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BLINK OF AN EYE

**ALSO BY IRIS & ROY JOHANSEN
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The Answer Man

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BLINK OF AN EYE

**IRIS
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BLINK OF AN EYE

CHAPTER

1

WOODWARD ACADEMY FOR THE PHYSICALLY
DISABLED
OCEANSIDE, CALIFORNIA

“He’s here *again*?” Dr. Allison Walker’s tone was low and almost menacing as she whirled on Kendra Michaels. “We discussed this, Kendra. I believe I made myself clear. What didn’t you understand?”

“Nothing,” Kendra said quickly. She found herself feeling the same sense of panic and intimidation she’d had when she’d been scolded by the school’s head administrator during the time she’d attended here as a child. Which was totally ridiculous. Yes, Allison was impressive, but between Kendra’s work in music therapy and her investigations with the FBI, she had significant credentials of her own. So why was she backing away instead of defending herself? “It was kind of a surprise visit. We weren’t expecting Delilah Winter to show up here today.”

“*I* certainly wasn’t expecting her,” Allison said coldly. “And I wasn’t expecting to have to tell the guards at the front gates

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to clear away all the fans and paparazzi who followed her onto the property. There were even more than there were last time. I understand they had to whisk away Congressman Dalborne, who'd just arrived here for a visit, to keep him from being trampled. Do you realize how important he is? Everyone knows he's getting his ducks in a row to run for president."

"You're exaggerating. Congressman Dalborne was actually a good sport about it all," Kendra said defensively. "And Delilah Winter took him with her when the guards were getting her through the gates. He was laughing about it."

"Which is more than I'm doing," Allison said. "This is a school, not a rock concert. Those students are here to learn how to handle their disabilities, not worship at the feet of some pop star. There's been enough disturbance here at Woodward Academy in the last months. I agreed to go along with your plans to improve our image, but not at the expense of the students. You promised me that wouldn't happen."

"And it's not," Kendra said. "Be fair, Allison. I've kept my word. A few months ago, this school we both love was going to be forced to shut down. You'd lost the funding to keep it open because no donors were willing to be associated with it. Not only had there been three murders on the property, but a drug lord kingpin and his men were killed here. We had to get another donor as well as convincing the parents of those special kids to bring them back. Something had to be done quickly."

"So you decided we had to develop a relationship with the media that would cause everyone to forget what happened here and make them think we were St. Jude or Shriners." She

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added sourly, “We don’t need to copy any other schools or hospitals. We work hard and we’re one of the best schools in the world for helping the disabled.”

“But we had to make the public remember that and forget the ugliness they’d seen recently on TV,” Kendra said urgently. “We’re making progress, Allison. I was able to arrange one interview with *60 Minutes* and two with CNN. Four positive feature articles have been written about celebrities visiting the campus and raving about the classes and students here.” Allison’s expression wasn’t changing, so Kendra rushed on: “And I managed to get that billionaire from Silicon Valley as a prime donor for the academy. That might not have happened if he hadn’t seen those CNN shots of the kids in the classroom.”

Allison nodded grudgingly. “If he doesn’t back out when he sees how Delilah Winter is turning this campus into her personal playground. Favorable publicity is one thing, notoriety is something entirely different. She’s been here *five* times, Kendra. She’s a disruption. Those paparazzi rob the school of any dignity it might have. Your friend Jessie Mercado arranged for her first visits here to the school. Can’t she tell her to go on tour or something?”

“That might be difficult when Delilah is a superstar and she and Jessie are just good friends,” Kendra said dryly. “We’re only having a small communication problem with her. Jessie didn’t even know she was here until I called her and asked her to drive down from L.A. and talk to her. She should be here by now.” Time to escape. She’d done all she could to soothe Allison. She turned and started across the campus.

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“I’ll go down to Big Rock where Delilah is performing and meet her.”

“Big Rock?” Allison asked. “Now it’s an outdoor concert?”

“It’s not really a concert.” Big Rock was an enormous flat rock on the grassy expanse of the gentle hills that overlooked the ocean. Kendra and generations of other students had sat there on the rock, carved their initials, and told their secrets to each other. “No one could call Big Rock a stage. She liked what I told her about how the kids felt about it. She just sits on the rock, sings a little, and talks to the kids. By having it outdoors, it gives the kids more room to spread out.” She was hurrying away. “It’s going to be fine, Allison. We’ll take care of it.”

“Then take care of keeping her away from here,” she called after her. “I don’t know why she would even want to come.”

“Because she likes it here, Allison,” Kendra said quietly as she headed across the huge campus toward the hill that led to Big Rock. “She likes the kids. And there’s no way we’re going to hurt her feelings.”

She could hear the sound of Delilah’s guitar in the distance, but she wasn’t singing. Laughter. She must have said something funny to the kids while she was strumming. Delilah was so good with the kids. Why not? She wasn’t much more than a kid herself, barely twenty. She’d hit it big with her first platinum record when she was fifteen and kept on climbing.

