“About a month ago, I thought I had it,” Mike finally said.

The tone of his voice had changed. The smile was gone and his face wore a somber, exhausted mask. I knew where he was going, but I didn’t say anything.

“I really fuckin’ thought I had it, Joe,” he said, shaking his head, staring at the ground. “Guys out in Imperial Valley found a body. A girl.”

My heart thumped in my chest.

“Definitely not Elizabeth,” he said quickly, as if he could hear my heart. “Teenager, she’d been missing about six months. But they snagged the piece of shit that did her. Someone saw him dumping her body, some shit like that, I can’t recall.”

Mike wasn’t much for profanity, making him a rarity among cops. But when he used it, it came forth in bursts and I’d learned that it signified how high his level of frustration had risen with whatever he was talking about.

“So they snag this asshole, bring him in and the prick immediately gives up

another one, a young girl, an illegal, that he'd killed over a year ago," Mike continued, rubbing at his chin. "Girl was never reported, probably because her parents were illegals, too. The I.V. guys can't find any family members now." He shook his head, angry at a multitude of things. "Anyway, cocksucker tells them where the girl's body is and sure enough, he isn't lying. Couple hundred feet from the first girl. Motherfucker."

Two women walking past us glanced in our direction. Mike stared them down until they moved their eyes away. He waited a few more seconds.

“The I.V. guys come back after finding the second girl, wondering if they’ve got some sort of serial killer or Green River fucker on their hands. So they ask him if there are anymore.” Mike paused, rubbed harder at his chin. “And the motherfucker gives them Elizabeth’s name.”

I shut my eyes, tried to slow down my heart, tried to find air to breathe.

“I.V. guys run her name and eventually they call me. I listened to what they had to say, listened to what he told them, decided he was worth a look.” He bit down on his bottom lip. “Almost called you as I was driving out there, then

figured I better wait.”

I tried to nod, but the muscles in my neck were locked up and I managed only a small, awkward jerk forward.

Mike looked at me. “Jesus, Joe. I’m sorry. Do you wanna hear this? I just started in and...”

“I’m fine,” I said, my voice sounding strained and small. “Tell me.”

He studied me for another moment before continuing. “So I get in the box with this guy and I thought it was him, Joe. Bad, bad guy. He was giving me details about your house, about the

neighborhood, about Elizabeth. He just felt like the guy. He fit.”

Each word was like a newly sharpened razor blade into my skin. Into my heart.

“And then he started going off about how he saw Lauren in the doorway as he drove away with Elizabeth,” Mike said and his voice trailed off.

I shook my head, choked out a dry laugh. “Message board freak.”

Mike nodded.

In the Internet age, message boards

had become both a help and a hindrance in finding missing people. If you went to the right places, knew how to filter out the garbage, you could find details and people that could legitimately help your case.

But filtering out the garbage wasn't that easy. One of the things I learned early on was that both cops and investigators would float phony details out to the public to root out the nut jobs and weirdoes that would try to leech onto cases, either as a supposedly helpful witness or as the perpetrator. If that info came back to you, you knew a liar was sitting in front of you.

Mike and I had thrown several phony bits out to the Internet and one involved Lauren standing in the front doorway, maybe having caught a glimpse of the car that carried Elizabeth away. Lauren never left the kitchen the entire time Elizabeth was outside by herself and no one would've seen her in the doorway.

“Motherfucker was telling me what Lauren was wearing, what her face looked like, how she was standing in the doorway, all of it giving him a hard on as he said it to me,” Mike said, a sour expression gravitating upward from his mouth to his eyes. “I broke both of his wrists before the I.V. guys got me off him.”

I stood from the car, took a couple of deep breaths, glanced up at the sky. “Good.”

“It’ll happen, Joe,” Mike said. “One day, something will shake loose. We’ll know what happened.”

I knew that wasn’t true, but I appreciated him saying it. “Check with vice, alright, if you wouldn’t mind, on Jordan’s wife? I’ll let you know if anything turns up on my end.”

Mike nodded and I walked away, images of my daughter clouding my vision.

FIFTY-EIGHT

One of the first things I told people when they asked for my help was that they had to take care of themselves first. Take care of themselves, take care of their spouse, take care of the children still in the home, take care of their lives. If you allow those things to break down, the rest comes crumbling down around you.

I learned that the hard way. My marriage to Lauren collapsed before

either of us had realized what happened. We were so focused on the enormous crack that had fractured our lives that we missed the fissures that radiated out from that initial crack, me far more than Lauren.

To get anything done, I had to take care of my own life first.

So I drove to Lauren's house.

Our old home.

The one where I'd last seen Elizabeth.

I parked across the street and got out. I didn't cross the road, just stood there,

my back against the car, as if some invisible forcefield was between me and the house.

The house was originally a one story, but we'd built an upstairs addition. Beige stucco with big, wide windows. A giant tree in the center of the front yard. Small cracks in the short driveway that had grown longer and wider since I'd last seen them. Fresh flowers, blues and reds and yellows, bloomed along the narrow path to the front door. The grass was green, the windows were spotless and the paint on the trim looked fresh.

I tried to remember other details about

what it looked like when I lived in it. Was it the same color? Were those the same kind of flowers? Was the tree always that big?

The only thing I knew for certain was the lawn in front of me was the last place I'd seen Elizabeth.

I wanted to walk to the door and knock, but my legs wouldn't move. My stomach cramped, the anxiety gripping the muscles inside and squeezing them. Heat radiated up the back of my neck and into my head, tiny beads of sweat lining up along my forehead, just beneath my hairline.

It physically hurt to stand there and look at the house. I was making a mistake.

My hand slid along the car door, found the handle and grasped onto it, as much for balance as to open it. I heard a car coming from down the street and turned in that direction.

A dark blue Toyota Camry slowed as it approached. I stood up straighter, tried to look normal, not as if I was about to pass out in the street, and attempted a smile and a half-wave at the driver.

The driver was Lauren and my hand

stayed frozen in the air.

She pulled the car into the driveway and sat there for a moment before she got out, looking at me, expressionless.

She wore a black pant suit with a red blouse and black pumps. A thin gold chain hung around her neck, standing out against the red of the blouse. Her hair was down and I didn't see any earrings. A flash of light at her right wrist revealed a watch the same color as the necklace, a watch I remembered giving her.

She stood there for a moment, looking as unsure as I felt. She opened the

driver-side rear door and pulled out a leather satchel and placed it over her shoulder. She shut the door and stared at me.

“Hi,” I said, my voice loud enough to carry across the street.

She just nodded.

“I owe you an apology, I think,” I said.

She shrugged as if I’d asked her a question about something she couldn’t have cared less.

“I’m sorry,” I said anyway. “For the

other night. I handled it poorly.”

The look in her eyes shifted, but I couldn't tell what was there. Anger, sadness, nothing?

“I wasn't expecting it,” I said, my knees shaking, my eyes moving to the exact patch of grass where I'd left Elizabeth to go get that fucking extension cord. “I didn't know what to do, Lauren. I'm sorry.”

Tears distorted my vision now. I lifted my arm. It was heavy, uncoordinated, as if it had fallen asleep. My knees weakened and my back began to slide down the car.

“Joe?” Lauren finally said. “Are you okay?”

I shook my head, still sinking to the ground, still pointing at the lawn. “She was right there, Lauren. Right there.”

The tears pooled in my eyes and spilled onto my cheeks and I could barely see Lauren crossing the street toward me. I felt her hands on my arm.

“Right. There,” I said.

Lauren’s arms went around me. I buried my face in her shoulder and cried for a long time.

“Are you alright?” Lauren asked.

We were sitting on a rock near the Hotel Del, watching the ocean roll in and out. She'd gathered me up out of the street, put me in my car and driven us over to the hotel and the beach. It was a narrow strip of sand that we'd walked hundreds of times together and she knew it was a place that would settle me.

I hadn't said a word since she'd

crossed the street. My eyes were dry, but the breeze off the water put a mild sting in them.

“I think so,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“For missing our daughter?” she asked without looking at me. She shook her head slowly. “If I get through a week without a mini-breakdown, I’ll let you know.”

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d collapsed so thoroughly under the weight of missing Elizabeth. I thought about her every day, but I’d steeled myself against the tendrils of emotion that tried to find their way inside me. I’d managed to

develop an ability to keep it all inside, not letting it crack my exterior.

But seeing the house again triggered everything I didn't want to think about.

“How can you live there?” I asked, picking up a handful of sand and letting it fall through my fingers. “I could barely look at it. But you? You live there, see all of it every day. How? Why?”

Lauren ran a hand through her hair, pushing it all over to one side. “You see the bad. I see the good.” She glanced at me, a small, sad smile on her lips. “I go sit in her room, think about her, talk to

her. I sit at the kitchen table and remember what an amazingly slow eater she was.”

We both laughed. Neither Lauren nor I were particularly fast eaters, but Elizabeth could stretch a meal out for hours, talking about anything, getting up from her chair, refusing to eat as we cajoled, ordered and begged her to finish the small plate of whatever was in front of her. It was the kind of thing that drove parents nuts, but given perspective, it was more charming than annoying.

“I go outside and remember how much she loved to work in the flower beds

with me,” Lauren said. “Go out back and think of her sitting on the patio, swinging her feet on the chair.”

She turned to face me fully. “I don’t wanna forget those things, Joe. And I feel like if I left, they would just fade away. Staying here in Coronado, in the house, I stay connected to her. To us, as a family.” She paused. “I need that.”

The sun glimmered on the surface of the water, the white caps washing it away every few moments before it reappeared on the watery glass top.

“I miss her as much as you do, Joe,” she said. “But I do it in a different way.

Your way isn't for me.”

She'd said something similar to me when I'd left, but I couldn't recall her exact words.

“And I don't mean that in a critical way,” she said, touching my arm. “I don't. There's no right way to handle it. But I can't do what you do. Couldn't do it. The way you felt when you saw our house? That's how I'd feel every time I went looking for someone else's son or daughter. You don't understand how I can live in the house? I can't fathom how you can spend all your time looking for missing kids.”

A small wave rose up out of the water and crashed down, long lines of white foam rolling at us.

“I see the good, you see the bad,” I said.

Her hand was still on my arm and she tapped her fingers against my skin. “Exactly.”

We watched the water for awhile. Sitting there, the warmth of her leg pressed lightly into mine, transported me to that time when everything was right with the world. Almost.

“I blindsided you the other night,”

Lauren finally said.

“You did.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

“But I meant it,” she said.

I didn’t say anything.

“One thing I’ve learned from all of this, Joe. Say what you mean and don’t waste any time saying it.”

“You’ve always been like that, Lauren.”

“Maybe. But it rings truer for me now. I try not to waste a word, a breath, an action, anything.” Her fingers wrapped around my forearm. “I’ve missed you. I know our marriage is over. I’ve accepted that. But I miss you and I still love you. And I’m not going to not say those things just because it makes it awkward between us.”

Her fingers started to slide off my arm, but I placed my hand over them and kept them there.

“I miss you, too,” I said. We sat there for awhile longer, watching the sun slip down into the ocean.

Something was beeping.

I rolled over in the bed and the sheets twisted tighter around me. Lauren's naked back was pressed up against mine. I pulled my legs out of the sheets and looked at her. She was still asleep, her mouth slightly open, her arms buried beneath the pillow.

I sat up and yawned. We'd gone back to my hotel room, ordered room service and spent the evening in bed. It wasn't just like old times, but it was close and

that was good enough.

As I stared at Lauren, thoughts about the implications of our night tried to rush into my head. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had sex, much less the last time I'd been with Lauren. I wondered how long it had been for her or if it was even my place to wonder. I really didn't want to think about those things, though. I wanted to stay in the present. I wasn't going to ruin the morning.

But the beeping was trying to ruin it.

Lauren stirred and twisted her head in my direction. "Hi."

“Hi,” I said, pulling on my jeans.

“What is that?”

“I think it’s my phone.”

“It sounds like a siren.”

I laughed. “Hung over?”

She laughed, too. “I don’t drink much anymore. Been a long time since I’ve killed off a bottle of wine in one sitting.”

I pointed to the table where our dinner trays and dishes were stacked. “Two bottles.”

She pulled the sheet up to her neck and closed her eyes. “Two bottles. Yes.” The phone beeped again. “And I will break that thing if you don’t turn it off.”

I sifted through the pile of clothes on the floor, but couldn’t find it. It beeped again and I realized it was coming from the bathroom. Somewhere in the foggy haze of the previous evening, I remembered plugging it in to charge. I unsnapped it from the charger and walked back out to the room.

“Got it,” I said, holding it up so she could see.

“Good work,” she murmured, her eyes closed once again. I watched her, focusing on the familiar rise and fall of her chest as she breathed, the way her hair fanned out on the pillow, a tangled mess of auburn strands.

I returned my attention to the phone. The blinking icon on the screen told me I had a message. I checked the missed calls log, but didn't recognize the number. I dialed the voicemail number.

Lauren rolled out of bed, the sheet wrapped around her. “I'm going to make this easy on both of us. No breakfast, alright?”

The voicemail was telling me that I had one message. “We can have breakfast, Lauren. It’s fine.”

She pushed her hair away from her face and grabbed her clothes off the floor. “No. Not a good idea. Let’s not go crazy here.”

I didn’t know if she was saying that for her benefit or for mine. “Why is breakfast crazy?”

She walked past me toward the bathroom. “It’s not breakfast that’s crazy, Joe.”

I listened to the message, but grabbed

her elbow as she passed. “Wait.”

She frowned at me, but she didn't pull away. I finished listening to the message, wanting to make sure I heard it correctly. Then I shut the phone off and looked at her. “Okay, I can't have breakfast with you.”

Her eyebrows narrowed and the frown morphed into confusion. “First you wanna have breakfast, now you don't? Joe, I already said it was okay. I'm not looking to rush you back to the altar. That's not what this was.”

“I know that,” I said, frustrated that I wasn't getting things out the way I

wanted to. “But what I’m saying is I can’t have breakfast with you. Today.”

Her forehead wrinkled and she shrugged, like I wasn’t making any sense.

I wasn’t.

I held up the phone. “The beeping. I had a message.”

Lauren slid her elbow out of my hand and tightened the sheet around her body. “Fine.”

“It’s Chuck. He’s awake.”

SIXTY-ONE

The nurse walked me down from the check-in station to Chuck's room. She explained that he was awake, alert and generally seemed to be doing well. Given the trauma and the time he'd been unconscious, though, she asked me to keep the visit brief. I told her I would.

She left me and I stood outside his door for a moment, gathering my thoughts. I took a deep breath before I stepped into the room.

His head turned in my direction. He didn't look much different from when I'd seen him before other than his eyes were open and a rough beard had sprouted on his face.

I stopped just inside the door and held up a hand. "Hey."

He squinted at me, like he couldn't see me clearly. "Joe?"

I grabbed a chair from against the wall and slid it over near the side of his bed before sitting down. "I look like a ghost?"

He tried to smile, but exhaustion prevented it from reaching full wattage. “Yeah.”

“I’m here,” I said.

“Jane found you,” he said.

“Through Lauren. Yeah.”

He stared at me, his chest rising up and down beneath the sheet. “Wasn’t sure you’d come.”

“Come on.”

“I didn’t know.”

There was no malice or sarcasm in his words, but they stung nonetheless. “Lauren called me, we hung up and I went straight to the airport. True story.”

“I didn’t wanna bother you,” he said. “But I wasn’t sure what else to do.”

“It’s okay.”

He rolled his head awkwardly to the other side and glanced out the window, then turned back to me. “Thanks for coming.”

