

Blood Justice

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David Burton



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Chapter One

Justine Kroft died for the first time at 11:26 p.m. on a Tuesday night. There was no physical reason for her to die at that time. She didn't fall down the stairs or off a ladder. The radio didn't tumble into the bathtub with her. She didn't eat anything poisonous, walk through a plate glass window or get hit by a stray bullet. Yet she felt death settle over her as surely as if the Reaper wrapped her in his dark cloak.

She had the first uneasy sense of death at about 8:30 p.m. that evening. Her heart raced for a moment. Nothing in an article about picking colors for a bedroom would cause her heart to race. Two gallons of periwinkle blue had already been ordered. Just a brief *thumpthumpthumpthump* and back to normal. Only a faint feeling of unease remained.

At 9:00 p.m. she began to wonder why her daughter Brittany wasn't home from the library. Probably talking to Nick Cressman. Those two sixteen-year-olds could talk for hours about nothing. Brittany was a good kid, though punctuality was not a strong point. Justine decided to give Brittany fifteen more minutes before calling.

At 9:10 p.m., Justine's toothbrush slipped from her hand and clattered into the sink. Dread gripped her gut and twisted. She ran to the bedroom and dialed her daughter's cell phone. The ringing stopped after five rings, but there was no voice mail announcement. She pressed the phone hard to her ear, desperate to hear Brittany say, "Hi Mom." All she heard was an empty silence—no laughing, no voices, no breathing.

"Brittany? Where are you? Are you all right?"

She heard a scream, then nothing. Connection broken.

"Oh, God. Brit, what's happening? Brit?"

She dialed again. Voice mail. Again. Voice mail.

She called Nick's parents, Patty's parents, Claire's, Robin's, Jeff's. Brittany had left the library at about 8:30. Nobody had seen her since.

911.

"Something's happened to my daughter. She left the library at eight-thirty. It's less than ten minutes away. She's not home yet. I called her cell. Somebody answered but didn't say anything. I heard a scream in the background then nothing. It was Brittany screaming. I know it."

Justine paced the length of her bedroom as her face tightened. "Yes, I know it's only nine-thirty...I know kids will be kids...I know, four hours...I heard her scream. A real scream."

Stopped in the middle of the floor, Justine's body vibrated with

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frustration. "And you expect me to wait until you get around to sending somebody? I'm going to look for her, whether you do or not."

Within a minute of slamming down the phone she was in her Lexus SUV speeding to the library. The building was dark, save for a single light illuminating the entrance. At the far end of the parking lot, Brittany's ten year old Ranger pickup waited like a lonely white smudge. They'd bought the truck from a friend for five hundred dollars the weekend after Brittany received her driver's license. Faded white, scratched and battered, stick shift, Brittany had fallen for it, love at first sight. "It has character," she said.

Justine wasn't interested in its character when she screeched to a stop beside it. She only wanted to look inside and see her daughter asleep, exhausted from end-of-school-year studying and activities.

"Brit! Brit!" Justine stared through the window. The seat was in shadow. Was that Brittany lying down? She pounded on the roof. "Brittany! Wake up!"

Nothing moved. Justine fumbled with her key ring for the spare truck key and yanked the door open. "Brit?"

Nothing. No pretty young woman excited for the end of tenth grade, excited to go surfing with her friends, excited to start a poorly paid summer job helping a school friend's brother make a documentary on San Diego shoreline wildlife. Nothing but a crumpled jacket and a gym bag. "God damn it!"

Justine's knees gave way and she dropped onto the seat's edge. The jacket she gripped held Brittany's scent. They had shopped for it together only a few weeks ago. The memory did nothing to soothe the desolation growing in her chest. Several minutes passed as she sat frozen. This was a crisis. Justine was good in a crisis, able to think and act fast when unexpected problems arose. That's why she was so successful. Yet, her mind was blank. There had to be a hundred actions she could take. She couldn't think of one.

The thunk of a nearby car door broke through her despair. A San Diego County Sheriff's Deputy approached.

"Are you all right, Ma'am?" His hand rested casually on the butt of his firearm as he peered into the truck cab from a wary distance.

"I am, but my daughter isn't."

"You must be the woman who called about her missing daughter."

"Yes. Yes. Something has happened to her. I know it." Her fist pounded her chest. "I know it, in here."

She explained the situation. Deputy David Axel rubbed his close cropped head for some long seconds. "I have a fifteen year old daughter," he finally said. "My wife swears she gets the same type of feelings with her. She knew the instant Toni broke her arm falling off her bike.

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So I don't dismiss your instincts."

"But?"

"No buts. When a young woman goes missing these days, we take it seriously. But there are procedures, things we have to do first."

"But my daughter needs help now."

"Ma'am, I can imagine how you feel. I'd be tearing up the town if it was Toni who was missing. But really, the best thing you can do is go home and wait for her to come home or call. We need a photograph, a description, a list of friends. Is there a husband or boyfriend who might have—"

"No. I want to look for her."