Yet Kendra had always been aware of something youthful and wistful about her from the first moment Jessie had introduced them. Jessie had told her she’d had a few big headaches

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from the time she'd taken over Delilah's personal protection, but it had only been because the girl was young and scared. She'd never turned into a spoiled brat—which could well have happened considering her sudden fame. Kendra knew Jessie had become really fond of her before she'd turned her over to another protection service, and it was obvious Delilah adored her. Kendra had wondered whether she'd first come to the school because it would give more opportunity to be with Jessie. If that had been the reason, it wasn't now. She'd told Allison the truth: She'd seen both the gentleness and the affection whenever Delilah interacted with the students.

“Coward,” Jessie jeered from behind Kendra. “Here I am to the rescue. Maybe you should have called your friends Griffin and Metcalf with the FBI to keep Dee under control. Or how about Lynch? As a black ops specialist, he should have been able to handle her.”

“Shut up.” Kendra turned to watch Jessie Mercado walk toward her. Those huge brown eyes and pixie features echoed the mischief in Jessie's voice, but Kendra had already had enough. “I took the flak Allison was handing me, but I had no intention of yanking Delilah out of here by myself.”

“She told you to call her Dee.” Jessie fell into step with her. “Do you want to hurt her feelings? She thinks you're her friend.”

“And I'm trying to maintain a professional relationship.” Which was difficult when Dee was so damn wistful and appealing. “And I am her friend, I just don't want to have to be the bad guy. She did us a favor the first couple times she came here for interviews with the kids.”

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“And you don’t want to tell her to get lost now that all that celebrity bullshit is getting in the way. Well, Dee has to live with it twenty-four seven.” Jessie added bluntly, “You’re too soft. By all means, call in the FBI.”

“I’m calling in Jessie Mercado. Why didn’t you know she was going to show up here today?”

“We don’t live in each other’s pockets. She didn’t mention it. When I phoned her, she told me she didn’t know herself until her car picked her up this morning. It was an impulse. She didn’t even notify her security detail.” Jessie’s lips tightened. “She was halfway to Oceanside before those agents thought to check on why she was late for rehearsal. I’d have fired them if I’d still been heading her security.”

“It was her fault.”

She shook her head. “They had a job to do. Cooperation with a client is nice, but you can never count on it. Though I’ll read her the riot act for being stupid. I taught her better than that.” She glanced soberly at Kendra. “But she really wasn’t being stupid. She’s very smart and canny about what’s going on around her. Sometimes she just has to let go and forget about being Delilah the Superstar. It keeps her sane and all the phoniness at bay. These visits here with the kids have been good for her. She’s only a kid, too, you know.” She made a face. “Not that her mother or all those sycophants around her have ever let her act like one. She’s been a meal ticket since her first Disney Channel show when they found out she could sing.”

“That’s terrible,” Kendra said. “I’m glad she had you for a friend during that time right after her record went platinum.”

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“Maybe I wasn’t her friend.” Her lips twisted. “She wanted me to stay with her longer, offered me a fortune to do it. But much as I like her, I could only stand that bullshit pop-star life for so long. Then I set her up with another security head, Colin Parks, and moved on.”

“You were her friend,” Kendra said quietly. “You *are* her friend. I’ve seen you with her.”

They had come over the hill and suddenly could see the huge crowd of students below surrounding the enormous flat rock where Delilah Winter was sitting, holding her guitar, with one torn-jean-clad leg tucked beneath her. Dewy complexion, tousled red hair, gray-green eyes, and that eager smile as she gazed out at her audience and tried to reach them. She was full of life that lit her entire face with warmth.

Jessie’s lips softened as she looked down at her.

“You’re right, maybe I was her friend.” She started down the hill. “Though how that will turn out after today, we’ll have to see.”



Dee saw them the minute they got close to the Big Rock. She smiled as she waved enthusiastically at them, then turned to the people in the audience. “Hey guys, two of my old friends have just dropped in. Jessie Mercado is an awesome private investigator who’s usually busy saving not only Hollywood but the entire planet, and Kendra Michaels was once a student here just like you. You all know her story. Blind girl has miracle operation, regains sight, and becomes an FBI superstar.” She

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gave a mock yawn. “That script has been written a hundred times before, but I guess it’s a classic. But I thought *my* audience deserved more so I got Kendra to agree to come up here and show you what the shouting was really all about.” Her face was suddenly alive with mischief. “So give her a hand to encourage her to tell us how a kid who had been blind all her life could make those FBI wizards sit up and take notice.”

“What?” Jessie murmured in shock over the wild shouts and applause of Dee’s audience. Her gaze flew to Kendra’s face. “You didn’t do that, did you?”

“Of course I didn’t,” Kendra hissed. She couldn’t believe it, either. “I’m going to *kill* Dee. Whatever possessed her?”

“She’s always had a puckish sense of humor. And Dee’s so used to show business, she probably thought it was no big deal to put you on the spot in front of hundreds of people.” She suddenly chuckled. “Good Lord, your face!” Her smile was almost as mischievous as Dee’s as she started to applaud. “Maybe look on it as a challenge?”

“Not funny. Talk about tough audiences.”

“Then you’re on your own.”

“Why am I not surprised?” she said grimly. “It’s been that kind of day.” She started to make her way through the crowd toward Big Rock where Dee was sitting.