I nodded but didn’t say anything. I was sure he had a lot of questions about where I’d been and what I’d been doing

and if he'd asked, I would've told him. It would've been nice to talk about it all with him, to unload a bit. I was used to being alone and keeping everything to myself. But he didn't have the energy to ask and I didn't want to wear him out. And I had my own questions.

“Nurse doesn't want me to stay long,” I said, nodding back at the door.

“I've been sleeping for a couple of days,” he said with a weak smile. “I'm fine.”

“I'm sure,” I said, returning the smile. “Any idea who beat the shit out of you?”

The smile faded. “No. I was on the beach, running. Somebody got me from behind and then knocked my lights out. Pretty sure there were two, though.” He winced, some invisible pain freezing him for a moment. It passed just as quickly as it had arrived and his face clouded over with something else. “Nobody around here is probably too upset about it, though. They’re all ready to throw me in jail, anyway.”

“I’m working on that,” I said. “It’s not gonna happen, Chuck.”

“You sound pretty confident.”

“Jon Jordan and I made a deal.”

He stared at me for a long time. “A deal?”

“Meredith’s missing,” I said.

His features sagged, like the wind had been knocked out of him.

“Almost forty eight hours now,” I continued. “He hired me to find her.”

“You gotta be kiddin’ me,” he said, his voice hoarse.

I explained to him the deal that Jordan and I struck.

“He’s full of shit,” Chuck said.

“I agree. He may drop the charges, but he’ll figure out another way to come after you.”

“Fuck him,” Chuck said quietly. “Go ahead and try.”

“What was going on with you and Meredith?”

He looked away from me.

“And just so we’re straight,” I continued. “I know it’s not what everyone thinks it was.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I know you.”

“You’ve been gone a long time,” he said. “Maybe I’ve changed.”

“Oh, you have,” I told him. “No doubt. You’re hanging out at our old high school, coaching basketball, doing a bunch of shit I never would’ve guessed. But sleeping with teenage girls and beating them up?” I shook my head. “Not a chance, Chuck. Not a chance.”

He shifted his head on the pillow, moving his eyes back to me. “Thanks.”

“Tell me what was going on.”

He stared at the wall across from the bed for a long time, his hands fidgeting beneath the sheet, the monitor next to the bed beeping in rhythm. “I made her a promise, Joe.”

“She was hooking, wasn’t she?”

He glanced at me, unable to hide the surprise on his face.

I ran down everything I’d learned from when I’d first arrived in Coronado, from the Jordan family to the teenage pimp to what Mike shared with me about Mrs. Jordan.

“So I understand you want to honor a promise to her, but given all that’s happened, it’s hard to think her disappearing is a coincidence, right? She isn’t off on some lark. Something’s happened to her and I doubt it’s good.” I tapped my temple with my index finger. “If you know something about what was going on in her life, you need to tell me. Right now.”

Chuck lay there, staring up at the ceiling, digesting everything I’d told him, blinking every so often. I stayed quiet, letting him get it straight in his head.

Finally, he turned to me and said, “She’s a good kid, Joe.”

“That’s what everyone has said. But for a good kid, she’s causing a lot of trouble.”

“She’s a good kid,” he repeated. “But she got into something. She’s trying to get out of it, but it’s complicated.”

“Get out of what?” I asked, thinking maybe, finally, I’d get an answer as to what I was actually doing in the middle of all of this.

“I don’t know much,” he said. “She wouldn’t give me specifics. Probably

because she knew I'd get involved."

I nodded.

"Her father, he's pretty strict," he said, his words slow, methodic. "Keeps her on a tight leash."

"Not a bad thing."

"No, it's not. But she's rebelled against it. Not like you or I ever did," he said. "Loud, letting the whole world know. She's done it very quietly."

I stayed quiet.

"Last semester there was some sort of

dance,” he said, now tapping his hands lightly against the table. “Something happened at home, I don’t know what it was. But Jordan cut her off.”

“Cut her off?”

“Gave her some sort of weekly allowance,” Chuck said, the wrinkles at his mouth and eyes tightening. “Probably a lot bigger than you or I ever got. But an allowance. She needed the allowance to buy tickets to the dance. It was some sort of formal deal, like a prom or something, I guess. To buy her dress, too, and a bunch of other crap, I guess. But he cut it off and she had no money to go.”

I kept quiet and let him continue.

“She was pissed at him,” Chuck said. “And she wanted to go to the dance. She needed money.” He paused, stared at his hands for a moment. “And she did something really stupid.”

I thought about everything I’d learned from Gina, from the Jordans, from Meredith’s friends and now from Chuck. I assumed her getting cut off was one of the things Jordan had done to attempt to sabotage her relationship with Derek. So Meredith needed money. She was rebelling against her parents. If prostitution was her way of filling those

two needs, it was far more than stupid.

“She told you all of this?” I asked.
“Everyone tells me you were spending a lot of time with her, but...”

“No,” he said, cutting me off. “She didn’t tell me. I saw her.”

“Saw her?”

Anger edged into his eyes.
“Working.”

SIXTY-TWO

“Couple of weeks ago, I was over on Harbor Island.” He named one of the high rise hotels near the airport. “I’ve been doing some work on my place and I needed a place to stay, so I spent a couple of nights at the hotel,” he said, shifting in the bed. “Got bored in my room, went downstairs to grab a beer at the bar. She was sitting there, dressed up, looking like she was about twenty-five. Didn’t recognize her at first.”

The nurse that walked me down to the room stuck her head in the room. “Sir, time’s about up.”

“He’s fine,” Chuck said, his voice the loudest I’d heard it yet.

I held a hand up to him and turned to her. “I’ll be outta here in just a minute.”

She nodded and disappeared.

“I’m fine,” he said. “You can stay.”

“Finish the story,” I said.

Annoyance flashed across his face.

“She was with some guy, older than both of us,” he continued. “There were drinks in front of each of them. He had his arm around her and she was trying to act natural, but you could see she was uncomfortable.” He stared across the table at me. “I knew it was one of two things. She was either dating this guy in some sort of weird-ass relationship or he was paying for her. It was obvious. Hotel bar, near the airport, you know what I’m talking about.”

I did. San Diego wasn’t Vegas, but there was enough high-end prostitution to go around. Expensive hotels near the airport and downtown were prime targets and while maybe the men thought

they were being discreet, anyone with a brain could add it up correctly.

Chuck lifted one of his hands and flexed his fingers slowly, wincing. “They didn’t see me. So I walked around the bar—it was one of those square deals in the middle of the room—and tapped her on the shoulder. She turned around and nearly fainted. She couldn’t even speak.” He brought his hands back to the table. “The guy immediately panicked, couldn’t get away fast enough and I let him go. I walked Meredith outside.”

“You let the guy go?”

“I was more worried about her than some piece of shit john.”

“Okay.”

Chuck glanced at me, then continued. “I took her to my car and she cried for about fifteen minutes. When she was done, I asked her what the hell she was doing. It wasn’t a weird-ass relationship. He was paying for her.”

My gut bounced. An eighteen-year-old girl turning tricks. She wasn’t some runaway or drug addict. Meredith was a kid from an unbelievably wealthy home with seemingly every opportunity in the world. It was ridiculous.

“She told me about the dance from last year, that’s when it started,” he explained. “She said she didn’t intend for it to go beyond that one time, but it was a ton of money and whoever she’s working for kept pressing her into service. I’m not sure how, but I can imagine.”

I could, too. Most threats would be enough to scare an eighteen-year-old girl into doing something she didn’t want to do.

“I lit into her,” Chuck said. “I was furious. But all I was doing was scaring her more. I asked her a ton of questions,

but couldn't get much out of her. Whoever is controlling her has her wound pretty tight. I told her I was going to tell her parents and she just absolutely lost it. Worse than when we first walked out of the hotel. She begged me not to." He looked away from me, taking a couple of deep breaths. "There was something in how upset she was. I'm not sure what it was. But it wasn't just that she didn't want me to tell her parents so she could avoid getting in trouble. There was something else there that I couldn't get out of her. So I made a deal with her."

He took another deep breath and I could see he was laboring. "I gave her a

week to get out and to tell her parents. I'd keep my mouth shut, but she had to get out. At first, she wouldn't agree and I told her then that we were driving to her parents to tell them. Finally, she agreed." A small smile appeared on his face. "And it was almost like she was relieved, like she was glad it wasn't just her secret anymore and that she was being leveraged." The smile evaporated. "So I drove her home. As she's getting out of the car, she tells me thanks and makes me promise again. I promise again. She looks at me kind of funny, then says 'No one's ever kept a promise for me.'"

His eyelids were sagging and I knew

he was on the verge of drifting off. “I know how stupid it sounds, Joe. But that got me. I think there’s a lot of shit in her life and I was trying to be solid for her, be someone she could count on. Stupid.”

I agreed. It was stupid. His heart was in the right place, but his head needed to be smacked around.

“Three days later, I’m in here,” he said.

“So why the fuck didn’t you say something when she started telling everyone you hurt her?”

“Because I made her a promise. I told her a week and I meant a week.”

I tried to hold onto my temper. “The second she lied about you hurting her, that promise was a pile of shit, Chuck.”

He stared at me for a long moment. “Maybe. But you weren’t in the car with her. You didn’t see what I saw. My guess is that she did try to get out, that she told whoever she’s working for that she wanted out and he’s the one that beat the shit out of her.”

“Even more of a reason for you not to have kept your mouth shut,” I said.

“Maybe,” he said. “But I figured I could keep an eye on her while she figured it out. She named me for a reason. Because I was the only one who knew what was going on. She knew I’d keep my promise.” He stared at me. “I trusted her.”

“Lot of good it did you,” I said, frustrated with him for far too many reasons to lay out right then.

The door opened and the nurse came all the way in the room this time. “Sir, please.”

I stood.

“When did your seven-day promise expire?” I asked.

He thought for a moment, his eyes closing. “Two days ago.”

The day Meredith Jordan disappeared.

SIXTY-THREE

I was exhausted and wanted to go back to the hotel. The previous night with Lauren had drained me—both physically and emotionally. Seeing Chuck had emptied the reserves. I knew that returning to my old life would take a toll on me, but I had underestimated exactly how large the toll would be.

But Chuck had filled in a couple of tiny blanks for me and I didn't want to lose the momentum of having small

pieces fall into place while the thoughts were fresh in my head. So I stopped at a gas station, grabbed some coffee, made a phone call to Gina and headed back to Rancho Santa Fe and the Jordan estate.

Caffeine and adrenaline had my hands bouncing on the steering wheel as I was buzzed through the gate. I drove slowly up the winding road, formulating what I wanted to do. It was entirely dependent upon whether or not Gina had arranged what I'd asked for.

As I crested the top of the road and pulled into the circular drive at the front of the home, I could see she'd done exactly what I'd asked.

She was sitting on the steps of the Jordan home, along with Jon Jordan and my escorts from the first day, Hanley and Boyle. Jordan was pacing slowly behind her and Hanley and Boyle were perched on either side of her. They stood when I shut off the engine. I bounced my hands off the wheel one last time and got out.

Jordan came down the steps immediately. “What the hell is going on, Tyler?”

I came around the car and didn’t say anything.

Hanley and Boyle slid into protective spots next to Jordan. They were about five feet from me. Gina stayed on the steps, watching.

“I asked you a question,” Jordan said, his face flushing.

I stood there, silent.

Boyle took two steps toward me and pointed a finger at me. “Hey. Are you...”

I grabbed his wrist, pulled him to me and brought my knee hard into his crotch. His mouth opened, but no sound came out and he sank to the ground. I

bent his wrist straight back, felt it snap and dropped it.

Hanley came up fast on my left, but I was ready. I stepped into him, blocked a punch and pivoted around him. I locked my arm tight across his neck, under his chin and wrapped my left arm tight around his head, as I spun us back to our original position.

Hanley beat on my arms, but there was no strength behind the punches. Gina stood behind Jordan, making no move to come forward. I stared at Jordan as Hanley's punches stopped hitting my arms and his body went slack. I held him up for another moment,

making sure he was out, then dropped him to the ground.

I hadn't exerted much effort, but I was breathing hard, sweat soaking my back. My hands were shaking and I waited a moment until they stopped.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jordan asked, glancing over his shoulder at Gina.

"You sent them after Chuck," I said. "They were the ones that put him in the hospital."

I didn't need to see his reaction to know I was right. I'd pegged them from

the moment they showed up at the high school. I'd placed Matt and Derek on my suspect list as well, but sitting with Chuck at the hospital that day, I knew that two high school boys weren't capable of inflicting the kind of damage Chuck had suffered. Jordan had sent his two goons to do a job and they'd gotten it done.

Boyle rolled over on the ground and tried to sit up. I planted my left foot and drove my right foot into his jaw. His head snapped back and thumped against the ground.

Gina moved down the steps behind Jordan and I held up my hand. "Don't,

Gina. Or I'll put you on the ground next to them. I'm done fucking around."

She stopped and stayed behind Jordan.

I moved my eyes back to him. "Our deal has changed."

He glanced at his men on the ground, then back at me. "What?"

"Deal's changed. You're gonna drop the charges against Chuck. Right now."

Anger fired through his eyes. "The hell I am."

“You’re gonna do it. Gina’s gonna drive you down to Coronado, you’re going to go into the station and you’re going to drop the charges.”

The anger flared hotter. “We had a deal, Tyler! We...”

“Had,” I emphasized. “Had. You tried to kill my friend, though you neglected to tell me that part when I signed on for this. So we had a deal. You still want me to find your daughter, you’re going to go drop the charges. Now.” I looked past him at Gina. “Olivia inside?”

Gina nodded.

I focused on Jordan again. “I’m going inside to speak to your wife while Gina takes you to Coronado.”

Jordan’s anger was fully aflame now, his hands balled into fists so tight it appeared they’d been glued that way.

“And before you say something stupid, let me lay it out for you,” I said, stepping closer to Jordan. “You refuse, I’m going right from here to the cops to tell them it was these two assholes that laid him out. Chuck’s awake and he I.D.’d both of them. No one is dumb enough to think they did it without your knowing, so you’ll go down with them.

And I won't spend another second looking for Meredith."

Jordan stood there, rigid, furious, unsure what to do. I let him think it out for himself. I knew that dropping the charges was no guarantee that he'd leave Chuck alone. In fact, I was certain he might make another run at him. But dropping the charges would buy me some time to demonstrate to him that Chuck hadn't done a thing to Meredith other than attempt to help her.

"What have you learned about Meredith?" Jordan asked through clenched teeth.

“A lot,” I said, walking past him toward the house. “But I won’t share a single thing with you if you don’t get your ass in a car with Gina and go to Coronado.”

“You work for me. I hired you.”

“I’m working for Chuck,” I told him. “And Meredith. That’s it.” I stopped on the steps next to Gina. “I’m going inside to talk to your wife. If you’re out here when I leave, entire deal is off and I go to the cops. And you can find your daughter yourself.”

Jordan stared at me, no doubt wishing he could get his hands on me. That

would've been a mistake on his part. I held his stare.

Gina descended the stares and whispered something in Jordan's ear, her hand under his elbow.

I went inside the home, leaving Jordan to make his decision.

SIXTY-FOUR

Olivia Jordan was sitting on a leather sofa in an expansive living room littered with expensive furniture. She wore jeans similar to the ones she wore the first time I'd met her and a red blouse with a wide collar and silver buttons. Her legs were crossed, the boot heel of the top leg bouncing as she paged aimlessly through a magazine.

She glanced up when I came into the room and tossed the magazine on the

sofa next to her, impatience and irritation mixing in an ugly way on her face. She held up a hand. “Here I am. Waiting for you as ordered.”