"Where?"

"I don't know, damn it."

Deputy Axel took firm hold of her shoulders.

"I promise we'll do whatever it takes to find her. I'll do whatever I can. I hate to say it, but it could easily be my daughter missing."

Justine relished her self reliance, yet was thankful for Deputy Axel's grip. It kept her from totally losing control. Bad for her image, but when it came to Brittany, she didn't give a damn. His grip on her shoulders lightened as she relaxed. She had no doubt of his sincerity. Through his hands, she felt his understanding and support. The passion in his voice spoke of his love for his daughter.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll follow you home and get the information we need. She may be home already, wondering where you are."

Brittany wasn't home. There was no message. Justine made more phone calls to no effect. Her sense of dread grew like a cancer in her chest. At 11:20, pain ripped through her body from crotch to chin. Terror squeezed her lungs. She fought for every breath.

At 11:22 breathing did not seem important anymore. The pain vanished. Emptiness replaced dread. Grief replaced hope. Justine gasped once and dropped to her knees. There, with the patience of the dead, she waited for confirmation of what she already knew.



Justine had been a struggling, self-reliant single mom for six years since her husband left her for a more pliable woman. He and the woman died in a car crash the next day and Justine, taking that as justified karmic payback, had not told Brittany that her father abandoned her. For the past three years Justine had been financially independent as a successful Southern California commercial real estate agent, and to the world at large, content. As long as Brittany was a happy, successful student, that was all that mattered to her.

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But Justine Kroft was a fraud. Her reputation as a “tough lady in a tough business,” was based on her need to provide the childhood for her daughter that she hadn’t had. It was all a façade. She’d known it all along, since her husband died and she had to support Brittany. Desperate and scared every step of the way, she gave up her life to provide for her child. From office manager in a commercial real estate firm she did what she had to do to become their top earner through sheer tenacity and fear of failure. Some nights while Brittany slept, Justine continued to read or study, though tears blurred the words. This wasn’t her, what she wanted to be. Her husband’s betrayal had sucked the substance and purpose from her. After his death, Brittany had given her emptiness meaning, a reason to struggle, a reason to succeed.

That all changed the day of the funeral. Until then she had maintained her stoic “tough lady” exterior. When the Sheriff’s Deputies had come to inform her of her daughter’s death, her face, as well as her heart, turned to stone. When she had to identify Brittany and only her daughter’s face was revealed, she didn’t shed a tear. Justine had known in her gut that her beloved child was dead. To have it confirmed hardened her all the more, because otherwise her shell would crack and never be whole again.

In the days before the funeral, Teresa Diaz, her office manager and friend, checked on Justine in the morning, stayed with her in the evenings, forced her to eat and helped with arrangements.

The unconscious effort to hold herself together sometimes left Justine disoriented and confused. As they left the funeral parlor, Teresa said, “It will be a lovely service.”

“It will?” Justine said.

“Yes, it will.”

At the car Justine asked, “Who died?”

Speechless, Teresa opened her mouth to answer, but couldn’t bring herself to say the words.

Riding home in silence, Justine rested her forehead against the window and stared out, something Brittany often did.

The morning of the funeral her stoic veneer held intact. None of the emotions roiling inside her showed through. She did what she needed to do—shower, dress, eat, breathe—to prepare herself for an experience she never dreamed she would have to endure.

Teresa wasn’t fooled. Not so long ago she had suffered a similar ordeal. She knew what was coming.

The non-denominational service was well attended by Brittany’s friends and Justine’s co-workers and acquaintances. No relatives attended. Justine and Brittany were a family of two. Many attended the actual burial, and though her legs wanted to buckle, Justine refused to

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let them. She even managed to acknowledge the tearful condolences.

The sad affair over, the attendees departed to their lives, sure that happiness would soon erase the sadness that for most of them, was temporary. After all, they had loved ones to console them and remind them that their lives had a future purpose.

Leaving the graveside, Teresa put her arm around Justine's shoulders as they walked toward the car. As she had so many times before to give or take strength and comfort, Justine reached out for Brittany. But instead of her child's solid warmth she felt the chill of empty air. Brittany wasn't there. Her strength wasn't there to hold Justine's shell together, and it cracked wide open. She dropped to her knees and tears brought out all the feelings of sadness, anger, frustration, emptiness, uselessness, despair, loneliness and fear that had boiled within her since death had taken both of their lives.

Justine lay in her bed and cried for almost three days. She only cried half the time for two more. Teresa finally made her eat, drink and clean herself, then went home to her family. That night Justine sipped coffee in her back yard. The cool air refreshed her face flushed from days of weeping. A crescent moon accompanied by its companion, Venus, shone bright enough that she could see the rest of the moon's dark circle.