If anything, the young girl’s smile was even more impish than before as she met Kendra’s eyes. She made a sweeping gesture of welcome and handed her the microphone. “Have a great show, Kendra.”

Kendra gazed blankly down at the mike. What the hell was she supposed to do now?

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Well, not freeze or stutter like an idiot.

Look on it as a challenge, Jessie had said.

She smiled and fell silent a moment, thinking.

Then she lifted her eyes to the audience and started to speak. “It wasn’t long ago that this school was in trouble. Serious trouble. It looked like it was going to close forever. But thanks to Delilah Winter, Congressman Dalborne, and a lot of other people, that’s changed. We have hope now.”

The crowd cheered.

“Do your stuff, Kendra!” It was a girl’s voice from the front row. “Do what Delilah said!”

Kendra glanced down to see a fragile-looking child with a broad grin on her face: Ariel Jones, a little blind girl she’d met during her previous case. “Do it!” Ariel was clapping her hands enthusiastically. “Come on! Show us!”

“What a troublemaker you are, Ariel.” Kendra shook her head. “You guys don’t really want me to do a bunch of lame parlor tricks, do you?”

More cheers, more applause. Okay, she’d give them what they wanted. As much as Kendra usually hated performing like a trained monkey, today was different. Of course these kids loved to see what was possible with the hand they’d been dealt.

She turned toward the politician. “Congressman Dalborne, thanks for coming out today.”

“My pleasure.” He stepped toward Kendra and waved to the crowd.

Kendra looked him up and down. “I always like politicians who patronize local businesses. You ate at the Breakfast Club

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Diner down on North Coast Highway this morning. I hope you enjoyed it.”

He frowned, puzzled. “You saw me there?”

“No. I haven’t been to the BCD in years.”

“Then how . . . ?”

“You read the newspaper while you ate. Not on your phone or a computer, but a paper you probably got from a machine. And it wasn’t the *San Diego Union*. You went local again. The *Coast News*, probably.”

Dalborne turned to a bespectacled young aide standing a few yards away. “Curtis, did you tell her . . . ?”

The aide shook his head no.

Kendra paced in front of the congressman’s group for a moment. “You wore braces as a child, didn’t you, sir? You were young. Younger than most kids when they wear braces.”

Dalborne flashed his perfect smile. “Right again. Though I’d really rather forget those days.”

“You managed to recover. From that childhood trauma *and* the cold you had last week. There’s been a bug going around. I caught it myself.”

Dalborne nodded. “It’s a nasty one, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely.” Kendra stared at his feet. “You grew up wearing flip-flops, and I’d say you probably still wear them quite a bit when you’re off the clock. I don’t know where you call home, but this seems to indicate you live on or near the beach somewhere.”

Dalborne blinked, staring at her in disbelief. “You’re right about the shoes. And I live in a beach house in Del Mar.”

“Nice neighborhood.”

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“Very.” His brows rose quizzically. “So are you going to tell us how you knew all this?”

“By doing something most of the kids here do better than anyone else. I just pay attention.”

“How did you know where I ate breakfast?”

She shrugged. “I smelled your breath. The Breakfast Club Diner serves up a mean plate of huevos rancheros, with a homemade sauce to die for.” She wrinkled her nose. “And that sauce hasn’t changed in twenty years, and it’s on your breath right now.”

The kids loved that.

After the laughter subsided, Kendra continued. “They’re also famous for their orange marmalade muffins. It’s a very distinctive color.”

Dalborne squinted at her. “I didn’t have a muffin.”

“No, but your assistant did.”

The assistant quickly looked down at his shirt and tie.

“Not on your clothes,” she said to the assistant. “There’s a distinctive orange splotch under your right thumbnail.” She turned back to Dalborne. “Your breath and his orange thumb can only mean you guys ate at the Breakfast Club Diner.”

“The newspaper?”

“Your right fingers have newspaper ink on them, meaning you’re left-handed, by the way.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Only one hand is stained, meaning you were probably eating with the other hand. If you were holding the newspaper with your right hand, you were holding your fork with your left. Your dominant hand.”

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“How did you know which paper?”

“The *San Diego Union* doesn’t come off on the hands nearly as much as the Coast Group of neighborhood papers. It’s a pretty safe assumption you were reading the *Coast*.”

“The fact that I wore braces?”

“Aside from that perfect smile of yours?”

“Thank you.” He smiled again. “Aside from that.”

“You have a habit of breathing in through your teeth. A lot of kids who wore braces do that. And it’s a habit some people carry with them throughout their lives, even if they aren’t aware of it.”

“Trust me, I’m aware of it. Every time I watch replays of myself at debates. It’s that obvious?”

“Not to most people. But I bet a lot of these kids could hear it.”

“Interesting,” he said as he heard sounds of agreement from the audience. “I think I just found my next debate prep team. What else can they hear?”

“A very slight rattle in your chest, a postnasal drip that’s probably a residual effect from your cold. I’m sensitive to it, because I also had it. And they might also hear the sound of your very elegant loafers snapping up against your heel. It’s the same sound someone makes when they wear flip-flops. That says to me you’re probably used to wearing flip-flops more than any other type of shoe.”