“You were a hooker,” I said, sitting down in a chair across from her.

The impatience and irritation disappeared quickly, replaced by embarrassment. “What?”

“You fucked men for money.”

She was rattled, throwing her eyes toward where I’d come from, probably wondering if her husband was coming in behind me. “I don’t know what you’re

talking about.”

“Seriously? That’s how we’re gonna play this? I’m gonna tell you the truth about your past and you’re gonna just sit there and try and look bewildered?”

She blinked her eyes rapidly, the corners of her mouth twitching.

“In Vegas,” I said. I picked up a marble coaster from the table next to me, rubbing my fingers along its smooth surface. “I don’t know if you were doing it elsewhere, but you were doing it in Vegas for sure. Don’t know if your husband was a client. Maybe that’s how you two met and...”

“Stop,” she said.

“...maybe he decided it was cheaper to marry you than pay for you on a nightly basis.”

“Stop,” she said again, more force behind it this time.

I dropped the coaster back to the table and she flinched. “And now your daughter has apparently picked up where you left off.”

Her entire expression froze. I searched her face for some sort of recognition, some tic, some cue, that told

me she wasn't hearing that for the very first time.

I found none.

“What did you say?” she whispered.

The question sat between us for a long moment.

“Meredith has been working as a prostitute,” I said finally.

She immediately shook her head.
“Impossible.”

“Nothing's impossible.”

“Meredith isn’t like that.”

“Like you?”

“She’s not at all like me, Mr. Tyler,” she said, her voice edged with anger.

“Did she know about your past?”

The anger faded and was replaced with hesitancy.

“I can run down your history in Vegas if you want,” I said. “I got it from a cop. I know I’m not wrong.”

She whispered something that I couldn’t understand.

“What?”

“Jon doesn’t know.”

I stayed quiet.

She placed her hands on her knees and for a moment, I thought she was going to vomit. But she took several deep breaths, staring at the ground before she looked at me again.

“Jon doesn’t know,” she said. “I’ve never told him. I met him...” Her voice trailed off.

I sat there, my mouth closed, watching

her.

“I met him after I’d already decided to leave...that life,” she said after a long pause. “I didn’t want to revisit it with him and I knew what he’d think.”

“So you were done hooking when you met?”

“He wasn’t a john, if that’s what you’re asking,” she said.

“No, what I asked was if you were done hooking when you met?””

She was trying to strike an indignant pose, but couldn’t quite put it all

together. And I wasn't entirely sure why I was pressing her as to how she and Jordan had met, but I felt like I was close to uncovering something I'd been looking for.

She remained silent and that gave me my answer. "So you weren't out of the game then."

"I was on my way out," she said, averting my eyes.

"Much easier to go out on the arm of a really rich guy, I'll bet."

The anger percolated in her eyes again. "I love my husband. I always

have.”

“I didn’t say you didn’t.”

“No, but I understand what you’re insinuating,” she said, her words hard and cold. She sat back in the sofa and folded her arms across her chest. “Of course it was easier to walk away with someone like Jon. But I’d already decided to leave. I don’t give a shit whether or not you believe that.”

“And he doesn’t know?” I asked.

“I’ve never said a word to him,” she said, her eyes slipping away from mine again.

“Did Meredith know?” I asked.

Her expression changed to something I couldn't read. She looked down at her hands, as if the answer might be written on her fingers. Her fingers clamped tighter to her knees. “Yes. She found out.”

“Some asshole at her school,” Olivia Jordan said, the words coming out of her mouth as if they were made of acid. “She came home and confronted me.”

We’d sat in silence for about five minutes after she told me that Meredith had discovered her secret. Anxiety squeezed her face and I kept waiting for her to cry. But the tears never came.

“A kid at Coronado told her,” I

repeated.

She nodded. “I was outside, planting flowers. I heard her car pull up in the drive. She got out of her car, walked right up to me and said ‘You were a hooker.’ Just like you did.”

“Was she upset?”

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. “Not really. I think she was happy to have something to hold over me.”

“Who told her?”

“She never said. But she had details

that were about right, so someone did.”

I wondered now if it was someone other than a classmate. “What details?”

She snorted. “That I fucked men for money. Again, just about what you said to me.”

I couldn’t tell whether she wanted me to feel guilty or whether she was just stating fact. I didn’t care. “You told me you were working at The Zenith when you met Jordan.”

“I was.”

“In what capacity?”

She sighed, but it carried more irritation than weary. “In the capacity you’d think.”

“So that was bullshit about how you met.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think you’d appreciate the nuance of prostitution when you asked me the first time,” she said, then waved a dismissive hand in the air. “Yes, I used to work in the hotel. I met him in the bar when I was having a drink.”

“When you were getting out of the business,” I said.

Her cheeks flushed. “No matter what you think, Mr. Tyler, I was getting out. But it’s not like you can just walk away.”

“Why not?”

“Because there are others involved.”

“Pimps?”

“With the level of clientele I serviced, we called them managers,” she said.

“Sure. So, what? Your manager didn’t want you to leave?”

“Of course not,” she said, frowning. “I was a good earner.” She immediately closed her mouth and the color returned to her cheeks as she realized what she was saying. “My clients paid a good amount of money for my time. I was a strong asset.”

It was clear to me through the vocabulary that she was using that she had completely re-imagined, maybe even dressed up, what she had been. I didn’t know what her circumstances were back then and it was none of my business, but listening to her attempt to dignify her work, I was embarrassed for her.

“Did Meredith threaten to go to her

father?" I asked.

Something flashed through Olivia Jordan's eyes and was followed quickly by anger. "Yes, she did, as a matter of fact."

"You obviously didn't want her to."

"How very astute of you."

"You bribe her? Threaten her?"

I expected an immediate denial, but got a moment of silence instead.

"Yes. I threatened to tell her father about her relationship with Derek. The

truth about it. That she was sexually active.”

“He knew she was having sex,” I said. “He told me that himself. You talked to him about getting Meredith birth control.”

She nodded. “Yes. But he didn’t know that she was dumb enough to pick up an STD. Jon would’ve freaked out and she knew that. I told her I’d tell him.”

I didn’t say anything.

“You have to understand something about Meredith,” she finally said, the

lines deepening on her forehead. “About the relationship I have with her. It isn’t the greatest.”

“That’s not what you told me the first time we talked.”

She hiked her shoulders as if that was ancient history. “I answered your questions.”

“I asked if you had a good relationship with your daughter and you said you did,” I reminded her.

“What I said was that I liked to think so,” she said.

My stomach tightened. I had misread Olivia Jordan after my initial visit with her. She had carefully chosen each word she'd spoken to me, in case it came back on her. It had and she was prepared.

“Tell me exactly what that means,” I said through clenched teeth.

“It means, Mr. Tyler, that my daughter can be a serious pain in the ass and that we don't always get along,” she explained. “She's a teenager. She doesn't like her parents very much.”

“Her father has the same problems with her then?”

“You’d have to ask him.”

I took a deep breath. “So basically everything you told me the first time we spoke was a load of crap? The happy family, the great daughter. All of that?”

She didn’t say anything.

“Do you even want to find your daughter?” I finally asked.

She made a face as if I’d defecated on the rug. “What kind of question is that?”

“You don’t seem to miss her,” I said, watching her. “You weren’t terribly

worried the first time I came here and today you seem as if you don't really care whether you see her again." I paused. "Either you don't care or you know where she is."

I hoped she would respond to the last part, but she didn't. If she knew where her daughter was, she was doing an excellent job of hiding it. What she couldn't hide, though, was what a hateful human being she was.

"I don't want to lose this, alright?" she said, leaning forward. "Any of this. I worked extremely hard to leave my old life behind and I'm not giving any of this up."

She was veering off course, but I didn't interrupt her.

“She wants to run away and hide, fine,” she said, waving a hand in the air. “Go. Be gone. But there's no way I'll let her destroy my marriage.”

“You think she ran away?”

“I don't know what happened,” she said, her jaw tightening. “I don't know where she is. But as long as she's not here, she can't tell Jon the truth.”

“Lovely,” I said, wanting to vomit. “That's a beautiful sentiment.”

She sat back in the sofa and sneered at me. “It is what it is. Every time I see her, I remember how far I’ve come. I’m not going back.”

“Your husband doesn’t feel that way,” I said.

For all the things that I didn’t like about Jordan, I had no doubt that he would do anything to get his daughter back. He was acting like a normal parent. Unlike his wife.

The sneer spread to every inch of her face. “Of course he doesn’t. He lives and breathes for her, thinks she is the

greatest thing he's ever seen."

"Jealous?"

The sneer morphed into an explosion of anger and she leapt off the sofa. "She's not even his child!our

SIXTY-SIX

Olivia Jordan, perhaps stunned herself that she'd spoken the words aloud, stood frozen for a moment before slowly moving back to the sofa. Her face held the angry outline of a frown.

After a few moments, she glanced at me, as if she was making sure that I was still in the room. She looked around, maybe checking to see if anyone else had been listening. Finally, she clasped her hands together and brought her

unfocused gaze back to me. “I’ve never said that out loud.”

I didn’t say anything.

“She’s...not his daughter,” she said, the words coming out of her mouth slowly and awkwardly, like she was relearning the language. “He’s not her father.”

“Okay,” I said.

Whereas her face had been a mask of anger one minute before, she now bore the expression of a scared and confused woman who was wading into unfamiliar territory.

“I was with Jon,” she began, her hands rubbing together like she was trying to clean them. “We’d been together for a year. I got a call from...” She paused, staring at her hands, unable to find the word she was looking for.

“Your old manager?”

She looked up from her hands, her eyes vacant. “Yes, that’s right. He called me. An old client of mine was in town, asking for me. He was persistent and offering a larger than normal fee.” Her hands started working again. “Thomas...my manager. Thomas called me, explained the situation, asked if I’d

do him a favor.” Her hands stopped. “I told him to fuck off.”

She laughed at the memory, though I didn't see much humor in it.

She laid her hands flat on her thighs. “So Thomas told me if I wouldn't help him out, he'd tell Jon. About my past.” She shook her head, her lips pursed together in a sour remembrance. “So I did it.”

“And you didn't tell Jon?” I asked.

“That was the whole point,” she said. “To not let Jon know. About any of it.”

“Didn’t you think he might come back at you again? Thomas?”

“It wasn’t going to happen again,” she said.

“You couldn’t have known that.”

“Trust me,” she said, leveling her eyes with mine. “It won’t happen again.”

I dropped it and moved on. “Okay. So, the client. He’s Meredith’s father?”

Her eyes slipped away again and she nodded slowly. “When I found out I was pregnant, I assumed it was Jon’s. But

when I went to the doctor for confirmation, I realized the timing was off. Jon had gone to Europe on business for a few weeks. When I tracked back, I knew it wasn't his."

I tried to sort out the questions in my head and get them in an order that would make sense.

"I was protected, like I always had been," Olivia said, answering one of the questions. "It was a fluke circumstance, the pregnancy."

"Why didn't you just abort?" I asked, then corrected myself. "I'm sorry, I don't mean just, as if it were an easy

thing. But given the situation...”

“I was going to,” she said. “That was the plan.” She shook her head. “But a phone call came to the house from the doctor’s office. Jon answered. This was before doctors started taking privacy seriously. He was ecstatic.” A thin, empty smile crept onto her face. “No going back at that point.”

“Did you tell the father?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No. I’m sure he didn’t use his real name.”

“Wouldn’t...your manager have known?”

She leveled her eyes with mine.
“Probably.”

I left it alone. “And I assume Meredith doesn’t know?”

“Of course not. It was bad enough that she learned what I used to be. There was no way I’d tell her the truth.”

“You didn’t worry about her finding out?”

She frowned. “How would she find out when I was the only one who knew? And why would I have wanted to know him? Introductions would’ve been a

little awkward, don't you think?"

It was clear by her tone that she didn't care what I thought.

"You think that would've been easy?" she said, gathering steam, her anger fueling her. "You think maybe we could've solved our little problem if we'd all just sat down and talked about it? Maybe turned into some sort of Brady Bunch? Give me a fucking break."

Her eyes were wide with fury. I wasn't exactly sure who or what she was mad at, but I was getting a good idea.

“Every time you see her,” I finally said.

She stared for a long time at me and I assumed I would get some angry denials, maybe some more profanity. But her face finally took on an accepting expression, the resignation that she couldn't—or didn't want to—hide it any longer.

“Yes,” she said, her voice just above a whisper. “Every time I see Meredith, I am reminded of what I used to be. Of who her father is, of how she came to be. And every time I see her with Jon, when he's gloating over her, spending

time with her, telling her how wonderful she is..." She cleared her throat and ran a hand through her hair. "I don't want to be reminded of that part of my life, but every day, I see her and I see it."

"She's your daughter, too," I said.

"No, she's not," she said, shaking her head, looking right through me. "She's the daughter of someone who no longer exists."

SIXTY-SEVEN

I walked outside, the interior of the Jordan home feeling toxic and ugly.

I'd asked Olivia a few more questions. It immediately occurred to me that perhaps she had done something with Meredith, but I let go of it almost as quickly. She was interested in protecting her place in the Jordan family and was not going to jeopardize that. She may not have cared for the sight of her daughter, but I doubted that she

played any part in her disappearance.

The afternoon sun was high and prominent and the heat weighed on me, unwanted. I sat down beneath the sprawling portico, slipping into the shade.

I was trying to be sympathetic to Olivia Jordan's situation, but failing. I knew that my own loss played into those feelings, but I didn't think that if Elizabeth was still with me and Lauren, and we were still married, that I'd feel any different. I didn't know what had drawn Olivia into prostitution and I didn't care. She'd made the choice and had to live with it, which wasn't an easy

thing to do. But she'd made the choice. I didn't see how taking out her frustration on her daughter helped.

By all accounts, Meredith was a good kid. I knew that wasn't the entire story, but it appeared that she had friends and people liked her. Regardless of the choices she was making now, she didn't deserve to be looked at as an ugly talisman by Olivia.

And no matter how long Olivia thought she could keep her secrets buried, she was wrong. Secrets don't stay buried.

They just wait to be dug up.

SIXTY-EIGHT

I was halfway back to Coronado when my cell chirped.

“I checked with vice here,” Mike Lorenzo told me. “Nothing on Olivia Jordan. She runs clean.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t sound surprised.”

I wasn’t. “I just finished talking to

her. She's screwed up, but she gave it up awhile ago. Pretty sure about that."

"Gotcha. I did get something else, though" he said. "Not sure if it matters or not."

"Alright."

"I called my buddy Tully over in Vegas again, just asked him to poke around her name, see if anything shook out," he said. "He dug up one thing."

I pulled over to the side of the road. I kept forgetting that California was a hands-free state and I didn't want to get stopped while I was paying attention to

Mike's call.

“He tried to track back to her, see if any of her old connections were still live,” he explained. “Turned up the name of the piece of crap who was supposedly her pimp. Tommy Lutton.”

Her manager, Olivia had called him. Thomas. She'd even tried to dress up his name.

“But his ticket was punched awhile back,” Mike said. “Found dead in an alley behind a Denny's.”

A dull flash fired inside my head. “Oh yeah?”

“Couple of bullets in his face,” he said. “Shooter never found.”

My stomach clenched. “When was this?”

More pages flipped. “Awhile back, actually. Maybe sixteen years? Can’t find the date on here.”

I didn’t need the date. Olivia had been adamant that he would never bother her again. Now I knew why.

“Joe?” Mike asked. “Joe?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

He paused. “That do anything for you?”