That's me, she thought. A slim bright sliver of light on the edge, the rest an empty shadow of what she might have been. She had faked her way through a job that months before Brittany's death had come to feel like a slightly obscene and unfulfilling way to make a lucrative living. She had no family, no real friends, save Teresa, no cause she championed. She did have looks and money, enough for most people, but she was used to having a purpose. Brittany had been taken away, raped and murdered. What else did she have to live for?

She uttered a single cry of anguish, "Oh, my girl," and sobbed, once. She wanted to cry, to sink back into grief and misery and just...vanish. She was dead, after all, part of a double homicide ten days ago. She just hadn't lain down for good yet.

But she had no more tears. She had used up her grief, as well as any other associated misery. Except anger.

When Teresa returned in the morning, she found Justine in the backyard, dressed in martial arts clothes, running through a Kung Fu sword form.

"You look like you know what you're doing," Teresa said, uncertain.

Justine wiped sweat from her face. "I had a black belt in Kung Fu when I was twenty. I thought it was time to return to it." She absently spun the sword. "You never know when weapons training will come in handy."

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Three weeks later Justine thought about that time of mourning as she waited in the Vista station of the San Diego County Sheriff's Department to see Detective Harry Frazer. She knew who she was now. Though she was dead inside, her living body was filled with purpose. She had worked with a new Sifu to regain her black belt skills and weapons proficiency. This was part of fulfilling her new purpose in life: to find and kill those responsible for her daughter's death.

Chapter Two

Homicide Detective Harry Frazer of the San Diego County Sheriff's Department stood hands in pockets and stared out the window of a borrowed office, wishing for a natural disaster of some kind. Not a big one where people got killed, maybe a minor earthquake, or a small tsunami. Anything so he didn't have to talk to the woman sitting in front of the cluttered desk.

Working a case, Harry had no problem talking to whomever he needed to. But confronting a woman whose daughter had been brutally murdered left him tongue-tied. He had a nephew about the same age as Brittany Kroft. The boy's father had died of cancer several years ago. Though he'd never had any kids, and had never wanted any, Harry had grown to love the boy like a son. What could anyone say to him if the kid had been killed like the girl? Nothing that mattered.

Madson Trees, one of three detectives on his team, usually talked to the families. He was a people person. But his wife had won ten million dollars in the Colorado lottery and he had walked out and wasn't coming back. While on vacation in Mexico Tom Volovitch, the other detective on the team, had been hit by a bus. He wasn't coming back any time soon. Other detectives were helping out, but it was still Harry's case.

Harry closed the blinds he'd been fiddling with unnecessarily. *Keep it professional.* He was usually good at that.

Still, what to say to Justine Kroft? He'd been wondering about that for ten years. She'd been the wife of a friend, but barely noticed him. When the husband died, she looked him in the eye and seemed to listen to his lame condolences. Lame, because he knew about the husband's affair and had become attracted to Justine while he himself was still, he thought, happily married.

After her daughter was killed, Justine had let him drive her home. She hadn't cried, but had let him hold her in his arms while she gathered her strength to hold back the tears for as long as she could. She did, after all, have a reputation of toughness to maintain. He felt guilty for enjoying the contact with her, but not enough to let her go before she pulled away.

He sighed and turned to her.

She regarded him with a cool, unflinching gaze from the darkest green eyes he'd ever seen, eyes not looking for sympathy or sorry-for-your-losses. Christ, he felt like a high school freshman trying

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desperately not to look stupid when the prettiest senior smiled at him. He focused on her loosely braided blonde hair that flowed from under a dark cap. Not light blonde, maybe strawberry blonde, but natural, he thought, as she didn't strike him as vain enough to spend the time to color it so perfectly. The hair was still damp, from a shower, he guessed. He remembered she had a black belt in Kung Fu. Maybe she had just come from a workout and that's why she seemed so relaxed, except for her eyes, when her reason for being there was the grim subject of murder. For sure, a hot and sweaty workout then a shower with...where was that damn earthquake when he needed it?

"Hello, Harry," she said.

"Mrs. Kroft." Damn it, what was the matter with him? "Justine, what can I do for you?" His job depended on reading people, but he had no idea what went on behind her placid façade.

"I want to know exactly what happened to my daughter."

"I don't think that's a good idea. The case is still under investigation."

"Surely by now you've developed a timeline of events, know how many men participated, their movements."

"Justine, it's not our policy to discuss a case in progress."

"Screw policy, Harry. I don't want an overview designed to protect a grieving mother's sensibilities. I have no sensibilities anymore. It's been three months since I buried Brittany, plenty of time to collect and analyze forensic data and form a timeline. They're horrible, I know, but I want the details. I need to know what really happened to my daughter. I'm not going away."

That much Harry could read. And he was sure she'd catch him if he fudged the facts. He slumped into his chair and gathered his thoughts.