Dalborne shook his head. “Incredible. Now I know why the FBI likes you so much.”

“What they like about me is that I just pay attention and can help them do what they do a little better.” Kendra whirled

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toward Dee. “And paying attention is how I know Delilah Winter didn’t show up at the recording studio night before last and left the crew and musicians waiting for her the entire session. Right, Dee?”

Dee’s eyes widened and her jaw went slack. After a shocked moment, she finally responded. “Yeah, I was on the beach working on writing a new song. Time got away from me. I was in another world.” She added quickly to the audience, “But trust me, I felt really guilty, and I paid overtime to each and every one of the crew. That was very unprofessional of me. So you guys do as I say and not as I do. Okay?” Then her face suddenly lit with a rueful smile. “And be sure and watch your back when you’re doing something bad around Kendra Michaels!”

The kids were clapping and laughing wildly at this sudden sign of naughtiness and vulnerability in the superstar they adored. As well as at the idea that she had been bested by one of their own.

A perfect time to end the performance, Kendra thought. She stepped forward and waved her hand at the audience. Then she bowed low as the applause washed over her. The next moment she jumped down off the rock and tried to escape through the crowd.

But she found Dee in front of her, hurling herself into her arms. “You were terrific! Just what I wanted. Just what they needed. I’m window dressing, but you’re the real thing.” She pushed back and grinned up at Kendra. “Wanna go on the road with me?”

“No, I don’t.” But she had to smile back at Dee. “And

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that was a dirty trick catching me off guard. What if I'd blown it?"

"You didn't. I have an instinct about things like that. I knew you were a natural. And how could I resist doing it when I've wanted to know how you do all that stuff myself? I knew I wasn't going to have much more time to find out, so I laid my trap." She made a face. "But how in hell did you know about that session I missed the other night?"

Kendra smiled. "Jessie told me. She said your manager called her when they were searching for you."

"That's cheating."

"A little. But you deserved it for putting me on the spot." She paused. "Is anything wrong? You worried a lot of people that night. It's not like you."

Dee shrugged. "Yeah, like I told you, time got away. I was really into creating something great with that new song." She nibbled at her lower lip. "And maybe I wasn't into anything else that night. With music you can't do it if you can't feel it, you know?"

"Sure." It was only half true. She could understand the artistic problems, but balancing them with the fame and emotional traumas could only be solved by Dee herself. It troubled Kendra that there didn't seem to be anything she could do to help her. She said lightly, "But you must have been feeling it today. You gave those kids a fantastic show."

"You helped. It was great fun, wasn't it?" She gave Kendra another hug and stepped back. She said quietly, "Don't worry, I'll do a couple more songs and then I'll say goodbye to these guys. I'll be off your hands in an hour and on my way back

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to L.A. with Jessie. I'll even promise that we'll lead all those paparazzi creeps out front away from here. Jessie is terrific at stuff like that."

"I know she is," Kendra said hesitantly, her gaze searching Dee's expression. The last thing she'd wanted to do was to hurt her. "It's not that we don't like you and appreciate everything you've done for us. You're a very special person, Dee."

"But so are these kids," she said softly. "And they belong here. I know I don't. It was just nice being able to watch them, be with them for a little while. They're so strong, much stronger than me."

"No, they aren't. Jessie keeps telling me what a tough cookie you can be."

"That's different." She gave Kendra another quick hug. "Now stop looking at me like that. Everything's okay. I understand." Her hand tightened on the mic, and she jumped back on top of Big Rock. She shouted, "Hey, I'm jealous. Kendra was just a guest artist. Let me show you what I can do. You heard her tattle how bad I was about writing that song when I should have been at work? Well, it might have been a bad thing to do, but the song turned out pretty darn good. Who wants to hear the new song I just wrote?"

The audience erupted with a clamor of shouts and applause.

"Come on, you're now ancient history." Jessie was suddenly beside Kendra and leading her out of the crowd. "Though you did a damn good job. Dee was impressed with you."

Kendra gazed over her shoulder at Dee Winter, glowing, intense, giving everything, who had started to sing again. "Then she wasn't the only one. I was very impressed by her..."

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“I was right, you know,” Allison Walker said as she came to stand beside Kendra at the front gates of the school. She watched Jessie drive Dee Winter past the crowd of paparazzi at the curb in her black Range Rover SUV. “She was disruptive. Look how those paparazzi are jumping into their cars to follow her.”

“Yes, she was disruptive,” Kendra agreed. “But those paparazzi are doing exactly what she wants them to do right now. Jessie is leading them away from here like a Pied Piper.” She added quietly, “And the kids had a wonderful, memorable experience.”

“I understand you had something to do with that,” Allison said dryly.

“A little. But that was Dee Winter, too.” She smiled. “And I can’t deny you were right. How could I?”

“You can’t.” She was silent a moment. “I...like her.”

“I know you do. She was just a problem you felt you had to solve.”

“She stopped by my office and thanked me for being so kind to her. She actually...hugged me. I was a little uncomfortable.”

“I’m sure she wasn’t. And I’m sure she meant everything she said to you.”