I watched cars fly by on the highway, a knot in my stomach. I wasn't a cop anymore, but the instinct to act like a cop was always with me and influenced everything that I did. I was certain that Tommy Lutton's death was not a coincidence and that Olivia Jordan had, at the very least, played a part in it. Maybe she hadn't pulled the trigger, but she was involved. But I wasn't sure what was to be gained, either, by exposing her. It wouldn't help Chuck and it wouldn't help me locate Meredith.

“No,” I finally said. “That doesn’t do anything for me.”

SIXTY-NINE

Gina Coleman was waiting at my hotel for me.

“Charges are dropped,” she said.

I looked around the hotel lobby.
“Where’s Jordan?”

“Probably trying to find someone to choke,” she said. “He’s furious.”

“Good for him.”

“I get that you feel like you got screwed,” she said. “And I’m not even saying you didn’t. But you agreed to help find Meredith and it hasn’t happened.”

“I can’t just snap my fingers.”

“No, you can’t. But you show up at his house and pull that power play, you can’t expect him to be happy about it.”

“You think he expected me to be happy about kicking the shit out of my friend?” I asked. “Sending two assholes to cut him down for something he didn’t do in the first place?”

She started to say something, but I cut her off.

“The same guy that you allegedly give a shit about,” I said.

Her cheeks reddened. “I didn’t know.”

“Sure.”

Irritation flared in her eyes. “I didn’t know.”

“Well, now you know. Bother you at all?”

She stepped in closer to me, the red having spread to most of her face. “Of course it bothers me. That’s why I just quit my job.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Nothing to say to that?” she asked, raising an eyebrow. “No wiseass comeback, no sarcastic rebuke questioning my loyalty?” She clicked her tongue. “You must be tired.”

She’d caught me off guard and I deserved what she was giving me.

“I’m sorry you had to quit your job,” I said.

“Sure you are.”

“I am.”

“Fuck you.”

She turned and headed for the lobby doors.

I stood there for a moment, not sure what to do. She was angry at me for a couple of reasons, but she was also clearly angry about quitting. She needed time to cool off, but I didn't want to waste the time.

I followed her outside. “I am sorry

about your job, whether or not you believe it.”

She was standing in front of the hotel, arms crossed, annoyance set like concrete on her face, her eyes like hollow-tipped bullets. Aimed at me.

“But I still need your help,” I said.
“Chuck still needs your help.”

“Chuck is clear,” she said, the concrete cracking a bit.

“No, he won’t be clear until Meredith is found and she clears him,” I said.
“It’ll stick to him until she says it was a lie, charges or no charges.”

She thought about that.

“Did you know Olivia Jordan was a hooker?” I asked.

The concrete shattered completely.
“What?”

“I need your help,” I repeated.
“Come inside and let me tell you what I know. Please.”

After a moment, she nodded and we went inside and sat down at a table in the hotel café. I explained what I’d learned from Mike and from Olivia, leaving out the part about Olivia having

possibly killed her pimp. I watched her expression the same way I'd watched Olivia Jordan's. If she was aware of anything I was telling her, she fooled me.

“That is really hard to believe,” she said when I'd finished.

“Tell me something,” I said. “It's been bugging me since Olivia told me. Wouldn't Jordan have checked out Olivia before marrying her? Wouldn't he have done some sort of look into her background?”

She cocked her head to the side, running it through her mind. “I don't know. Now? For sure. It's one of the

things I spent the majority of my time on. Anyone that was working for him, we did lengthy background checks on.” She squinted, like she was trying to see into the past. “But back then? I don’t know. He hadn’t amassed his wealth yet and his company wasn’t nearly what it is today. It’s hard to say. I’ve never for a second thought that their marriage was a sham.” Her eyes came back to their normal gauge. “I think he loves her. You don’t normally run your prospective fiancé through the system, you know?”

I did know. I thought back to when Lauren and I were engaged. If anyone had suggested that I needed to check her history, I would’ve thought they were

insane. But I wasn't putting together a multi-million dollar fortune and I hadn't met my future wife, by chance, in Las Vegas.

“He had security people before you, right?” I asked.

“I met the guy I replaced,” she said, shrugging. “I don't know anything about the ones before him. I'm not sure how long ago he created the position.” Her mouth twisted into a frown. “And it'd be a little hard for me to find out now.”

An elderly couple moved slowly through the lobby toward the check-in desk, a bellhop lugging two large

suitcases behind them.

“Was he pissed?” I asked.

Gina hiked her shoulders and rolled her eyes. “I don’t know. I guess.”

“Did he argue? Want you to stay?”

“At first, yeah,” she said. “Offered me more money, apologized, blah blah blah. Then he got mad, told me fine, I was done as of right then. Made me give him the keys to the car and he took off.”

“Keys to the car?”

“It’s leased to the company,” she said,

waving a hand in the air. “Wasn’t mine to begin with.”

“And he just left you here?”

“Actually, he left me in Coronado. I called a taxi to get me here.”

“Nice.”

“It doesn’t matter. Just as well,” she said, shaking her head. “I couldn’t do it anymore, not for any amount of money.” She paused. “I think I always knew it was them that attacked Chuck, in the back of my mind at least. But when you laid it out for him at the house and I saw those assholes lying on the ground, I

knew I was done.” She stared at me. “I knew I was done.”

I had underestimated her and I felt badly about that. Jordan didn’t deserve her.

“I’m sorry it shook out like that,” I said.

“I’ll survive,” she said with a tight smile. She leaned forward and rapped her knuckles on the table between us. “So where do we go from here?”

The bellhop led the elderly couple and their luggage toward the bank of elevators.

“There are two big questions that we don’t have answers for right now,” I said. “Who told Meredith about Olivia? And who else besides Derek was Meredith working for?”

“You think one and the same?”

“Maybe. But I’d think one at least might tie to the other. Were you able to find out anything about her computer password?”

“No. Jon didn’t know it. He was going to give it to some computer guy he works with to have him check it out.”

“What about her cell phone records?”

“He was getting them pulled for me,” she said. “Not sure what he’s gonna do now.”

“I need to go talk to him,” I said. “There has to be something in her cell records, either a number she called or texted, that might point us to one of the answers.” I paused. “I need to tell him what Meredith was doing, too.”

She let out a hissing sound through her teeth. “Better you than me.”

“You wanna come along?”

“No.”

“Don’t you have stuff you need to get from his place?” I asked. “Might go quicker if I’m there to run interference.”

“I wanna go see Chuck,” she said, her mouth settling into a firm line.

“I can drive you.”

“No,” she said. “You go. I’ll find a ride over there.”

I was going to offer again, but the look on her face told me she wanted to be alone in prepping to see him. I could understand that.

“Look,” I said. “If you’re not working for Jordan anymore, there’s no reason you need to stay in this. If you wanna spend some time with Chuck, look for a job, whatever, I understand.”

She stood and rubbed her palms together like they were cold. “I’m in. Regardless of how I feel about Jon, I like Meredith a lot and I’m worried about her.” Something flitted through her eyes.

“What?”

She stared at her hands for a long moment before moving her gaze to me.

“And I owe Chuck.”

SEVENTY

“You could’ve saved us both a lot of time if you’d told me we were gonna need to talk again,” Jon Jordan said. “Or did you just come here to order me to do something else?”

He was still in the driveway of his home, sitting in the passenger seat of the BMW. A small pile of papers sat in his lap and he was rifling through a black book.

“Making sure Gina can’t claim the car as hers?” I asked.

He pulled a white card from the book, zipped it back up and threw it in the glove box, slamming it closed. “She no longer works for me. The car is no longer available to her.”

“Afraid she’ll try to steal it?”

He slid out of the car, shoved the car door shut and glared at me. “What do you want?”

“Gina asked you to pull some cell phone records,” I asked. “Did you do that?”

The glare lost a fraction of its intensity. “Yes. They’re inside.”

I followed him in, down a long hallway toward the back of the home. We turned into a small office with bookshelves, several easy chairs and a neatly maintained desk.

He grabbed several sheets of paper off the top of the only pile on the desk and thrust them at me. “Here.”

I pointed at one of the chairs. “You’re gonna wanna sit down.”

The anger flashed again in his eyes.

“You know what, Tyler? Unless you’ve got something to tell me about Meredith...”

“I do,” I said.

He lowered himself into the chair across from me and the anger had morphed into an expression of equal parts hope and desperation.

I wasn’t exactly sure how to explain what Meredith was doing. I didn’t like Jordan, but I hadn’t know him outside of the context of our situation. What he’d done to Chuck was wrong, but at the core of all of his actions was the fact that his daughter was missing and that he

believed Chuck had hurt her. He was wrong, but I tried to put myself in his situation. If I thought I knew who was responsible for my daughter's disappearance, what would I have done?

Far worse than what he had done to Chuck, I knew. Far worse.

I tried to be mindful of all of that as I explained to him that his daughter had entered the world of prostitution.

He didn't react the way I anticipated. I expected a lot of anger, some denial, something close to a complete meltdown.

What I got was a father who was stunned into silence, his shoulders slumping further down with each mini-revelation, the realization that he no longer had a good handle on who his daughter was, hitting him squarely in the gut with the force of a medium-sized bomb.

But he didn't say a word. He just listened, a distraught expression crystallizing on his face as I told him. I left out the parts about Olivia because I wasn't sure her past was at all connected to Meredith's disappearance. Yet.

When I finished, he sat there for a

long minute, his eyes away from me, staring out a window on the side wall that looked out on a heavily-treed area of their property. With the index finger and thumb of his right hand, he traced an invisible circle around his mouth and chin, as if he was waiting for a beard that had yet to grow in.

Finally, he turned back to me, his face looking like one I saw in the mirror almost every morning.

“I just want to find her,” he whispered.

He was back to being the defeated father in the parking lot the night he hired

me. No bullshit, no arrogance, no attitude. Just a father who wanted more than anything else to see his daughter again. I hadn't found much to like about Jon Jordan, but I sympathized with him, probably more than he would ever know.

And I was going to find his daughter.

SEVENTY-ONE

Jordan excused himself from the room for a moment and I took the time to scan through the papers he'd given me.

They were phone records from Meredith's cell phone from the previous three months. Given the time frame I'd put together of when she'd started freelancing, I bypassed the furthest month back and worked over the previous two months. I pulled two pens from the holder on Jordan's desk and

started making circles and notations to detail numbers that were popping up on a regular basis. I figured many of those I'd be able to eliminate quickly, as they probably belonged to friends she spoke to on a normal basis. I was looking for abnormalities, a number that showed up where it shouldn't have.

“What are you doing?” Jordan asked, startling me as he came back into the room.

“Checking the numbers.”

“What can I do?”

I gave him half the stack. “Mark

anything you recognize. Circle numbers that you see called repetitively. Anything that doesn't look right to you, mark it.”

I expected an objection or a question, but he took the papers, grabbed a pen and went to work.

We worked for nearly an hour, mostly in silence, save for when I asked Jordan to identify a number for me, which he did so without complaint, checking his Blackberry on occasion to verify. When we were done with our respective stacks, we compared what we had and arrived at three numbers that stuck out from the others.

“Recognize any of them?” I asked

He studied them for a moment, then shook his head.

I pointed to the area code of the first one we'd identified. “Not a San Diego area number, right?”

He glanced at it. “No.” He flipped open the laptop to his left, waited a moment, then tapped the keys. “It's an Oregon number. No info on it, just the origination point.”

I pulled out my cell and started

punching in the numbers.

“Wait,” Jordan said.

I looked at him.

“My line is blocked,” he said. “So the other end can’t see who’s calling.”

I nodded. “Put it on speaker.”

He pushed a button on the phone next to the computer and a dial tone jumped loudly through the speaker. He punched in the number and it rang twice.

“Powell’s Books,” a male voice answered.

“I’m sorry?” Jordan said, looking at me.

“Powell’s Books,” the guy said again, not bothering to hide his annoyance. “Can I help you?”

I signaled to him to cut the call and he pushed a button on the phone.

“Meredith read a lot?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, the faint hint of a smile fighting to reach his face. “Constantly.”

“It’s a bookstore up in Portland,” I

said. “She’s probably ordering from them.”

I’d spent a couple months up in the Pacific Northwest and remembered drinking coffee and thumbing through books, my eyes on the pages, but not really absorbing anything.

Jordan blinked several times. “I think I’ve seen it on boxes that have come to the house.”

“She has her own credit card?”

“No. She would’ve used one of Olivia’s.”

“We can cross-check the billing against when the calls were made, just to be sure,” I said. “Next one.”

He punched in the numbers and it went immediately to an automated voicemail. He looked at me and I signaled to him to cut the call.

“I’ve got a guy who can run the number for us,” I said, thinking of Mike. “No need to give anything away by leaving a message.”

Jordan nodded, glanced at the third number and dialed it. It rang twice before the voicemail kicked in.

We both listened to Kelly Rundles tell us that she couldn't get to her phone and to leave her a message. Jordan touched the screen on the phone and ended the call. He reached for a rolodex next to the phone and began flipping through the cards, his eyebrows bunched together in confusion.

“What?” I asked.

He found the card he was looking for and plucked it from the roll. He laid it next to the phone bill and spun them both in my direction. “The number I just called isn't the number she'd given me to contact her.”

I could see in his face something that I felt often enough on my own. Any small incongruity, anything that looked like a tiny step forward provided you with a shot of adrenaline. The feeling that maybe all wasn't lost, that maybe the answer was closer than you thought.

I looked at both numbers. "When did she give you the one in the rolodex?"

"When the school hired her."

"Three years ago, right?"

He nodded.

"When was the last time you called

her on this number?”

His expression sagged. “Probably a year ago. I generally reach her through the school.”

“She could’ve changed numbers in that time,” I said. “Changed cell providers maybe.”

“You can keep your number.”

I nodded. “Sure.”

I scanned the phone bill again, checking the times that Meredith had apparently called Kelly Rundles. They were all over the map. Morning, middle

of the day, several after midnight.

“They were pretty close?” I asked.
“Meredith and Kelly?”

Jordan hesitated, then nodded.
“Yeah. Meredith really looked up to her. Kelly has far and away been the best coach Meredith has ever had.” He fought off what looked to me like a grimace. “We encouraged the relationship.”

“Look, this is something to take a look at,” I said quickly. “But it might not mean anything. All of these calls may be legit and she may have just not gotten you her new number. I’ll find out. But

don't start thinking that Kelly had anything to do with what's going on with Meredith until we know something for certain."

Jordan exhaled and stood, walking over to a window on the far side of the room. He stayed there motionless, his hands in his pockets, his back to me, staring out the glass.

"Ever get easier?" he finally asked.

"No," I said. "Not for a second."

"It's not even that she's gone," he said. "It's..."

“It’s the not knowing,” I said. “Not knowing what’s going on with her.”

He turned to me, his face pale, the skin drawn tightly around his eyes and mouth. “Yes. The not knowing. It’s... brutal.”

“It is.”

“I can’t imagine what it’s like for you,” he said.

“And I hope you don’t have to.” I stood up, unwilling to get into a conversation about what it actually was like for me.

Jordan pulled his hands from his pockets but seemed unsure what to do with them. He settled for putting them awkwardly on his hips. “What should I be doing?”

“I’m going to head over to the school,” I said. “Get ready for the game.”

“Should I go with you?”

“No. Stay here. I want you to recreate the forty-eight hours before Meredith disappeared.”

“Recreate?”

“On paper,” I explained. “Everything you can remember from two days prior to her disappearing. Try to account for every second of each of those days. Nothing is too immaterial. What time you woke up, what you ate, exact conversations you had with her, what she was wearing. Every detail of every second, as best you can.”

He nodded slowly, probably already trying to line up details. “Alright.”

“I’ll call you after the game,” I said. “We can go over what you’ve got.”