"This is for your ears only. If the perpetrator gets off on a technicality because you told someone who told someone, nobody except the bad guy is going to be happy. Understand?"

"I get it, Harry. I don't want you to get in trouble."

"This is supposition, but it's based on solid forensic evidence and experience." He looked right at her. "No sensibilities protected."

She nodded. Her body tensed, lips pressed tight. She silently pressed her thumbnails together, one over the other.

"Brittany left the library at eight twenty-eight. She walked toward her truck at the far end of the lot. Around that time several people reported seeing a van in the area. The occupants, two men, maybe three, were shouting and laughing, the radio turned way up. The van passed by as she reached her truck. They stop, jump out, grab her. It's over in a few seconds."

Her frown deepened. Otherwise Harry detected no change. How did

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it change her thoughts on the crime, knowing it was a random wrong place/wrong time act? Harry became aware that he really wanted to know.

"She fought. They punched her once to subdue her. Sometime after nine oh five they entered a house being refurbished. She was raped." Harry couldn't bring himself to say how many times and ways she'd been raped.

"She fought back. We believe there was a fourth man. She ran to him, possibly thinking he would help her. He did not. Two of the other men dragged her to a wall and tied her with wire, suspended by her wrists, legs spread."

Justine had stopped clicking her thumbnails and her knuckles had whitened, otherwise she hadn't moved. Harry had spent time at the scene. He could barely continue. Maybe the woman really didn't have any feelings left.

"We found no evidence of torture, which frankly is unusual. She was cut open in one continuous motion from vagina to breast bone. That is what killed her. The cut was deep and fast. She was unconscious in seconds. Her heart was removed and drained of blood, then discarded. There was very little blood at the scene, considering the wound."

Harry watched Justine. Had he gone too far? She stared into a corner, both fists clenched tight. "Go on," she said.

He inhaled deeply. "She was found by the construction crew at six-thirty the next morning, her clothes neatly folded beside her. Except for her panties, which have not been recovered."

Perhaps Justine did not need a moment to compose herself, but Harry did. "Is that what you came for?"

The woman took a deep breath. "Yes. Thank you. Do you have any DNA samples? There must have been some."

Harry wished *no* would suffice, but knew that it wouldn't. "No, we do not have any at this time. Any semen samples were washed away when she was...cut."

She blinked once. "The van. Have you found it? Do you have any suspects?"

"We have found nine vans that fit the description. We've questioned all involved with those vans. No arrests."

He didn't like the way she studied him, as if she could read his mind. Surely he wasn't that transparent.

"So none of those men are suspects?"

He should have known she wouldn't leave it alone. He sighed. Honesty could be a real pain in the ass.

"One of them is a possibility."

"Who is he?"

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"I can't tell you that."

"Afraid I'll pay him a visit?"

"He has an alibi for that night."

She almost smiled. "Three other men who swear they were playing gin rummy together until eleven-thirty?"

Harry rose up and leaned his fists on the desk.

She stood up with him.

"Justine, we're working this case hard. When we make an arrest, you will be one of the first to be informed."

"You promise?"

"I promise. I'll call."

"I hope so."

After Justine left his office, Harry slumped in his chair and frowned. His instincts told him that the guy, Robert Westly, had some involvement in the murder. But with no probable cause, there was nothing he could do. By the book, as usual.

He thought of his sister and his nephew. Brittany was Justine's life. She was not going to let the investigation go. He wouldn't either. Harry could tell already that Justine Kroft was going to be a problem, if not professionally, then personally. Probably both.

Chapter Three

Justine found a chair in a waiting room. Face hidden in her hands, she thought she might cry. But no, dead people didn't weep. Dead people delivered justice. *My girl. My life.*

Detective Frazer, Harry, believed one of the men questioned was involved. She liked the sound of that name, Harry. A good, solid, trustworthy name. She saw something in him she could connect with, though she had no idea what it might be. Not that it mattered. Her job was vengeance, to find and execute the men responsible for her daughter's murder, not to connect with a handsome detective, or give a damn about consequences. As a child, justice had been denied her and her parents. That was not going to happen this time.



Ten year old Justine broke her arm while racing two boys on bikes. She hit a patch of wet leaves, skidded out, and tumbled up against a tree. She had some scrapes and bruises and a broken arm. No big deal. After all, she was winning at the time.

She wanted to go to school the next day, but her mom made her stay home. Justine had to admit, not out loud, of course, that the scrapes and bruises hurt a lot more the next day than she thought they would. So she only protested halfheartedly when her mom made her take some pills with lunch then go to bed.

A short scream interrupted her nap. Drowsy and confused, hearing voices downstairs, Justine slid out of bed and crept down the first few steps like she sometimes did when her parents had company. Peeking through the banister posts she saw her mother, naked, on the living room floor with a man on top of her. He had no pants on and his thin rear end rose and fell.