“I believe she did.” She was silent a moment. “Perhaps we’ll invite her again...in a year or so.” She shrugged. “At any rate, she’s on her way to where she belongs now. Thank heavens your friend Jessie brought a car and not her motorcycle

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this time. I wouldn't want to be responsible for an accident happening to a guest at our academy."

"I don't think our 'guest' would mind. Dee would find riding on the back of Jessie's motorcycle a blast. She's probably done it many times before." Kendra sighed as Jessie's SUV disappeared around a corner, followed by a parade of screeching paparazzi vehicles. She wished she was with them. She was suddenly feeling very much alone after the excitement that had gone before.

She turned away and headed for her Toyota in the parking lot. "Now I've got to go back to my condo and have dinner with my friend Olivia. I had to cancel on her twice this week, and Olivia doesn't tolerate that kind of discourtesy. She let me know it wasn't to happen again. It seems as if I'm up here all the time these days."

"I know you are," Allison said. "And I'm grateful. Don't think I'm not. You've practically saved the academy. It's just that things are different now. It's hard for me to get used to it."

"Me too. And you've worked just as hard as I have, Allison. We've done it together." She got into the Toyota. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Have a good dinner." She paused. "I haven't seen that extraordinary Lamborghini that belongs to Lynch up here for the last week." She hesitated again. "Is there some problem?"

Allison was trying to be tactful, Kendra realized. Unusual for her these days. Bluntness ruled her life except when dealing with business associates or parents of students. But evidently, she didn't want to come straight out and ask her if the man she assumed to be Kendra's lover had left her and gone on the lam.

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“No problem other than the usual one with Adam Lynch. The Justice Department wanted him to save the world and he was sent somewhere in Tibet to do it. I haven’t heard from him since he left last week.” She backed out of the parking space. “But I’m sure he’s missing the Lamborghini.”



HIGHWAY 5

OCEANSIDE, CALIFORNIA

“They’re gaining on us.” Dee’s voice was tense with excitement as she looked at the rearview mirror. “I think it’s that red Subaru who’s in the lead.” She tilted her head. “Though that Chrysler is pretty close.”

“You sound like you’re calling a horse race.” Jessie cast her an amused glance. “And enjoying every minute of it.”

“I always have fun with you.” Dee’s gaze was fixed on the vehicles careening around the curb behind them. “That green jeep took that turn on two wheels. He definitely has potential.”

“Potential to kill himself, maybe. Or someone else on the road.”

“Can you lose ’em before that happens?”

Jessie pulled the wheel hard right and spun onto Oceanside Boulevard. “We’ll see. By the way, are you going to tell me where you left your security detail this morning?”

“Not sure. They’re probably still at Thunder Road recording studios, wondering where in the hell I went.”

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“You slipped out on them?”

“Maybe.” She looked away from Jessie. “They would have tried to stop me. The recording company pays them.”

“And you wonder why I quit as your security director.”

Dee grinned as she leaned back in her seat. “I wouldn’t have tried to slip out on you. Admit it, you’ve never had a more fun job.”

“I had more fun dodging gunfire in Afghanistan.”

“You miss me.”

“How can I miss you when you’re always hanging out at my office?”

“Not when I’m on tour. Are you sure you don’t want to come back?”

“Positive. Buckle your seat belt. It’s about to get hairy.”

Dee’s smile deepened as she pulled the belt across her chest. “Now that’s what I like to hear.”

Jessie punched the accelerator and sped toward the I-5 entrance ramp. As the paparazzi’s vehicles fell in line behind them, Jessie slowed to a crawl.

“What are you doing?” Dee asked.

“Waiting for that eighteen-wheeler to catch up to us.”

“Why?”

Jessie was still looking in her side-view mirror. “Gotta time it just right...”

The cargo truck pulled alongside them and most of the other photographers’ cars. Just as the lane turned right onto the I-5 northbound entrance ramp, Jessie gunned the engine, jumped the median, and swerved left in front of the truck. She sped down Oceanside Boulevard and checked

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the rearview. The paparazzi caravan, still blocked from the left by the eighteen-wheeler, could only continue onto the freeway.

“Well done, my friend.” Dee initiated a fist bump that Jessie didn’t return.

“There’s still a couple stragglers back there.” Jessie’s hands tightened on the wheel as she sped up and turned right onto South Coast Highway. “And the others will get off at the next exit and try to intercept us.”

Dee’s eyes were glittering with excitement. “Then let’s change cars.”

“How do you propose we do that?”

“We find someone to loan us theirs.”

“That’s your plan?”

“Yes. We’ll find someone, and I’ll strike the *Summer on the Beach* album pose.” Dee flipped back her hair, cocked her head to the side, and smiled in a perfect re-creation of her multi-platinum debut album cover. “I’ll offer ’em ten back-stage passes, and if that doesn’t work, I’ll volunteer to show up at their daughter’s next birthday party.”

“That actually works?”

“Yes.” She was beaming. “For almost everything.”

“I’m *really* glad I don’t work for you anymore.”

Dee was ignoring her. “Slow down, I think I see a housewife getting into a Suburban.”