I said goodbye and found my way back outside. The evening air was

settling in, cooler than normal for that time of year. Fog hung at the edge of the sky and I could smell the dampness working itself down to the grass and the pavement.

The forty-eight hour diary was to keep Jordan busy. Most likely, it wouldn't do a damn thing to help us find Meredith. But it would occupy him, give him a task, help him push forward, mute the pain of not knowing where she was for the moment.

Someone—I could no longer recall whom—had given me the same exercise during the first week of Elizabeth's disappearance. I had scribbled

furiously, recording every detail I could remember. It kept me busy, occupied, made me feel like I was doing something toward finding Elizabeth.

As I got into my car, I hoped that I could provide Jon Jordan with a better outcome for his efforts than I had received.

SEVENTY-TWO

Athletic Director Robert Stricker was standing near the entrance to the gym when I arrived at the high school. He raised his eyebrows. “Wasn’t sure if you were coming tonight.”

“I told Kelly I’d be here,” I said. “You seen her yet?”

He tilted his head back toward the locker room. “She’s been here for awhile.” He held a hand up and waved

at someone as they passed in behind us.
“Anything on the Jordan girl?”

“Nothing right now.”

“Her father driving you nuts?”

“He’s just worried about his kid.”

Stricker nodded. “Understandable.”

“You think of anybody, anybody here at the school who might know something?” I asked him. “Someone who you saw her with that seemed out of the ordinary?”

“Why?”

“She just had some things going on in her life that were definitely not ordinary,” I explained. “I’m just wondering if there was a connection here or if it was all outside of school.”

“Not ordinary how?”

“I can’t really say right now,” I said.

He nodded, then shrugged his large shoulders. “I can’t recall seeing her with anyone other than her boyfriend and teammates. Pretty tight group, you know?”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks. I’m gonna go

find Kelly.”

“Good luck tonight.”

“You said she was in the locker room, right?”

He smiled. “I meant good luck with the game.”

“Oh. Right. Thanks.”

I saw Megan entering through the far door at the end of the hall and hustled to catch her before she entered the locker room. She saw me coming, gave a half-wave, took a step as if she was unsure of what to do, then waited on me.

“Hey, Coach,” she said.

“Hi Megan. You alright?”

“Yeah, sure. Why?”

“Just asking.”

I wasn't just asking. Megan was normally as laid back as was humanly possible while being awake. But her shoulders were bunched, there was no smile on her face and she was clutching her backpack like her hand was glued to it. The tension in her face, body and actions was tangible.

“You hear anything from Meredith?” I asked.

She looked down at her shoes and shook her head. “Nope.”

“You sure?”

Her head snapped up, her eyes now filled with something other than tension. “What? I mean, yes I’m sure. I haven’t seen her.”

“Talked to her?”

Color flushed in her face. “No. Why?”

Going through Meredith's phone records had shown me more than a couple of unidentified phone numbers. Every day, without exception, Meredith and Megan spoke by phone and texted one another, to the point that it was unnecessary to count how many times. Sorting the calls and text messages by the hour would've been more effective. I knew they were good friends, but those phone records demonstrated how close they were. I was no longer buying the idea that Megan didn't know what was going on in Meredith's life.

"You told me the rumor about Meredith being a hooker," I said. "Why?"

She pulled harder on the backpack and licked her lips. “Because I thought it might help.”

“No. You knew it wasn’t a rumor. Meredith was involved in prostitution and you knew.”

The pink in her cheeks glowed into a red. “Why would I do that?”

Goose bumps popped on the back of my neck, as I felt like I was getting close. “Because you wanted to help her. You didn’t want to come straight out with it and betray her. I get that. So you fed it to me as if it was a rumor so

I'd look at it. I know what she was doing, Megan. And so do you."

She'd slipped a fingernail into her mouth and was gnawing on it, her eyes darting from me to her feet and back again. She looked to me as if she was trying to make a decision. I stayed quiet and let her make it.

"Can we talk after the game?" she finally asked.

"I don't wanna wait, Megan," I said. "Meredith's been gone too long and I don't want to waste anymore time."

She mumbled something, but I

couldn't understand her.

“What?”

“She’s alright,” she whispered.

“You’ve talked to her?”

She hesitated, then nodded.

The goosebumps popped harder and my heart rate spiked. “Do you know where she is?”

She started to say something, then glanced over my shoulder and something in her expression changed.

I turned and followed her gaze. Kelly Rundles was talking to Stricker at the other end of the hall. She looked up and waved. I waved back.

“After the game,” Megan said quickly. “Not now. We can’t do it now.”

I turned back to her. “Why?”

She started backing away from me, toward the locker room. “After the game. Meet me on the other side of campus, near the admin building.”

“Megan, come on,” I said. “Talk to me.”

“After the game,” she repeated. “Just trust me, please. And don’t tell anyone yet. Please. Don’t tell *anyone*.”

I didn’t want to let her go, but there was something in her voice and in her face that made me realize I didn’t have a choice. And I didn’t want to push her to the point that I lost her. Plus, I knew I’d be sitting on the bench and she wouldn’t be out of my sight for the next two hours.

I nodded in her direction.

The tension drained out of her face and something close to a smile found it’s way into her expression as she

disappeared into the locker room.

SEVENTY-THREE

The girls were out of it and so was I.

It was nearly halftime and we were down by fifteen. It should've been more. They couldn't shoot, they couldn't pass, they couldn't defend and they couldn't execute. It looked as if they had never played a game together before. Everything that Kelly tried failed. When she wasn't screaming herself hoarse, her jaw was set in a concrete mix of frustration and anger.

Megan, the best player on the team in Meredith's absence, was atrocious. Throwing the ball away, taking ridiculous shots and letting opponents drive by her as if she was nothing more than a turnstile. Kelly had called her over to the sideline several times, alternately coaxing and berating her, Megan nodding at her with an absent expression, then returning to the floor to continue her ugly play. She was now at the far end of the bench, a towel draped around her neck, her eyes glued on the floor.

I was no help, either. I was watching the game, but my mind was on Meredith

and Megan. And Kelly Rundles.

The phone calls bothered me. A few phone calls would've been normal, maybe a few text messages. I could recall calling my coach in my high school several times, but they were nothing more than short courtesy calls. Times had changed and relationships between players and coaches had changed, as well. If Meredith was being recruited by top notch colleges, it was likely that Kelly would've acted as a filter between Meredith and recruiters which would've meant regular phone calls and communication.

But the sheer number struck me as

odd. They were nearly every day and many were late into the night. That just seemed abnormal, particularly after Kelly herself had cautioned me about how the relationship between coach and player could be construed differently if the adult wasn't careful.

As I watched the seconds tick off the clock in the second quarter, though, something else was bothering me.

When I spoke to Megan before the game, her demeanor and voice changed when Kelly showed up at the opposite end of the hall. Was it just a player shrinking beneath the gaze of her coach? Or was there something else?

Every time I glanced at Kelly stalking the sideline, I wasn't thinking about the game. I was thinking that maybe she had lied to me.

The horn sounded ending the quarter and the girls jogged out of the gym toward the locker room. Several glanced anxiously at Kelly, no doubt anticipating an ass-chewing over their horrendous play.

Kelly snatched her whiteboard off the bench, her jaw still locked in place. She walked over to the scorer's table, took a look at the scorebook, shook her head and came back in my direction.

“It’s like they don’t even give a shit tonight,” she spat. “Sixteen turnovers. In the first half. Jesus Christ.”

“Yeah.”

She walked past me, still talking. “I’m thinking we just go straight man, full-court, press the rest of the way. See if that shakes them awake.” She bounded up the steps that took us from the gym floor to the hallway that led to the locker room, her feet stomping against each stair. “They wanna lose, fine, but they’re gonna run their asses off doing it.” We stopped at the door to the locker room and she turned to me, sweat

on her forehead and the skin around her eyes pinched tight. “What do you think?”

I massaged the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger. A trace of a headache was forming in my skull, as if my brain hurt from everything I was putting it through.

“Joe?” Kelly asked. “Are you alright?”

“You were talking to her,” I finally said. “To Meredith. A lot.”

Her face screwed up with confusion. “What?”

“Phone calls. I looked at Meredith’s phone records for the last couple of months and there were hundreds of calls between you and Meredith.”

The confusion wound tighter on her face. “What are you talking about?”

“Why was she calling you so much Kelly?” I asked. “Daytime, night time. You two were on the phone together a lot.”

Her eyes were narrow slits now and her hands were balled into fists. “We’re in the middle of a game, Joe. It’s halftime and I’m trying to figure out how

to stop the ass kicking we're on the wrong end of. You wanna talk about Meredith, we'll talk about her *after* the game."

"Ever since she disappeared," I said, pushing on. "It's like you've forgotten about her. You haven't been worried about her, you've barely mentioned her. It's been about basketball all the time." I paused. "You know where she is, Kelly?"

The confusion folded itself into anger and for a moment, her right elbow cocked and I thought she was going to hit me. Instead, she stepped in closer to me, our noses no more than a couple inches

apart.

“I am in the middle of a game,” she growled. “And I am not interested in discussing anything else right now. But fuck you for the insinuation. Get the fuck out of my gym.”

That was fine. I wasn't doing her or the girls any good on the bench. I didn't belong there anymore.

“I'll find you after the game then,” I said.

She held up a finger like she had one more thing to say, her teeth bared, her cheeks sucked in, anger plastered on her

face. But then she abruptly turned and her fist slammed against the door as she disappeared into the locker room.

SEVENTY-FOUR

I watched the rest of the game from the stands.

The second half of the game went much like the first half. The Coronado girls made a bit of a run to start the third quarter, but it was nothing more than a token show of effort. They quickly reverted to the poor play they'd shown in the first two quarters and when Kelly benched Megan near the end of the third, it was as if she was waving the white

flag. The girls appeared listless, tired and uninterested and they were rewarded with a thirty-one point spanking. They looked the part of a defeated team as they left the floor—heads down, shoulders slumped, embarrassment sitting heavily on their backs.

The exiting crowd made getting back to the locker room a slow process and my phone vibrated in my pocket as I trudged along in the herd.

“Joe, it’s me,” Mike Lorenzo said.

“You get my message?”

“Yeah. Sorry I’ve been hung up on something else.”

“That’s okay. Find anything on the number?”

“Not yet. Just got back to the station and I’m trying to run it down now. What exactly am I looking for?”

I explained to him the discrepancies in the phone records and the little bit of information that Jordan and I had cobbled together.

He stayed quiet for a long moment before he responded. “I’ve never heard anything that went the wrong way against

Rundles, Joe. Everyone seems to like her pretty well.”

“I understand that,” I said, stepping out of the slow crawl to the exit. “And I’m not saying she’s done anything wrong. But I need her to spell it out for me. Just because everyone likes her doesn’t mean I can’t ask her a few questions.”

“Settle down, Joe,” Mike said. “I wasn’t saying you couldn’t ask her questions. I can’t tell you what to do anyway. I’m just telling you what I know. Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t follow up.”

I watched the crowd trickle out the door of the gym. “Sorry. I know. I’m just...I think I’m close. Getting a read on that other number might help, too.”

“I’ll call you as soon as I have something,” he said. “Hey, you free for breakfast tomorrow?”

“Yeah why?”

“Just something I wanna show you.”

“Alright,” I said.

He named a diner near the high school and we settled on eight o’clock.

“Call me if you get a hit on the number,” I said.

“Will do,” he replied.

I shoved the phone back in my pocket and left the empty gym.

The girls were slowly emerging from the locker room, most with the hoods of their sweatshirts pulled over their heads. They brushed past me without saying a word. I didn't see Megan or Kelly and I waited for a couple of minutes, assuming Kelly was talking to her about her poor performance. Kelly wasn't one to let things go or to let things ride. She addressed them

immediately with the intent that always clearing the air made it easier to move forward.

But after ten minutes, I was tired of waiting and stuck my head into the locker room.

A locker room that was already empty.

SEVENTY-FIVE

I drove over to the opposite side of campus to my rendezvous point with Megan, cursing under my breath that I had taken so long to get back to the locker area. It didn't bother me as much that Megan was gone. If she was really going to meet me, it made sense that she would've made a fast exit.

Kelly's absence, though, felt wrong to me. She was always the last one out of the locker room after a game and several girls stepped out after I'd gotten there. I'd taken awhile, but it hadn't been

empty by the time I'd arrived. I expected her to be there if for no other reason than to tell me I was officially relieved of any and all coaching duties.

But she was already gone and I wondered why.

I pulled my rental into the small square lot near the admin building. It was dark except for a single street lamp in the middle of the parking slots. The buildings were shadows and there were no other cars.

I parked beneath the light and waited.

After a five minute wait that seemed

like thirty, headlights split the darkness near the entrance and a car pulled up next to me.

Megan.

Her window was down and she motioned for me to lower mine.

“I’ll drive,” she said.

I was just relieved to see her, so I didn’t argue.

The interior of her car was warm and music drifted softly from the speakers.

“You didn’t tell anyone, right?” she

asked. “That we were meeting?”

“No.”

She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment.

“Megan, I didn’t say a word, even to a cop who’s helping me out,” I assured her.

“Why weren’t you on the bench for the second half?” she asked.

“Long story,” I said.

“Coach was pretty pissed when she came in at halftime,” she said.

“She should’ve been. You guys were terrible.”

“Yeah, but it was a different kind of pissed.” She watched me. “It was more than the game.”

“Where are we going, Megan?” I asked, not having any intention of telling her about my conversation with her coach.

We circled my car and headed out of the lot and off campus.

I wanted to ask her more questions about our destination and Meredith, but I

wasn't ready to push it yet.

“What was going on out there tonight with you guys?” I asked to break the silence.

She had one hand on the wheel and an elbow on the door. She raised her shoulders in a lazy shrug. “I don't know. Just wasn't into it, I guess.”

“Doesn't sound like you.”

She sighed. “We're tired, all of us. It's such a long season. It's a grind. And the last week, it's been even tougher.” She rapped her knuckles against her window. “I think we just hit

a wall tonight.” She glanced at me. “And it didn’t help that you weren’t there in the second half.”

“Game was already over, Megan.”

“Maybe. But Rundles was already flaming pissed. We needed a steady voice. Yours.”

A twinge of guilt hit me in the stomach. Despite all the girls had done to make me a part of the program, I still felt like an outsider. I hadn’t considered that my absence would’ve mattered to them. Taking up Meredith’s disappearance with Kelly at the half had not only been pointless, but selfish, too.

“I’m sorry about that,” I said.
“Couldn’t be helped.”

She nodded and I couldn’t tell whether she cared or not.

We cut through the center of the island, across Orange and over into the neighborhoods near the golf course on the east side of the island.

“Kind of a weird route to take to the bridge,” I said.

“We’re not going to the bridge,” she said.

“We’re staying here on Coronado?” I said, too surprised to bother hiding it. “Where are we going then?”

She turned left and cut the headlights, coasting to the curb. She shut off the engine, then pointed to my window. “There.”

The dark house outside my window took a moment to register with me. It was a small square bungalow. The yard was slightly overgrown. It looked empty.

It was the Jordan buy-in house I’d seen on my first day back.

The only thing that was different was that the windows had been empty before, but now there were curtains blocking the view to the interior of the home.

“This is the Jordan’s home, right?” I asked.

Megan was flipping open her phone and stopped mid-flip. “How do you know that?”

“It’s the address listed for Meredith’s enrollment,” I said. “It’s a buy-in, right?”

She processed everything I said, then nodded. “It belongs to the Jordans,

yeah.” She opened up the phone and started punching the keys. Then she shut it.