Justine's heart raced. She didn't understand what was happening, but was pretty sure it was bad. What to do, call out to her mom, go back to bed, run away? The man emitted several sharp grunts and stopped moving. He raised his body and that's when Justine saw the knife the man held against her mom's neck.

"I've waited a long time for that," he said. "You shouldn't have rejected me all those years, Judy. It could have been much more pleasant for both of us."

"Well now you've had me, Bill. Now get off." Mom tried to push him off.

With a hand on her forehead, he pressed her head to the floor. "It's not that easy, Judy. I don't think I can trust you not to tell somebody about our short affair."

"Do you think I'd want to admit to anybody I'd been with you?"

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"I know you, Judy. You wouldn't want to, but you would. A pity, you were the best I've had." He leaned on the knife as he drew the long blade across her neck. Judy's body shuddered for a few seconds as blood spurted, then slowly relaxed into death. She didn't even have time to scream.

Justine was smart enough to stay silent. She pressed hands to her mouth to keep from crying out. Frozen in place, barely breathing, Justine watched the man, Mr. Service from down the block, touch her mom's private places before he washed himself in the kitchen, dressed and left.

Bill Service pled Not Guilty. Justine, eleven by then, was the star witness at the trial and she did well. Too well. Service's lawyer presented refutable, but believable, proof the prosecutor had coached her on what to say. He told the jury she had been on pain pills that day. How reliable a witness could she be? Mr. Service had been in the house only two days before, invited in by Mr. Kroft, so of course there were fingerprints and hairs. They proved nothing.

Service was acquitted.

As Justine grew up she didn't think of it so often, and even less after her father's slow decline into depression and a quiet death by sleeping pill. She was too busy surviving. But she never forgot the guilt of not saving her mother, and never forgot that justice was not always served.



Justice would be served this time, Justine swore it. There had been no consequences for her mother's murderer. This time would be different. Whatever she had to do, whatever she had to give, Brittany's killers would get the justice they deserved.

If Harry thought a particular man was involved, she wanted to speak to him. The information had to be in a computer somewhere. She knew a guy who would take it as a personal challenge to find that information. If Harry's suspect was involved, he would tell Justine all he knew. She hated the idea of torture, knew nothing about it. But if the government could do it, so could, so would, she.

With a plan in mind, Justine stood up quickly, right in front of Deputy Axel. They both apologized, then recognized each other.

"Deputy Axel, I remember. You were very helpful that night. I appreciate it."

"I'm so sorry we didn't find her in time."

"You did your best." *Now it's my turn.* She laid a hand gently on his arm. "You were at the funeral with your wife and daughter. They're both beautiful."

His fingers nervously intertwined. "I had to go. I kept thinking about how I'd feel if something like that happened to my Toni. I doubt I'd be as strong as you."

"I didn't feel very strong at the time."

Axel had the appearance of a hard ass cop, but at that moment he

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looked like he was about to cry. "I'd do anything to keep her safe. Anything. There's been so many girls gone missing the last few years, you just want to lock them in their rooms. But even that doesn't always work. Several have vanished right from their bedrooms."

Justine had another idea. "I'm sure she'll be safe with you looking after her. Unfortunately, I can't look after Brittany any more. But I will do whatever's necessary to catch the people who did it. And that would make your Toni much safer."

"You should let the Sheriff's Department do it. We'll catch the sons-of-bitches."

"I have to do something. If not for Brittany, then for the safety of Toni, and other girls."

Axel nodded. "I understand. It's what I'd do."

Justine's smile dazzled. "Maybe you could help me?"



At 6:15 in the morning, Justine sat in Brittany's truck across the street from 568 Equine Lane in Vista, the next town inland from Oceanside. An older, semi-rural neighborhood, several of the large lots contained horses. Number 568 contained trucks. A late model F-150 rested in front of the detached two-car garage. A Toyota with huge off-road tires sat to one side of the ranch style house, while behind the house a pickup with no hood waited beside a van with no wheels.

According to David Axel this was where Rob Westly lived.

Westly had two men swear they had shot pool together until after eleven o'clock the night of Brittany's murder. He had refused to give permission to search the van.

Waiting, she unconsciously flipped open a new folding knife, familiarizing herself with the action. Not just any mass produced knife, she'd had it custom made by a man she'd helped develop a small industrial park, and incidentally kept out of jail. Justine was an honest, if aggressive, agent. Like all agents, referrals were her lifeblood. It had been a calculated risk—not quite illegal, though possibly unethical—to help Gabe Wheat out with a small lie and some of her own money, but it paid off in two profitable projects with him and several very lucrative referrals.

Wheat made custom knives for a hobby. Collectors paid thousands for his creations. Justine did not want a collectible, she wanted a weapon. She wanted a utilitarian tool capable of delivering an eye for an eye, an evisceration for an evisceration. Not able to find a folding knife with a blade longer than four inches that she could carry in her pocket, she went to Gabe's hillside Carlsbad house overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

"It's illegal to carry a concealed knife with more than a four inch blade," he said when she told him what she wanted.