“I have my own plan, Dee. And it doesn’t involve a meet-and-greet at a kid’s birthday party.”

She frowned. “I’m *not* naming a song after someone.”

“Also not on the table. Hang on.” Jessie spun hard left

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into a restaurant parking lot and raced down a narrow driveway to the building's rear side, where a deck overlooked the narrow beach.

Dee looked around. "So we're just gonna hide back here? I like my plan better."

"No. We are switching vehicles, but not in the way you think." Jessie put the SUV in park and killed the ignition. "Let's go."

"Go where? Is someone meeting us? Did you send for an Uber?"

Jessie climbed out and slammed the door closed.

Dee scrambled out and joined her on the blacktop parking lot. "Come on, what's the plan?"

Jessie motioned ahead, where a black fourteen-foot bowrider boat was partially beached on the sand.

Dee's eyes lit up. "The *Moon Shadow*! What's it doing here?"

"Saving your sorry ass from the paparazzi."

"You brought it down here for me?"

"I came prepared." She sighed. "You know, it's almost as hard being your friend as it was being your employee." They approached the sleek craft, which Jessie occasionally used for surveillance and tracking along the coast. "Let's push this back and get out of here."

Within five minutes, they were on the boat and speeding north on the waters past Camp Pendleton.

"We got away from them!" Dee collapsed back in her seat, her face wreathed in smiles. "For a minute, I thought they had us. What a way to go, Jessie!"

"I'm glad you approve," Jessie said dryly. "Given how close

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we came to going off that cliff near the school. And those cars following us came even closer.”

“I knew you’d find a way to lose them.” She reached out and squeezed Jessie’s arm. “You’re one of the best stunt drivers in Hollywood. You’re totally awesome behind the wheel. Remember, you let me watch you on the set a couple times when you were working as the head of my security.”

“That was a mistake,” Jessie said grimly. “I only did it because we were just getting to know each other, and I wanted you to have faith in my driving in case the situation called for it.”

“And this situation called for it,” she said with satisfaction. “So it wasn’t a mistake.”

“Except that I’m no longer heading your security team. And today you blew off the people who have that job. Not good, Dee.”

“You’re going to yell at me.” Her smile faded. “I thought you would. I deserve it. I’m a professional, and I knew I didn’t have any right to breach my security contract with my recording company. But I thought maybe it wouldn’t hurt to do it one more time before I became Delilah again.” She added coaxingly, “Give me a break. I’ll apologize to everyone. I’ve already told Kendra I’m sorry I put her on the spot by showing up at the school.” She made a face. “I really thought I could sneak past the paparazzi at the front gate.”

“They had it staked out because they knew you’d been there four times before.” Jessie frowned. “And you don’t have to apologize to me. You’re not that crazy sixteen-year-old kid I watched over any longer, Dee. You shouldn’t have to apologize to anyone. You’re grown up and you should have

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your own standards and abide by them.” She paused. “And usually I believe you do. I think this time you went off the rails a bit. Is everything okay with you?”

“Sure, fine.” She smiled brilliantly. “Why not? My last record went platinum.”

“Is everything okay with you?” Jessie repeated.

Dee glanced out the window. “I’ve missed you. You’re the only one I can really talk to, Jessie. I know you’re always busy. Hell, you were even on that job in Afghanistan for a while this year.” She went on quickly, “I’m not complaining. You’re right, I’m grown up and you don’t work for me any longer. But if I sent you tickets, would you come to my concert tomorrow night? I’m playing the Hollywood Bowl.”

Oh, shit.

Jessie hadn’t realized how long it had been since she’d made more than passing contact with Dee. She was right, Jessie had been swamped for the last months, and Dee’s career had also appeared to be operating on hyperdrive. Other than setting up Dee’s appearances at Woodward Academy, she’d barely seen her. But Jessie should have remembered how vulnerable and lonely Dee could be even surrounded by hordes of fans. “I wouldn’t miss it,” she said lightly. “But I thought it was already sold out.”

Dee grinned. “Lucky for you I know someone at the box office.”

“Yeah, lucky for me.” She grinned back at her before she paused to ask, “Is your mother going to be able to make it this time?”

“Gina?” Dee shook her head. “Be for real. She’s in France

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with husband number five. She said she'd try to see me when I go on tour."

"Hey, then maybe you'll be able to have dinner with me after the concert? I'll understand if you can't. But I'd be willing to fight my way back through all your friends and fans if I had a chance."

"You have a chance," she said quietly. "Thanks, Jessie."

"For what? It's just a meal." She tilted her head. "And talking about meals, would you mind if I didn't take you right back to that mansion you call home? I'm starved. Maybe we could stop at Pink's and get a hot dog?"

"Maybe we could." Dee's gray-green eyes were suddenly twinkling. "Since you're the only one in my circle who will let me load mine with onions for fear of media reprisal."

"I'll brave it. We've gone through worse together." She pulled back on the throttle. "And I have a hunch there are even better times ahead..."



KENDRA'S CONDO

"Stop checking up on me. I told you I was coming to dinner," Kendra said when she received Olivia's call as she got out of her car in the parking garage. "I'll be in the elevator in seconds. But I thought I'd go up to my place and shower first. I was outside on the grounds of the school for a while today and I'm a little mussed."