“What are we doing, Megan?” I asked. “Why did you bring me here?”

“Just wait,” she said.

“I’m tired of waiting,” I said. “What the hell are we doing here?”

She started to say something, but her phone chimed. She flipped it open, nodded at it, then closed it. “Come on.”

“Come on where?” I said, no longer hiding my agitation.

Megan got out of the car and I did the same. The street was dark and quiet. The only nearby lights seemed to be the faraway lights on the bridge crossing the bay. The air smelled of dead grass and dampness.

I was more acutely aware now that I was without my gun. I'd brought it with me on the trip, but I'd left it in my bag for most of my stay. I wasn't comfortable carrying it around teenagers and the amount of time I'd spent on the Coronado campus precluded me from carrying it. I had gotten careless in not planning ahead and I hadn't even put it in my rental when I'd gone to the game.

I could handle Megan, but I wasn't sure what else there might be to deal with. I had no idea if she was helping me or setting me up and that uncertainty was now jabbing me in the gut.

Megan checked the street, glancing in both directions. It was empty. She walked up the driveway and I went behind her, remaining a fair distance back. There was a gate to the left of the garage and she reached over and unlatched it. It swung open and I followed her through.

The backyard seemed darker than the street without the aid of random

streetlights and dimly lit front porches, and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust. The grass was longer in the backyard, perhaps having gone unmowed for several months, but I realized immediately that we were walking in a path that had been trampled down. We came around the corner of the house to an empty covered patio. The blinds were pulled on the inside of the sliding glass doors.

Megan opened her phone and the screen glowed in the dark. She tapped several keys, then looked at me, saying nothing.

The jabs in my gut punched harder.

The blinds inside fluttered like a gust of wind blew through them. I saw a hand poke through them and the lock popped loudly in the quiet. I shuffled back a few steps. I thought I knew who was inside, but I wasn't entirely certain and I wanted to be cautious. The hand disappeared and Megan slid open the door, looking at me.

“After you,” I said.

She didn't argue and stepped through the door, pushing the blinds aside. I followed.

The interior was pitch black, save for

a nightlight plugged into an outlet on the far wall. We were in a large rectangular living room that was empty except for a single small sofa.

She was sitting on the sofa.

“Hi Meredith,” I said.

SEVENTY-SIX

“You’ve been here the entire time?” I asked.

She was on one end of the sofa and I was on the other. Megan sat cross-legged on the floor. They refused to turn on the lights and my eyes were adjusting to the darkness with the help of the nightlight.

As far as I could tell, Meredith appeared fine. She wore jeans and a

sweatshirt and she seemed a little tired, a little pale, but otherwise fine. She was nervous and had pushed herself into the far corner of the sofa, as if she could shoot out her feet and kick at me if she needed to.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice ragged.

“Why?”

“Because I knew no one would look here,” she said.

“Kind of a big gamble,” I said. “This is your official address.”

“*You* didn’t look here,” Megan said.

Hard to argue with that.

“So why are you here, Meredith?” I asked.

“Because I didn’t know where else to go,” she said.

“You aren’t dumb,” I said. “So you must know that your parents are going out of their minds.”

“My parents? Or my dad?” she asked, a knowing smirk on her face. “You don’t even know my parents.”

“I know a lot more than you think I

do,” I said.

She raised a cynical eyebrow.
“Really?”

“Really.”

She folded her arms across her chest.
“Why don’t you tell me what you know then?”

“You sure?” I asked. I glanced at Megan. “You care if she hears?”

The cynical eyebrow became an angry one. “Megan knows everything. And she is the *only* one I trust.”

Megan played with her shoelaces and remained silent.

I spent the next fifteen minutes laying out everything I had learned about her life over the previous three days, leaving out nothing. Chuck, the beating he took, the prostitution, her mother's past, her boyfriend. I put it all on the table for her.

Meredith's eyebrow went from angry and cynical to disbelieving, embarrassed and uncertain. By the time I finished, her hands were clasped together in her lap and she was staring at them.

Megan had not flinched so she

apparently did know everything.

“That’s what I know,” I said. “But I need you to fill in the blanks. Why did you blame Chuck for beating you up?”

“He was an easy target,” Megan said.

“Megan, no offense, but shut up,” I said. “Thanks for bringing me here, but I want answers from Meredith. Not you.”

She went back to fiddling with her shoelaces.

“I knew people would take me seriously if I said it was him,” Meredith said. “Everyone knew we’d been

spending time together, but he was new at school.” She paused and even in the dark, I could see tears in her eyes. “I felt horrible. I know that doesn’t make it better or right or whatever, but I felt horrible. But I didn’t have a choice.”

“You could’ve told the truth.”

She made a noise that was some combination of a laugh and a grunt. “Yeah, right. So easy to tell the truth.”

“It’s easier to ruin a coach you say you like?”

“I *do* like him,” she said, straining to keep her composure. “No one’s ever

taken the time to help me like he did. No one.”

“But you did get angry with him when he gave you the ultimatum, right?” I pressed. “When he told you to get out of the hooking?”

“Yeah, but I was more relieved than anything,” she said. “He was giving me an out.”

“So what happened?”

“I got the shit kicked out of me,” she said, her voice full of anger and hurt. “I didn’t want him to tell my parents. I didn’t want to tell them, either, but I

wasn't going to make him do it for me.” An angry smile crept onto her face. “And part of me did kinda want to see my mother's face when I told her.”

I didn't respond.

“But when I tried to get out, I got the shit kicked out of me,” she said, the smile disappearing. “And I got scared.”

“Who beat you up?” I asked. “Was it Derek?”

She pressed herself further back in the sofa. “Derek thought he was controlling me, but he's an idiot. I was never scared of him.”

“Derek said you wanted out.”

“I did. I wasn’t sure I wanted to keep doing it. Yeah, the money was cool, but it was...I don’t know. I thought I was just done.”

“But you didn’t get out.”

She hesitated, then shook her head.
“No. I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t tell you,” she said. “I can’t tell you a lot of things.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t wanna die.”

It sounded melodramatic, but there was weight to her words. She believed what she was saying.

“I’m here to help you, Meredith,” I said. “I don’t think Megan would’ve brought me here if she didn’t think I was here to help you.”

But it was like a wall had come down. She wasn’t budging.

“So why did you come here?” I asked, trying to maintain some momentum in the

conversation. “Why did you run away?”

“I needed to hide,” she finally said, wiping at her nose. “I was afraid.”

“You didn’t think your parents would be worried?” I asked. “Your friends?”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course I knew they’d be worried. And I’m sorry, okay? But I wasn’t sure what else to do.”

Again, it sounded overly dramatic, but there was sincerity in her words. I wasn’t sure if she was accurately describing her situation, but she believed what she was saying.

“Why did you get into this Meredith?” I asked, trying a different path. “Why the prostitution?”

She wiped at her nose, then her eyes and looked away. “I don’t know.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “This isn’t something you get into without knowing why. I don’t believe that for a second. Maybe it doesn’t feel now like you knew what you were doing. But you did.”

She sniffed and wiped harder at her eyes. “Because I was stupid then, I guess. I didn’t say out loud ‘I want to be a hooker,’ okay? I was mad at my mom,

I needed money and I was stupid.”

“You aren’t stupid and no one does this just for money.”

“Some people do.”

“Well, I don’t believe for a second that was your reason. Had to be something else.”

She stared into her own lap, her hands clasped tightly together. “I was tired of being perfect.”

“What?”

“Everything I did, I was perfect,” she

said, slowly. “Everything. School. Basketball. Everything. And I got sick of it. Because God knows if I wasn’t perfect, I would’ve heard about it.”

I didn’t say anything.

“So I decided to take the pressure off. Myself. Screw up badly enough and then I wouldn’t have to worry about being perfect. No one would expect a thing from me. For sure, not perfection.”

“And you thought this was the best way to do that?”

A sneer crossed her face. “Or maybe the apple just doesn’t fall far from the

tree...”

I thought that was closer to a more honest assessment, that all of this was somehow tied to her relationship with her own mother. It didn't make perfect sense, but you could draw a line from her actions to what she'd learned about Olivia.

“You weren't worried about putting yourself in danger?” I asked.

“No.” Meredith threw up her hands. “I don't know anymore, okay. It all made sense then. It doesn't now. I get it. And I didn't think it would end up like this.” She closed her eyes and her

body shook as she sobbed quietly.

I doubted there was anything she could say to me that would make me understand and forcing her to explain herself wasn't my responsibility. That was something she would have to work out with her parents.

"I'll ask one more time," I said after a minute. "Will you tell me who beat you up? Tell me who you were freelancing for?"

"It's okay, Meredith," Megan said. "I think you can trust him."

Meredith thought for a moment, then

shook her head. “No. I can’t. I’m sorry. I’m afraid.”

I took a deep breath. “Okay. Then we’ve got two choices. I can take you to the police or I can take you to your dad. You don’t have to tell me, but you’ll have to tell one of them eventually. I will take you to either place you want to go and I will get you there safely. But you aren’t staying here. I’m sorry. I promised your father I would find you. I have. So those are your two options. The police or your father.”

She looked at her friend.

“He’s right, Meredith,” Megan said.

“You can’t stay here. It’s not safe. You have to trust him. It’s why I brought him here. I know you told me not to bring anyone, but I believe him. He’ll keep you safe.”

Meredith was staring at her lap now. “Okay. I wanna go home.”

I stood before she could put up any more of a fight. “Let’s go then.”

When she stood from the sofa, she seemed smaller, younger than when I’d seen her on the basketball court. There was no confidence, no command, like it had been ripped out of her. I didn’t know what all she was hiding, but that

didn't prevent me from feeling sorry for her.

She walked over to the kitchen and grabbed her backpack from the counter. Megan went to her and put her arm around her.

"It's alright," Megan said, squeezing her around the shoulders. "It'll be alright."

"Anything else you need?" I asked.

Meredith shook her head and we headed for the front door, the two of them in front of me, Megan still with her arm around her friend.

Megan looked back at me. “We’ll go straight to her house, right?”

“Yes. I promise.”

Megan nodded and smiled at her friend. “Good.”

I reached around them and opened the door.

And ran right into some familiar faces.

SEVENTY-SEVEN

Kelly Rundles and Robert Stricker were blocking our path.

Kelly reached her hand out.
“Meredith? Are you alright?”

Meredith shrank from her coach's reach and backed into me. I guided her around to my side and she pressed into me, a shy toddler clinging to a parent.

I put an arm around her shoulders.

“She’s fine.”

Megan took several steps back and was now on my other side. She wasn’t radiating the same fear that Meredith was, but her demeanor had changed and it wasn’t for the better.

Kelly’s eyes were fixed on Meredith. “Where have you been? Do your parents know you’re here?” She glanced at me. “Do they know?”

I was taken aback by Kelly’s concern because it was genuine. She seemed shocked to see Meredith and there was no anger, no animosity, no aggressiveness on Kelly’s part. After

our half-time confrontation, I had pegged her as somehow being involved in the downward spiral that had become Meredith's life. Now, looking at her face, I was fairly certain I was wrong.

"I'm taking Meredith home," I said, my arm tightening around her shoulders. "We're going to her home right now. Her parents know we're on the way."

To the girls' credit, they didn't blanch at my bluff.

Kelly hesitated, then stepped out of the way.

Robert Stricker did not move.

We locked eyes.

The situation crystallized for me.

And he produced a gun.

SEVENTY-EIGHT

Stricker herded us back into the house.

Kelly Rundles' face was the epitome of confusion. "What the hell is going on?"

He had the gun firmly aimed in my direction. By the way Meredith was clinging to me and the way Megan had taken up residence behind me, I had a pretty good idea.

“You follow us here?” I asked.

Stricker nodded.

Kelly looked from him to me. “He said you wanted us to follow you.” She looked back to him. “You said he wanted us to follow him, but that he didn’t want Megan to know.” She blinked and it seemed to dawn on her how strange that sounded. “What the hell are you doing with a gun?”

“You saw Megan and me in the hall,” I said. “Before the game.”

Stricker held the gun steady and

nodded again.

“And when I wasn’t on the bench in the second half, you knew something was up,” I said.

The corner of his mouth flared up into something that on anyone else would’ve resembled the beginning of a smile. It was nothing more than an admission on him.

“What the *fuck* is going on?” Kelly asked, completely exasperated.

I nodded at Stricker. “Meet Meredith’s pimp.”

Kelly stared at me for a long moment then rotated her head toward Stricker. “What?”

“Vegas,” I said, as I processed the connection that I’d missed from the beginning. “You went to UNLV.”

The corner of his mouth flared again.

“You knew Olivia,” I said. “Before Jordan did, right?”

He didn’t say anything.

“You were the one who told Meredith about her mother,” I said.

Meredith's hands clenched tighter to my midsection. I took that as confirmation that I was right.

“And I'm guessing you knew what Derek was running,” I continued. “Maybe you heard whispers in the hall, maybe Derek shot off his mouth, I don't know. But you already knew she was in the game.”

Kelly was staring solely at Stricker now.

“She was pissed off at Derek and you pounced,” I said. “Offered her more money, made it sound better. Then when she wanted out you beat the crap out of

her. And you told her to blame it on Chuck.”

There was no flare now on his mouth. Just a blank expression.

“There are details I can’t fill in but I don’t need ‘em,” I said. I shook my head. “I don’t need ‘em. Because I’m right, aren’t I?”

Stricker didn’t say anything.

But Meredith whispered “Yes.”

“He’s an asshole,” Megan said from behind me.

“Been called worse,” Stricker said, his voice low and unfamiliar as he spoke for the first time. “Been called a lot worse.”

“I’ll bet,” I said. I glanced at Kelly and recited the cell number Jon Jordan and I discovered in the phone records. “That number mean anything to you?”

She looked confused for a moment. “I think it’s my old school phone.”

“School phone?”

“The school gave me a phone and I think that was the number. I lost it a couple months ago.”

I looked at Stricker. “You didn’t lose it, Kelly.”

Stricker’s mouth twitched again.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about and none of this is making sense,” Kelly said. She moved her attention to Stricker. “Robert. Put the gun down.”

She had edged closer to us and further from him.

“Can’t do that, Kelly. Because we’ve got a problem here.”

“Don’t make the problem worse,” I said.

He chuckled. “This where you tell me we can all walk away friends?”

“No,” I said. “But you use that gun and this whole thing goes from bad to horrible.”

“Not sure there’s anywhere else to go,” he said.

“There’s always somewhere else to go,” I said. “Always.”

“That what you learned lookin’ for your kid?” he asked, smirking. “Some

sort of feel-good bullshit about moving on? Because that's what it sounds like."

"Bet your salary isn't the same at school as it was in the NFL, right?" I said.

He smiled an ugly smile. "Good guess."

"So what was all this? Supplemental income?"

The ugly smile remained.

"Maybe you just liked being in charge? Missed that from your playing days?"

He stared at me.

“Or maybe you’re just an asshole who likes hurting kids.”

I didn’t expect him to answer and it didn’t matter. There was nothing he could say to me that was going to justify his actions. Maybe he had them straight in his own mind, but it wouldn’t make sense to me.

“Stricker, come on,” Kelly said.
“This is insane.”

He pivoted and fired a single shot in her direction.

The noise was deafening in the house, but I heard Meredith scream. Or maybe it was Megan. I wasn't sure. Kelly fell backward, hitting the ground with a loud thud. Her hands clutched the giant red circle spreading on her left shoulder. Her mouth was open but she didn't say anything.

Stricker quickly moved the gun back to me. "Is there somewhere else to go now?"

I didn't say anything.

"Gotta take care of this, Tyler," he said, a resigned expression on his face.