"I don't care."

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“Ahh. I assume it would be best if the knife couldn’t be traced back to me.”

“I probably wouldn’t sign it if I were you.”

Wheat doodled a quick design. Without looking at her, he said, “I can’t imagine how you feel after what happened, and I don’t want to know what you plan to do with this knife. I do know I want you to be careful. This blade will cut both ways. Don’t let it hurt you.”

“Thanks. But nothing will hurt me again.”



At 6:35 the left side garage door rolled up and a white van backed out. Justine followed the van to an off road truck shop in San Marcos where it parked behind the yellow brick building beside rusting four-wheel drive relics.

Justine parked in the Burger King parking lot next to the shop. When Rob Westly exited the van she was sitting ten feet away, separated by a chain link fence that enclosed the back of the shop.

Westly slammed the door and walked around to the back of the van. The only things not average about Westly were his massive arms and shoulders. Otherwise, he was five ten, one seventy, with short brown hair, a small mouth and pug nose, clean shaven—just another guy.

Passing around the van, he scanned the street and the Burger King parking lot with a practiced sweep. Justine pretended to search through her purse. She felt his gaze linger on her for a moment, then move on as he entered the shop.

Ten minutes later a guy about twenty years old with a ball of curly black hair and an untucked blue-striped mechanic’s shirt came out of the side door of the shop and slipped through an opening in the fence across from Westly’s van. Five minutes later he ducked back through with two Burger King bags.

As soon as he entered the shop Justine slid through the fence. The van’s side door was unlocked. She climbed in and gently shut the door.

Sour smelling sheets and blankets covered a small mattress on a raised platform across the back. A small built-in cabinet had a tiny plastic sink in the top. A fold-up table hung on the cabinet’s side. A beat up plywood box held jacks, tire tools and jumper cables.

It only took her a few minutes to find blood spatters on the thinly carpeted floor by the sink. She scraped them into one of several small envelopes she had in her pocket, just in case. Brittany’s torn panties had dropped down between the platform and van side. Justine sat on the makeshift bed and studied them. They were common underwear, pale blue, high cut on the sides, bought in packs of three anywhere, except these had a crude flower drawn in blue marker on the right front. Justine had washed them a hundred times and the flower had faded, but

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there was no mistaking it.

Justine opened and closed her knife with one hand. She had wanted a six inch blade, but Wheat had insisted a knife that size would be too unwieldy, both open and closed. They settled on a five inch blade ground to razor sharpness the full length of one edge and the first three inches of the other. The blade swung into a no-frills aluminum handle with black serrated plastic sides molded to her grip. It was light weight and quick with a balanced feel.

She considered waiting until Westly got in the van, then slitting his throat immediately and being done with it. Three to go. But that wasn't enough. Too easy, too quick. Plus, she wanted names. And she wanted him to suffer.

A voice came from outside. "They're in the van. I'll get 'em. I'll get 'em."

In the van? Justine dropped to her hands and knees and peeked out the side window. Westly, twenty feet away. She froze for a second. She didn't care what happened to her—jail, her body killed—but she had to be free and alive to avenge her daughter's murder. Damn it, what did he want? Which door will he open? She looked out again. Where was he?

A squeal from the rear door latch galvanized her into action. The door creaked open. A blast of morning light blinded her as she rolled onto the floor against the platform, open knife gripped against her chest.

The second rear door opened. By the sound she knew he pulled open a drawer under the bed. A scrape and something heavy landed on the mattress.

"Ah shit."

The end of an open spring shock absorber rolled into sight above her head. It tilted over the edge. The van bounced. Westly's meaty hand grabbed the shock as it grazed her arm. When he yanked the shock back, part of the bunched sheet tumbled onto her face. The rank odor of unwashed sheets assailed her nose. For two minutes she lay still, not breathing. With the tip of the knife she lifted the sheet. She noticed several brown stains. Blood? Were these filthy sheets where Brittany had been beaten? Was it her blood? Or her murderers'? Harry Frazer said she fought back. Was this where it happened? Justine wanted to think so.

She carefully folded the sheet and slipped out of the van and back to her car. Back home, while continually chanting in her head *Dead women don't cry Dead women don't cry* she sealed and marked the sheet, panties and blood scrapings. Just in case. Then she went to her office. Just another day.

Chapter Four

No matter what Justine felt inside, she had to appear “normal” to the world, until she completed her task. She had no thoughts beyond that.

So she endured her co-workers’ questions about *was she ready to come back to work*, and offers of *anything I can do for you just ask*. Justine forced a smile and thanked them and said working was better than brooding at home, alone. They were good people. They meant well, but she felt nothing for them. They were extras in a movie, there to serve the heroine and then be forgotten. Her eyes blurred for a moment when she thought of what else she had lost besides her daughter.