"Bad idea," Olivia said flatly. "Get off at my condo instead."

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Harley has been missing you, and that means you'll end up more than 'mussed' when he gets through with his first attack. And you'll probably smell like chopped liver. I don't think those new breath mints are working."

Kendra groaned. "I thought you told me that dog training was making a big difference."

"Oh, it has, but with a unique dog like Harley, you have to consider that his superb intelligence would let him know that he's being ignored, and he'd feel as if he had to do something about it." She paused. "He might even think you have to be punished."

Kendra didn't like the sound of that. There were times these days when she regretted persuading Olivia to take a Seeing Eye dog into her home. Her friend had sworn she didn't need a service dog since she considered herself, though blind, to be totally independent. She'd even built a successful web destination called *Outasite* that earned her seven figures. Yet she'd fallen in love with Harley. Perhaps they'd become entirely too close in both nature and spirit, Kendra thought gloomily. "You wouldn't have been coaching him?"

"I never coach Harley in bad behavior. But you'll have to take responsibility for your own misbehavior. Neither of us approved of you canceling dinner for the second time in a week. I'll see you in a few minutes." She ended the call.

Kendra sighed as she pressed the button for Olivia's fourth-floor condo. Might as well accept whatever Olivia and Harley had in store for her. Olivia had been her best friend since they'd both been students at the academy as children. When Kendra had gained her sight, it hadn't changed anything about

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the relationship but the fact they'd both gotten stronger and more determined to be their own people.

She heard Harley's hideous bark as she hurried down the hall so the neighbors wouldn't complain. Poor baby, he couldn't help that his vocals had been damaged in a fire, but it didn't help the effect that sent a chill down everyone's spine.

Olivia threw open the door. "It's about time."

Harley launched himself at Kendra. She saw a flash of one blue eye, one brown eye, and curly brownish face and body hair before his paws hit her shoulders. The dog was part German shepherd, part mystery mutt, and totally adorable.

But that big tongue licking her chin was not, and neither was the liver smell Olivia had mentioned. "You're right, try another breath mint for him." Then she knelt down and started stroking and crooning to him. He instantly rolled over on his back and presented his belly for attention.

After a moment Olivia said, "That's enough." She bent down and snapped her fingers and made a downward motion.

Harley quickly rolled back over and jumped to his feet.

"Good boy." Olivia turned away. "Kendra, I poured glasses of wine for us when I heard you in the hall. You can sit down at the kitchen bar and keep me company while I finish the salad."

Harley was now calmly sitting next to the island and gazing happily at Olivia. He was completely ignoring Kendra. Night and day, she thought suspiciously. "Could you have stopped that attack before it began?"

"Of course. Harley's training is going along splendidly. But both barking and displaying affection are vitally important to

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dogs. If I keep it within limits, I'll raise a healthy dog." Her lips twitched with mischief as she got down the salad bowl. "I decided that since you hadn't been around lately to contribute to his health and well-being, you'd certainly want to help out. Isn't that right?"

She sighed. "Right."

Olivia's smile had disappeared. "Then we need to talk."

"About what?"

"About why you've turned your back on me and stopped being my friend."

"What?"

"You heard me." Olivia turned toward the salad ingredients on her kitchen counter. "Have a seat."

Kendra was still trying to recover from the shock as she sat on a barstool on the other side of the counter. "That was a hell of a thing to say. What did I do? Look, I know you were upset about me missing dinner, but I didn't think you'd go that far to punish me. After all, I had work to do up at Oceanside. You're usually very understanding about professional engagements. Heaven knows, you have enough of them yourself."

"Yes, I do." She was expertly tossing the salad. "And I let all the excuses go for a little while because I thought there might be a smidgen of truth in them. But then I decided that it was time to clear all the crap away."

"Crap?" She frowned. "What are you talking about? And smidgen of truth? I was telling you the truth about working late at the school."

"Smidgen," Olivia repeated precisely. "You wouldn't lie to

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me, but if you didn't want me to worry, you'd spend more time than needed on a project to avoid telling me about a problem. You've done it before. Sometimes I think you're not even aware you're doing it. But I *am* beginning to worry. Because it's stretching on too long . . .”

“And you want to clear the crap away?” Kendra said. “Did it occur to you that you could be wrong?”

“No, I know every nuance of your voice and phrasing. I'm terrific at it. I realize when I'm getting smidgens.” Her expression was sober. “What's going on? I have to know. You're my best friend. You've never hidden anything from me before. Are you working on a new case? You haven't mentioned Griffin or Metcalf, but they've asked you to keep cases confidential before. I won't pry, but I want to be there when and if you need me. You live right upstairs, and I should at least know that much.”

“You think a homicidal maniac is stalking me?”

“It's happened before.” She drew a deep, relieved breath. “But judging by my infallible ability to read your voice, I gather that it's not happening now.”

“No, it's not.” She chuckled. “I haven't been called by anyone at the FBI for weeks. No serial killers knocking on my door or following me to the school. You screwed up, Olivia.”