“As soon as you found out your friend was okay, you should’ve walked.”

“I won’t let you hurt her,” I said.

“I’ve got the gun, Tyler.”

“You’re not gonna hurt her.”

He seemed amused by my defiance.
“Are you blind?”

“No. But you aren’t gonna hurt her. You’ve done enough of that.”

The amusement in his expression faded. “Oh, God. Please don’t give me some fucking speech, alright? These

girls, they know what they're doing. They aren't innocent."

"Either are you," I said. "And you're gonna have to kill me if you want her."

Meredith's hands were like claws in my stomach. My arm was still around her shoulders and her face was buried in my shirt, unable to look at Stricker. I could hear Megan breathing behind me to my right. I didn't look at Kelly because I was afraid of what I was going to see.

"Not a problem, Tyler," Stricker said and he aimed the gun at my throat.

Another explosion roared through the room and I jerked. Meredith pushed harder into me and we toppled to the ground. I lay there for a moment, my ears ringing, unsure of what had happened. Then I sat up.

Stricker was on his back, his face a bloody mess. The lower half of his face was gone, the area where his mouth had been now one large vacant space. The gun had fallen from his grip and his body was twitching, as if someone was tickling him. I popped to my knees, crawled over and grabbed the gun, then looked back at Megan.

She was holding a gun with both

hands, her eyes still on Stricker. The gun was shaking.

I stood and walked over to her, carefully taking the gun from her. Her eyes were still locked on Stricker.

“Megan?” I said and my voice sounded quiet after the two gunshots.

“It’s my dad’s,” she finally said, her words slurred, heavy. “I brought it in case...” She looked at me. Her eyes were glazed over, staring through me. “In case you wouldn’t help Meredith.” Her eyes focused and she finally looked at me. “In case I had to shoot you.”

SEVENTY-NINE

The small narrow street was now packed with police officers, fire trucks and curious eyes.

“You should’ve called me,” Mike Lorenzo said.

We were standing off to the side of the Jordan’s buy-in home. Lieutenant Bazer was in the middle of the yard, directing his officers. He glanced at me, then looked away.

“I didn’t know what I was walking

into, Mike,” I said. “Otherwise, I would’ve.”

That was the truth. I had learned early that it was better to let the local police handle things when the time was right. I wasn’t looking to showboat or steal anyone’s spotlight. If I’d known Meredith was inside, that Stricker was a piece of crap and that Megan was armed, I most definitely would’ve called Mike.

But sometimes you don’t know.

Mike rubbed at his jaw. “You alright?”

I nodded. “Fine. Did you call Jordan?”

“Yeah, he should be here soon,” Mike said. “Didn’t tell him everything that happened, just that his kid was safe.”

Mike’s colleagues had Meredith and Megan separated, talking to them individually. As long as they told the truth, they would be fine.

EMTs spilled out of the house, Kelly Rundles on a gurney. She was moving, alert. She would be fine.

“It was absolutely self-defense, Mike,” I said. “That girl probably saved

my life.”

Mike looked over to where Megan was talking to another officer. “I’ll make sure she’s alright.”

There was movement amongst the gawkers in the street. Jon and Olivia Jordan emerged from the middle of the pack, their heads twisting and turning, eyes wide. Jon saw Meredith first and broke into a sprint toward her. One cop attempted to grab his arm, but Jordan shook him off, missile-locked on his daughter.

Meredith saw him and her body shook as she began sobbing. Jordan slowed as

he approached, like she was a deer and he didn't want to scare her away. Meredith's chin sunk and her body shook harder. Jordan stepped in and swallowed her with his arms and they shook together.

Olivia was slower in getting to them and when she did, she seemed unsure of what to do. She put a hand on her husband's shoulder and another on her daughter's. Her eyes scanned the crowd until they settled on me.

She gave a slight nod in my direction and I had no idea what it meant nor did I have any any desire to ask her.

Jordan never took his eyes off his daughter. I imagined that it would be hard for him to ever let her out of his sight again.

I was envious.

“If you wanna get out of here, go ahead,” Mike said and I knew he was reading my thoughts.

“Thanks.”

He walked with me away from the crowd and guided me toward his car. “Hang on a sec.” He opened the door and pulled out a thin envelope.

He handed it to me. “This was what I was gonna give you at breakfast tomorrow.”

I took the envelope and flipped it over in my hands a couple of times.

“It’s probably nothing,” Mike cautioned. “But it’s something I’d take a look at. Since you’re here, I figured I’d just pass it along.”

I knew by his tone and demeanor we were no longer talking about Meredith Jordan and the subject was Elizabeth.

I stared at the envelope. “Okay.”

“Like I said, it’s probably nothing,” Mike said again. “But it’s the kind of thing that I’ve been looking at over the last few years when it rolls in. You can take a look, see what you think.”

I folded the envelope and stuck it in my pocket. “Thanks, Mike. For everything.”

“That sounds like a goodbye,” Mike said with a raised eyebrow.

I nodded at Meredith and her parents. “We found her. Chuck’s clear and he’s gonna be alright. I think I’m done.”

“You gonna be alright?” he asked.

I offered him my hand and we shook.

“I hope so,” I said.

EIGHTY

I was buying a bagel the next morning when my phone chirped. I scooped the bagel off the counter and answered it, looking for a napkin.

“Hey,” Lauren said on the other end.

A pain shot through my stomach and it had nothing to do with hunger. “Hey.”

“How are you?”

“I’m okay. What’s going on?”

“I was going to see...” Her voice trailed off. She cleared her throat. “I wanted to see if you had time for lunch today.”

I stared at the untouched bagel, then dumped it in the trash can, knowing I wouldn’t be hungry when our conversation was over. “I can’t, Lauren.”

“Are you still looking for the girl?”

“No, we found her.”

“Was she alright?”

I gave her a sanitized version of finding Meredith.

“I’m glad you found her,” she said when I finished.

“Wasn’t really me. Her friend took me right to her.”

“But you kept pushing,” Lauren said. “You kept pushing.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?” Lauren finally said after a few moments of silence.

“Yeah, I am.”

She sighed into the phone. “I should’ve known.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” she said, her voice tinny, strained. “It’s alright. There were no promises.”

“The other night,” I said, trying to find words that wouldn’t sound clichéd or forced. “I’m glad we had the other night.”

“Me too,” she said, but I couldn’t tell

if she meant it.

“I really do miss you, Lauren,” I said. “I don’t know if you believe that, but I do. Miss you.”

She coughed and cleared her throat and I pictured her pacing in the house, the phone pressed to her ear. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” I said. It was the truth.

She sighed again. “Joe, I can hear the announcements in the background. I know you’re at the airport.”

The terminal was thick with travelers, luggage and chaos. The lines were long at the counters and the voice in the loudspeaker was saying something about a delayed flight.

I stepped out through the sliding doors into the cool morning air, the sun shining brightly across PCH on the harbor.

“I don’t know where I’m going,” I repeated. “Honestly, Lauren. I just need to go.”

There was a long pause on her end and for a moment, I thought she’d hung up.

“Will you let me know where you end up?” she finally asked. “Just send me an email, a text or something? So I know you’re okay?”

“I will,” I said. “I promise.”

“And think about coming back,” she said. “Not long term. But maybe for a long weekend. Or maybe I could meet you somewhere. No strings.”

“I love you, Lauren,” I said, squinting into the sunlight. “I’ll call you.”

She hung up without saying anything.

I shoved the phone into my pocket, the

hunger from before replaced with something that I couldn't define, just something that hurt.

I thought about doing the goodbye thing. Find Lauren, find Chuck, find Gina, find everyone I'd connected with over the previous few days and say goodbye. But I knew that I'd be tempted to stay, to think that I could overcome the past that punched me in the face every day I woke up in San Diego.

I knew better and drove myself straight to the airport before I changed my mind, turned in my rental car and strapped on my backpack.

The envelope Mike had given me was folded up in the pocket of my jeans and I pulled it out. I hadn't opened it. When I'd gotten back to the hotel, I'd stared at it for a few minutes before deciding that I needed sleep before confronting whatever it held.

I knew that whatever was inside probably wouldn't lead to finding Elizabeth. But there was always that microscopic chance that it would. I'd spent the previous years jumping at just those chances. Following up on them was the only thing that got me to sleep at night, knowing that I wasn't leaving anything to chance.

Meredith was back home. She'd been found. Seeing her with Jordan reminded me of how much I wanted to be that father, the father reunited with his daughter.

When Lauren asked me where I was headed, I hadn't lied to her. I didn't have a plan. I didn't know where I was going, only that wherever I went, I'd go back to thinking about Elizabeth.

I unfolded the envelope, fingered the dull creases in it.

I slid my finger carefully under the flap and unsealed it. I pulled out a folded-over photo with a note attached

to it.

Found this in a file. You'd know better than I would, but it was close enough to pass on to you. I'd have followed it myself if you hadn't come to town. Let me know if I can help. ML.

That was followed by the name Jacob Detwiler and a Minneapolis address.

I removed the note from the photo and unfolded the picture.

Two young girls, maybe ten years old, sitting on what looked to me like a bus bench. There was snow on the ground and both girls wore hooded sweatshirts

and jeans. They sat close together, their faces devoid of expression. Their arms were linked.

I folded the picture with trembling fingers. The floor swayed a bit and I had trouble breathing as I looked for a place to sit. An icy sweat formed on my neck. I knew better than to get my hopes up. I had learned the hard way. But sometimes things showed up that couldn't prevent it, couldn't save me from the heartache.

I sat down and tried to catch my breath, wondering how fast I could get to Minneapolis.

I unfolded the picture again.

The photo was grainy, out of focus and shadowy, probably taken around dusk. But I knew Elizabeth's face.

And for the first time in forever, she was staring back at me.

THE END

**READ ON FOR A SNEAK
PREVIEW OF THE SEQUEL TO
THREAD OF HOPE**

THREAD OF SUSPICION

Joe Tyler has a picture.

After years of looking for his missing daughter, Elizabeth, and coming up empty, he finally has something. A picture of her shortly after her

abduction, showing her with another girl in Minneapolis, far away from her home in San Diego. When Joe arrives in Minneapolis, armed with the picture and an address, he begins to follow a vague trail of clues into Elizabeth's life in Minnesota. He enlists the aid of a local woman, who specializes in helping runaways. In exchange for her help, Joe attempts to help her

locate a boy who works for her and has gone missing.

As Joe digs further into the dark underworld of runaways on the Minneapolis streets, he begins to close the gap between himself and his long missing daughter. A retired detective and a few others offer him more hope, but what Joe doesn't realize is that the closer he gets to finding Elizabeth...the further away

he actually is.

Picking up where the #1 bestseller **THREAD OF HOPE** left off, **THREAD OF SUSPICION** brings Joe Tyler closer to the elusive answers about his missing daughter while leaving him teetering on the razor sharp edge between hope and heartbreak.

ONE

I stood on the sidewalk, late afternoon snow swirling around me, and stared at the house.

The wind pushed at me, trying to propel me forward. I pulled up the collar on my wool coat, protecting my neck from the icy air. The snow fell light and steady, already beginning to coat the grass and dot the sidewalk.

But I could still see the house.

A bungalow painted light green, it sat close to the street. The shades were pulled in the windows and a massive tree stood sentry over the entire front yard. The screen door hung crooked in front of the main door. An ancient Buick was parked on the cracked asphalt driveway and a large, blue city-issued trashcan sat just off to the side, under the carport.

The wind pushed again and I winced. The temperature dropped by the minute and snowflakes clung to my hair and tucked themselves inside my ears.

I reached into the back pocket of my jeans and pulled out the folded envelope.

I'd already looked at it at least a hundred times. I'd sat on the airplane, my eyes locked as tight on the handwriting as my hand was on the envelope. I knew the address by heart, plugging it effortlessly into my phone after getting into the rental car at the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport.

I was at the right address.

I shoved the envelope back into my pocket and walked quickly across the yard, hopping up the three concrete steps

that led to the front door. I opened the screen door and knocked hard on the door three times, my heart crashing against the inside of my chest.

The door swung open. A kid in his twenties stood in the doorway, a cigarette hanging from his lips, attitude hanging from everything else.

“Yeah?” he asked, frowning at me

“I’m looking for Jacob Detwiler.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“Joe Tyler. Are you Jacob?”

He took a long drag on the cigarette and blew the smoke in my face. “Fuck off.”

He tried to shut the door, but I stiff-armed it. “So you’re Jacob?”

He flicked the cigarette over my shoulder. “Yo, you better get your hand off my door like now, dude.”

“Are you Jacob?” I asked again.

He cocked an eyebrow at me. “I’m not gonna tell you again, dude. Get your hand off my door.”

I grabbed him by the shirt and

whipped him around, throwing him over the steps and into the snow-covered yard. He landed hard on the frozen ground, his mouth open in a wordless scream.

I descended the stairs, picked up the butt of the cigarette he'd tossed and knelt on his chest. The red ember on the end of the cigarette glowed in the falling snow.

I held it near his cheek. "One last time. Are you Jacob?"

His eyes locked on the cigarette. He knew I was ready to bury it in his skin. "Yeah. Yeah. I'm Jacob."

My mouth was so dry I could barely get the words out. “Do you know where my daughter is?”

He couldn't pull his eyes from the burning ember. “What? Who?”

I laid my forearm across his throat. “Elizabeth Tyler. Do you know where she is?”

He squirmed beneath me. “No! I don't know no bitch named Elizabeth.”

I jabbed the cigarette into his cheek and he screamed.

I pulled it away. “Next one's going in

your eye.”

Tears pooled in his eyes. The spot I’d touched was bright red and puffy.

I pulled the photo from my pocket and held it over his face. “Elizabeth Tyler.”

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, then opened them, staring at the photo several inches from his nose. Something changed in his eyes. “That’s Bailey.”

“No, it’s my daughter,” I said. The snow stung my eyes. I pushed down harder on his throat.

He coughed and shook his head. “No! The one on the left. That’s Bailey. My sister.”

TWO

I lifted my arm off his neck and he wheezed, gasping for breath.

He rubbed at his throat. His eyes were now locked on the picture in my hand. “Man, that’s old.”

“How old?” I asked, my voice tight and raw.

He wrinkled his nose. “Dunno. Maybe six? Seven years?”

That sounded right to me, gauging how old Elizabeth looked in the picture.

“Where’s your sister now?” I asked.

He started to say something, but anger filtered into his features and he frowned. “Who the hell are you? You just show up at my door, throw me down and now you wanna ask me questions? Stick a fucking cigarette on my face.” He ran his thumb over the welt on his cheek.

“The other girl in the picture,” I said. “That’s my daughter. I’m trying to find her.”

“From that old picture?” He smirked.
“Good luck.”

I held the picture in my hands as if it might break. “It’s all I have.”

Jacob ran a hand through his overgrown mane. “Well, she might be with Bailey for all I know.”

I felt a twinge, a small flutter, in my chest. “With your sister?”

“Maybe. But I haven’t seen Bailey since probably about then.”

The twinge died.

Like it always did.

I stood and offered a hand to help him up. He refused and got up on his own.

“Why haven’t you seen her since then?” I asked.

He brushed snow from his shirt. “She left with my mom.”

“What do you mean?”

“My parents got divorced,” he said. “She went with my mom. Chicago first, then down to Florida.”

“Where is she now?”

“No clue.” He looked away. “I stopped talking to my mom when they got to Florida. So I didn’t talk to Bailey, either.”

“And you stayed here?”

“Yeah.”

“What about your dad?” I asked.
“Would he know where they are?”

“He’s dead,” he said, his voice flat.
“And he wouldn’t have known anyway. He took off right after my mom and I never heard from him again.”