Under her desk, she opened and closed the knife. The act reassured her. She felt Teresa studying her from the door. Teresa carried an extra ten pounds and didn’t give a damn, because at forty-five she looked thirty-five and wasn’t afraid to show it.

“What?”

“You’re not ready to come back to work,” Teresa said.

Justine shrugged. “It’s better than crying, drinking, or eating myself into oblivion every day.”

“Maybe, but your mind is not on your work. You’ve been staring at that same page for ten minutes. Talk to me, *amiga*. Tell me how you feel.”

Justine didn’t need to tell Teresa how she felt. Teresa knew. Four months earlier, her sixteen year old daughter, Antonia, had disappeared. A sweet, cute, Hispanic girl, Antonia embodied Southern California as well as any blonde haired, blue eyed surfer girl. A chance witness looking out her window saw what happened. Antonia was walking home in the evening with a slightly overweight, plain girl. A van stopped and two men jumped out. One grabbed Antonia, the second grabbed the other girl, seemed to look into her eyes, then dropped her. The girl remembered nothing. In five seconds, Teresa’s world went from happy to Hell.

Teresa and Miguel had three children: Antonia, eleven year old Carlos, and eight year old Maria. Teresa was the strong one in the family, but the abduction devastated her. Without her strength, the others coped by quickly moving on, leaving Teresa with nobody but Justine for support. In the weeks after Brittany’s death, Teresa had returned that kindness.

“Not now,” Justine said. “I need to go over some of these files. I won’t

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stay long.”

“I am worried for you, my friend.” Justine forced a smile and a nod of thanks. Teresa admonished Justine with her eyes and left her alone.

Justine continued to stare at the same page. Teresa was her best friend out of a group of friends that, she had to admit, was too small. After two unproductive hours Justine left without a word.

At her home on the eastern edge of Vista, she listened to a message on her answering machine. “Justine, we are doing something. By tomorrow we should have a search warrant. Call me tomorrow and I’ll explain. Maybe over lunch?”

The lunch invitation barely registered. If the police got hold of Westly, Justine might never get to him. It had to happen that night.



Westly left work at five-fifteen. He finished off a beer between the shop door and his van and popped open a new one before climbing in. Justine followed him down the 78 freeway into Oceanside, where he parked behind a bar close to the beach that was already rowdy with happy hour drinkers.

She waited ten minutes then entered the bar. Her dark pants, T-shirt and light jacket fit right in between the business suits and surfers with knee-length shorts and tank tops. The knife rested snugly in her right pants pocket. A small throwaway purse held some money, tissues, a comb, breath mints, and a fully loaded, .22 caliber semi-automatic pistol. Just in case.

Westly sat in a booth with a wiry, nervous guy he called Freddy who constantly stroked a scraggly beard. They had a fresh pitcher, so, with a beer of her own, Justine settled onto a bar stool on the right-hand end of the U-shaped bar where she could keep an eye on them. Half a dozen would-be escorts for the night offered her drink, smoke, two parties and a quickie in an apartment two buildings down, no names necessary. A mention of her jealous cop husband and a steely stare repelled them easily enough.

After about fifteen minutes, a scruffy guy somewhere between fifty and seventy pushed through the crowd of drinkers, most of whom were less than half his age, and ensconced himself next to her.

“Darwin,” the young female bartender greeted him as she set a mug of beer in front of him. “Don’t you be hitting on this gorgeous lady. I don’t think she’s interested.”

Darwin studied his beer for a long moment then said with what Justine thought was a slight Italian accent, “It does not matter if she is interested or not, there is only one woman for me, and she is gone.” He drank deep from his mug and gently set it down with a weary shake of

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his broad, square head.

With a quick meeting of eyes, Justine and the bartender traded sympathy for the man. "I'm Bayley," the bartender said. "You want anything, give me a shout."

After another deep draught of beer, Darwin launched into a story about evil grey monks leaking false information about WMDs so some idiot would start a war that would eventually escalate and wipe out all humans. Then the little grey wimps could take over the planet without having to do any exterminating themselves. Much of the story had to do with betrayal and loss and unjust condemnation, so that she wondered which war he was actually talking about. Justine agreed that so far, the evil monks' plan seemed to be working. She bought him another beer.

The toilets were in a corridor opposite the booth that led to a back entrance. The first time Justine followed Westly down the corridor, there were too many people he seemed to know. The second time nobody paid attention.

"Hi." Justine pressed herself against Westly, gently nudging him toward the exit. "I've been watching you," she said with drunken enthusiasm.

Westly studied her face, then lowered his gaze to her tight T-shirt, now thrust toward him. "Why's that?"

"Because I'm horny and I don't want to be."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. Want to do something about it?" She let her hand run over his ass, then along his hip to his thigh.

"Maybe. Why me?"