“No, I didn't.” She finished the salad and leaned back against the counter. “The smidgen was there. I just exaggerated the threat. For which I'm grateful. I instinctively go for the worst-case scenario when I believe something's not right with you.”

“Actually, I'm admiring how good you were to listen and

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identify a possible problem. Your audio abilities might be better than mine these days.”

“You’ve just gotten lazy since you got your vision. I have to work harder. I went after what I wanted, but I just took the wrong path.”

And this wasn’t going to be over until Olivia had everything clear to her satisfaction, Kendra could see.

“Then turn around and start over.” She took a sip of her wine, trying to read Olivia’s expression. “Don’t wait and let it simmer. Come right out with it.”

“Are you certain? I was trying to be diplomatic.”

“That’s always a lost cause between us.”

Olivia shrugged. “If it wasn’t a life-or-death situation, it has to be Lynch. I didn’t think that was possible, because you usually do such a great job of guarding yourself from him. But maybe something has changed lately . . .”

“It could hardly have changed, since I haven’t seen him for two weeks.”

“That sounded a bit barbed,” Olivia said. “Is he still in Tibet?”

“As far as I know.” She added warily, “And I don’t have any right to be barbed. We don’t have that kind of a relationship. We’re friends and partners, and anything else that occurs between us has to trail behind.”

“Bullshit,” Olivia said. “It would be nice if we could all keep our emotions in those neat little boxes, but it doesn’t happen. They all get jumbled up together and who the hell knows where they’ll land.” She took a sip of her wine. “I’ve known you since the day you met Adam Lynch years ago

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and you're even more jumbled than most. You've both been moving cautiously around each other, but it was inevitable that you'd come together. Who could blame you? You're both brilliant, and you match each other. Then add sexual tension, respect, admiration, and a number of other emotions that are guaranteed to drive you around the bend."

Kendra forced a smile. "It sounds very uncomfortable."

"You'd have to tell me. I'm on the outside. From what I've been able to judge, it's like two fencers fighting a championship match. Sharp. Thrusting. Exciting. I have an idea you both draw blood on occasion." She shrugged. "But I can't let myself care, because you'd tell me to mind my own business. Which I will do, as long as you clarify that it's Lynch with whom you're having a problem and not some mystery serial killer." She added softly, "Because I'll always know a problem is there, Kendra."

Kendra nodded ruefully. "Acknowledged." She lifted her glass. "Between you and Harley, I don't have a chance, do I?"

"Hell, no." She turned toward the oven. "Now take Harley for a short walk, and then set the table while I finish dinner."



Paul Fantinelli exited the elevator and strode across the rooftop patio of the London Hotel. The sun was setting over West Hollywood, and the poolside bar was packed with young entertainment industry professionals. There were the agents, the lower-level studio execs, and the impossibly good-looking stars- and starlets-in-the-making.

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And a man who didn't fit in any of those categories. Nick Parillo stood on the pool's far side, nursing a drink as he stared at the lights of Sunset Boulevard. Parillo was a handsome man, maybe fifty, who obviously felt no connection to anyone or anything on that patio. He was dressed in an expensive suit, no tie, and a close-cropped hairstyle that almost appeared to be a military cut. He turned and waved Paul over.

"Nice hotel," Fantinelli said.

Parillo shrugged and finished his drink. "Any problems this morning?"

"No, I blended in with the paparazzi. There were probably ten of them there at the school. No one suspected a thing. I was just another member of the pack."

"Good. Anyone at that concert that I should know about?"

He shook his head. "It was only for the kids." He held up the fingers of one hand. "That hotshot Congressman Dalborne who wants to be the next president, Delilah Winter, Jessie Mercado, and Kendra Michaels."

"Kendra Michaels?" Parillo repeated. He swore softly. "And you didn't think I'd be interested in her? Are you an idiot? Even you must have heard about her background."

"It doesn't mean anything. She teaches classes up there at the school."

"Everything means something in this game. Particularly Kendra Michaels. Count on it." He suddenly stopped as a thought occurred to him. "But it's obvious you weren't worried about anything that happened this morning. So why did you call and ask to meet me?"

"I just thought we needed to have a talk." Fantinelli

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hesitated. He was already having second thoughts. Parillo wasn't a man to fool with, and his contacts with the mob were legendary. But the stakes were high enough for Fantinelli to risk probing a little. He smiled ingratiatingly. "This deal is going to be a huge score. How much do you think you're going to make off it?"

Parillo stiffened. "Don't concern yourself with that. You're not paid to do anything but obey orders. I chose you because the word on the streets is that you're smart and your team couldn't be traced back to me. Just do your job and you'll get every dollar you've been promised."

"Maybe I should have asked for more," Fantinelli said softly. "Come on, I'll do a better job for you than those Las Vegas guys you usually hire. Like I said, you must be making a fortune. Share a little."

"Talk like that could be very dangerous for you." Parillo's eyes were suddenly fierce. "We made a deal. I'd advise you not to try to change it." He took a step closer, and his voice deepened into a tone that sent an icy chill down Paul's spine. "This isn't only about money for me. You know nothing about how I operate or what other contacts I might have. Trust me, my friend, it's about something far, far more important than that..."