“Where’d you go?”

“I stayed here,” he said. “By myself. I didn’t need them. Either of them.”

“You didn’t have any contact with them? At all?”

He wiped at the snow on his face. “I got some Christmas cards and shit, I think. But I was fine. I didn’t need them.” He shrugged. “My dad didn’t wanna be a dad. That was cool. He split, I bailed school and life was fine.”

It was easy to see that it wasn’t cool and that life wasn’t fine, but I wasn’t there to play life counselor. I was there

to find my daughter and Jacob was connected to a girl in a photo with her. I wasn't going to waste time solving his problems.

I wanted to solve mine.

An engine sputtered at the curb and I looked up.

A red SUV idled and a woman stared at me from the windows.

“Oh, great,” Jacob muttered. “My day is just kicking ass.”

“Who's that?” I asked.

“No one,” he said.

The passenger side window dropped and the woman leaned across the seat.
“Everything okay, Jacob?”

“Fabulous,” he said.

“You sure?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m going inside.”

I folded my arms across my chest.
“I’m not done talking to you.”

His face screwed up in agitation
“Man, I don’t have shit to say to you,

alright? I haven't seen my sister in years. I have no idea where she is. And you know what? I don't care where she is. So I don't know where your kid is, either. Sorry. Life sucks, sometimes.” He shook his head and pushed past me. “Get used to it.”

THREE

The woman got out of the SUV and trudged across the snow-covered yard.

Waves of dark hair snaked out beneath the knit beanie on her head. A large parka covered most of her short, compact frame. Pale blue eyes stared at me, curious.

“Hi,” she said, holding out a gloved hand. “I’m Isabel.”

I shook her hand. Feathery crows feet and tired eyes couldn't convince me she was old. I put her somewhere in her early thirties.

“Joe Tyler,” I said.

“You have an issue with Jacob?”

“I just met him.”

“Doesn't answer my question.”

“I wasn't trying to.”

She folded her arms around the parka. “Okay. For the record, I don't like him. So it's alright with me if you do have an

issue with him.”

“How do you know him?”

She stared over my shoulder at the house, choosing her words carefully. “We sort of work together.”

“Sort of?”

Her eyes refocused on me. “You know anything about Jacob?”

“I wasn’t kidding. I just met him. No. I know nothing about him.”

She nodded. “He’s kind of a scumbag.”

I smiled. “In my experience, you either are or you aren’t.”

She returned the smile. “Probably so. He’s a scumbag, then.”

“How so?”

“Deals,” she said. “Probably a bunch of other crap I don’t know about.”

“So how do you know him?”

“I find kids through him.”

“What do you mean?”

She fished in the pocket of her jacket, pulled out a card and handed it to me.

The card listed her full name, Isabel Balzone. A cozy image of a brick home was centered above her name. Below, the words *Director, Run Home*.

“Don’t let the director title fool you,” she said. “I’m a one-woman organization.”

“What’s Run Home?”

“Mostly a failing endeavor,” she said, smiling dryly. “I try to get kids home.”

“Kids?”

“Mostly teens,” she said. “Runaways. Homeless. Some others. I try to get them home. Or at least to a safe place.” The smile appeared again. “Run Home is the opposite of run away.”

I nodded. “I get it. So what do you have to do with Jacob?”

She sighed. “We kind of have a deal. He runs into anyone that really needs help, he calls me. In turn, I don’t turn him into the cops.”

“Sweet deal.”

“Believe it or not, he does call me,”

she said. “I check in with him a lot. But he does call.” She paused. “So maybe he’s not a scumbag. Maybe just a bit of a jerk.”

The snow fell in earnest and the entire street was blanketed in white.

“Why are you here?” she asked. “And why did you have him on his ass?”

I shoved her card in my pocket and held onto the photo of Elizabeth and Bailey. I stared hard at it, willing Elizabeth to speak to me, to tell me where she was, where she’d gone, who’d taken her.

But she said nothing.

I offered the photo to Isabel. “I’m looking for my daughter.”

FOUR

Isabel Balzone blew the steam off the top of her coffee. “You’re still looking?”

The steady snow had morphed into a blizzard while we talked in front of Jacob’s house. She’d suggested grabbing coffee at a diner down the road. With nowhere else to go, I said okay.

The diner, like Jacob’s house, was in a run-down neighborhood west of Minneapolis. Just off 94, north of the

skyline and the baseball stadium, nestled in a thicket of brick ramblers and falling-down clapboard homes. The crowd inside was decidedly local.

I cupped my hands around the warm porcelain mug. My eyes zeroed in on the chipped rim. “Yeah.”

“Even when you don’t know what you’ll find?”

“I need to know,” I said. “The not knowing is almost worse than not having her around.”

She nodded as if she understood. But she didn’t. The only way she could was

if she had lost a child.

Maybe she had. “How’d you get into this?” I asked.

The waitress returned and set a slice of apple pie in front of Isabel. She hadn’t ordered it.

“Just wanted to do something helpful,” Isabel said. “I worked at a couple of non-profits out of college but the red tape and restrictions chafed at me. I’m not really a sit around and wait for an answer type. So I just started going out at night. Finding kids, giving them blankets, getting them food, stuff like that.”

She shrugged. “I got some cards printed up and learned how to write grant proposals. I pay myself a ridiculously small salary. And here I am.”

“You do anything with missing kids?” I asked. “Help look or locate?”

She ate a forkful of pie and shook her head. “Not much. It’s mostly assistance. Making sure they’re safe, have food, stuff like that. Most of the kids I work with, they don’t wanna go home. And some of them have good reason not to. I don’t think it’s my job to put them back home unless they want to be there, you

know?”

“But your organization is called Run Home.”

“Well, sure.” She wiped her mouth with her napkin. “For those who have a decent home to go back to, it’s the best place for them to be.

“And the others? It’s okay to let them run away?”

She smiled, like she’d been asked that a million times. “It’s never okay because it means a kid doesn’t feel loved. But like I said, a lot of these kids...they’re not better off at home.”

I could imagine the reasons, but I didn't have the ability to be so objective. I lost that ability the day Elizabeth disappeared.

“But there is one kid I'm concerned about,” she said, lines forming on her forehead.

“Who?”

“He was a regular. And he's nowhere to be found.”

“How old?”

“Nineteen.” She sighed and rubbed

her forehead. “And, yeah, I know. He’s old enough to go do his own thing now.”

I nodded.

“But Marc...is different.”

I didn’t say anything, just watched the snow fall outside the window. Cars were moving slower now as it piled up, slicking the street. It was like watching the world through a snow globe.

“He helped me,” Isabel said. “He wouldn’t tell me much about himself. I know he was on bad terms with his father. Never spoke a word about his mother. So he was one of the ones that

didn't want to go home.”

The waitress refilled my mug and Isabel waited for her to leave.

“But he wanted to be around, you know?” she continued. “He didn't want to be by himself. So he started coming with me at night, helping me with the blankets and food. He's smart, good sense of humor. Didn't mind me asking him questions as long as I didn't mind when he didn't answer. I talked to him about getting a job. He wasn't against it.”

“Doing?”

She pushed the plate away and toward the edge of the table. “Working for me, actually. I just picked up another grant two weeks ago. Enough to cover a part-time employee. I asked him if he wanted the job. And he said yes.”

“What specifically was he going to do for you?”

“Same thing he’d been doing,” she said. “Nothing really different. Figured I could introduce him to the grant writing stuff, too. Truth is, I need the help. It wasn’t a completely unselfish thing on my part. And Marc knows me, knows what I do. He knows this world. The kids I see on a regular basis, they know

him. They trust him. That is a huge thing.”

I knew that was true. When I went looking for someone, the most difficult thing was gaining the trust of the people in the world the kid left. Kids especially were pessimistic, distrustful of adults. It took time to cut into that armor of skepticism.

Time a missing kid didn't have.

“So when did he disappear?” I asked.

“Three nights ago,” she said, concern sitting heavy on her face. “He normally meets me to do the food run. He's only

not showed once before and he was sick that time. Sent someone to let me know. But this time? Nothing.”

“You asked around?”

“Yeah,” she said, blinking. “No one’s seen him.”

“You try the dad yet?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. Feels like I’d be stepping over some line I promised Marc I wouldn’t cross.”

“Waiting is sometimes a really bad thing.”

She stared at me for a moment. “That sounds like it comes from experience.”

I shifted in the booth. “It does. You promise things to kids that you intend to honor. But once things go haywire, the promises go out the window. At least for me they do. My goal is to find them. If they’re pissed when I find them, so be it. At least I found them.”

Snow ticked against the window, the wind blowing it into the glass.

“I might be able to put you in touch with some people,” Isabel said. “Might help, might not. But I could at least get you to them.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your daughter,” she said. “I know a little bit about what happened with Jacob and his family. No promises, but at the very least, I can probably get you to someone who knows where his sister is. Maybe a little about her history when she was here.”

“And in exchange, you want me to help you,” I said. “With Marc.”

She didn't say anything.

But she didn't have to. I'd gotten used to it. People meant well. I believed that.

They wanted to help. But the world of missing kids was like one big giant swap meet. I'll help you if you'll help me. There was no fear of leveraging what you had to offer when it came to finding a missing child.

And I was the first one to leverage when I could.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll help you.”

FIVE

The two men standing near Isabel's car did not look friendly.

I paid for the coffee and we walked out into the snow and dimming, gray sky. She ducked against the wind and then stopped cold when she saw them.

“You know them?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

They stared at us, the taller of the two mumbling something to his buddy, his eyes not leaving us. He was skinnier than the other, even bundled up in a field jacket. Scar across the bridge of a pointed nose, gray eyes and a small mouth. His partner wore a thick hooded sweatshirt over what looked like several lumpy layers. Small, close-set eyes, a pug nose and a frown. He was twitchy, jumpy, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Both looked like they were in their early twenties.

“It’s okay,” Isabel said. “It’s fine.”

Seemed like she was saying it to reassure herself more than me.

They ambled in our direction and the taller one nodded at Isabel. “Hey, Isabel.”

“Stevie.” She glanced at the short one. “Boyd.”

Stevie looked at me with the gray eyes. “Hey.”

“Hi.”

Boyd stared at me, looking me up and down, then shrugged, apparently not impressed.

“Have you seen him?” Stevie asked

Isabel.

She hesitated, then shook her head.

His mouth curled into a small smile.
“You sure about that?”

“I haven’t heard from him,” she said.

“Not sure I believe you.”

“Don’t know what to tell you then.”

“She’s lying, Stevie,” Boyd said, sneering into the falling snow. “You know she is. She always protects Marc.”

I glanced at her at the mention of

Marc's name. She didn't look at me.

"You didn't return my call," Stevie said, ignoring Boyd. "Makes me think you're avoiding me."

"I'm not," she said, shuffling her feet on the slick sidewalk. "But I don't have any news for you and I've been busy."

Boyd snorted. "Sure you have. What? With your new boyfriend here?" He glanced at me again, his eyes glistening. "That who you are?"

I didn't say anything.

"If I hear from Marc," Isabel said to

Stevie. “I’ll let you know. I told you that.”

“What are you?” Boyd asked, stepping in a little closer to me, tilting his head, mocking. “A mute or something?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Don’t be an idiot, Boyd,” Isabel said.

She glanced at Stevie. He just watched Boyd with an amused expression.

Boyd’s mouth cracked into a sneer

again. “Or maybe you’re just really stupid and don’t know how to talk.”

It always surprised me that bullies couldn’t sense when they were around someone they wouldn’t be able to handle. Boyd knew nothing about me. He knew nothing about the anger inside me, the rage that stayed at bay inside me most days.

Unless provoked.

Boyd stepped in closer so that we were almost nose to nose. The stench of stale beer and cigarettes assaulted my nostrils. “Talk. Come on. You can do it.”

“Let’s go, Joe,” Isabel said, tugging at the sleeve of my jacket.

Boyd knocked her arm away. “Not until he...”

My open palm slammed into the side of his face, and he swallowed his words. He stumbled to the side, off the sidewalk and into the street. I followed him, put my hands on his chest and shoved hard. He fell backward onto the trunk of a sedan parked at the curb.

His eyes were wide, probably surprised that a guy of average size could push so hard.

He had no idea.

“If you get off that car, I’ll break your arm,” I said. “The one you touched her with. I’ll snap it in half, right between your wrist and your elbow.”

Snow speckled his face, his cheeks bright pink, his breath coming out of his mouth in bursts of cold fog. A fat, red welt was forming at the corner of his mouth where I’d struck him. His eyes moved from me to his friend.

“Sounds like he means it, Boyd,” Stevie said behind me. “I’d stay there until he tells you to get up.”

“Joe, let’s go,” Isabel said. “Please.”

I stared hard at Boyd. I didn’t like that he’d touched her. I didn’t need to make any of it my business, but there was something about the way he’d swiped at her arm that bothered me. And it seemed as if I didn’t need much of a push anymore to cut my anger loose.

I stepped back onto the sidewalk.

Boyd stayed on the car.

I moved my eyes to Stevie.

He held his hands up, like he wanted

nothing to do with me. He wasn't scared, just didn't want to tangle at that moment. "Hey, man. We're cool."

"Get your friend and go," I said.

He helped Boyd up and whispered something to him that I couldn't make out. They headed down the sidewalk away from us, Boyd glancing over his shoulder at me.

As they walked away, I had no doubt that we were anything but cool.

SIX

“What’s your cell number?” Isabel asked, opening the door to her car.

I told her.

She fished her phone from the console in her car, punched some numbers on it, then looked at me. “I just sent you a contact.”

My phone vibrated in my pocket.

“She works at DCFS,” she said. “If she can’t get you information on Bailey, she’ll know who can. Call her tomorrow morning. I’ll call her tonight and give her a heads-up that you’ll be contacting her.”

“Okay,” I said. “Thanks.”

“And maybe we could meet up at some point tomorrow?” she said. “Talk a little bit more about Marc?”

I lifted my chin in the direction we’d just come from. “Maybe tell me about those guys?”

She played with the zipper on the

jacket. “Don’t worry about them. But thanks. For what you did. You didn’t need to, though.”

She was clearly uncomfortable talking about them and I didn’t want to push her. It was none of my business. But there was more to it than she was willing to tell me.

“Sure. Tomorrow,” I said.

“And I’m guessing you need a place to stay,” she said.

“I’ll find a place.”

She reached into her bag and fumbled

around a bit, the pulled out a key and card. “Here.”

“I can find a place.”

She frowned. “My little endeavor doesn’t exactly pay the bills, so I’m a property manager for a small complex. Over in Linden Hills. It’s not far from here. We’ve always got empties.” She thrust the key at me. “If you feel like you have to pay me, we can work it out later. But you’ll have more space than in a hotel room and you’ll have a kitchen. It’s not furnished, but I should be able to get my hands on some furniture and other things tomorrow.”

I hesitated, then took the key and the card. “Okay. Thanks.”

She nodded. “Address is on the card. Call me if you have trouble finding it. Otherwise, I’ll call you tomorrow.”

She got into her car and drove off.

I stood there at the curb for awhile, letting the snow fall around me, watching cars crawl up and down the street as the sky moved from gray to black.

I wasn’t sure where to go, what to do. I’d come to Minneapolis because of a picture and an address. The address,

thus far, had led to nothing. Yeah, I'd found Jacob Detwiler, but that hadn't done me much good. Maybe it would, but I wasn't very good at being patient. I wanted something immediately.

I pulled the picture out of my pocket, unfolded it.

I traced Elizabeth's face.

For the millionth time, I wondered where exactly she was.

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available at Amazon.**