"Who else in this place?" She brushed her hand across his crotch. "You have a place close by?" She stuck her fingers halfway down his pants.

"I have a van in back."

"Ooo. I like camping." She tugged his pants as she backed toward the door.

Grinning, he followed along. "Just a quickie, right?"

She managed a giggle. "Well, not too quick."

Out the door she yanked him to the side and pressed him against the wall with her body. She bit his earlobe while probing his crotch with her leg. He was ready.

Nobody was around. She was ready.

Thick fog had pushed in off the water. It tumbled over the building tops in intermittent whirls and swirls. The van showed as a fuzzy edged shadow in the small parking lot across the alley.

"Where's your campground, Smokey? I have a fire to put out."

In the back of the van, Westly slid the side door closed and turned

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to Justine.

"Where's that fire?"

"Here."

Justine swung a pipe from the box by the door against his head. She laid him out on the floor and straddled him. Her hand shook as she pressed the knife to his neck.

"Who helped you murder my daughter?"

Still dazed, he shook his head, then winced and didn't move. Blood left a slow trail down his cheek. "Who are you? You're fucking crazy. Get off me." He shifted under her. The blade bit through skin to his neck tendons.

"I'm Brittany's mother."

The look in his eyes showed that he knew who she meant. "I don't know any Brittany."

"I found her underwear in here. Who helped you?"

"Get real, lady."

The power of his punch to her ribs drove her against the van's side. Each gasp for breath sent a spike of pain through her. It happened so fast she hadn't had time to cut him.

Westly sat up, then moaned and had to support himself for a few seconds. This gave Justine time to catch her breath, and worry. His punch had been much more powerful and quick than she ever imagined. Her Kung Fu training and her will failed her in the confines of the van. How could she hope to gut him like the useless animal he was?

He grabbed her left arm and yanked her to him. She slashed his arm and chest. He threw her onto her stomach and pounded on her back. She gasped in pain.

You're dead, she reminded herself. *No pain*. In one fluid movement, she jerked her knees underneath herself. "Fucker!" she growled. Rising, twisting, she smashed his face with her elbow. Stooped, but on her feet, knife still in hand, she knew she had to finish it.

She never got the chance.

Westly's foot lashed out, kicking her against the front seat. As she fell, she spun to land on her right side. The knife clattered into the door well.

Get the gun. Finish him now, or he'll finish you. Westly grabbed her before she could turn and get the purse. His hand held her arm like a vise. The other hand closed around her throat and squeezed.

Desperate, she pounded his body with her knee. He grunted with each hit, but did not loosen his grasp. She had one last chance. She seized his crotch and yanked.

"Ahhh!" His grip loosened. She twisted away, scrabbling for the door handle. The door slid open. Justine snatched the knife as she slid

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head first out the door onto the damp asphalt.

Westly swore as he lurched out of the van, swinging a pipe. The pipe caught Justine's leg just above the ankle.

She stumbled. Pain brought tears, yet she hobbled quickly down the dim alley leading deeper into the block.

Westly had to take a moment to clear his head, then, carrying a two foot length of pipe, he ran after her.

Single story commercial buildings lined the alley on both sides. There were occasional indentations for access and parking for the businesses, but no passage through to a street. That was good. On the open street the police were sure to get involved. The way the legal system worked, Westly could walk and she'd be in jail.

He gained on her fast.

A glance into a narrow opening showed her dumpsters along the back and a pile of scrap two-by-fours close to the corner. She turned into the opening, and flattened against the brick wall, knife gripped tight, ready to strike.

Westly ran around the corner. She swung the blade for his body. His swift reaction with the pipe just managed to deflect the blow. Back to the wall, he whipped the pipe down and smacked the knife out of her hand, sending a jolt of pain up her arm.

Justine ignored the pain—she had to. In one movement, she grabbed a broken two-by-four, whirled around and slammed the wood against his back. He stumbled. She hit him again. He went down. She drew back for a solid strike to his head.

Once again, he proved too quick and too tough for her. The pipe caught the back of her legs and swept her feet out from under her. She landed on her ass with a jolt that took her breath away. The knife spun out of her hand.

"You're done." He swung the pipe over his head like an executioner lines up his axe.

But Justine wasn't quite done. Holding the two-by-four by the ends, she blocked his blow, and the next and the next as she pushed backward with her feet. The third blow cracked the wood. It wouldn't take another. She stopped moving backward. Westly stepped up. She brought her leg back then jammed her foot against his knee. Not a crippling injury, but it slowed him down enough for her to crawl away and regain her feet.

Limping, but implacable, he came after her. She tried to dart past him and escape to the center alley. The wild arc of the pipe kept her trapped.

The two-by-four splintered in half, leaving a long sharp point at one end. She could barely hold it with two hands to parry the swinging

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pipe.

"Come on, Mom. Don't give up now. Your slut daughter put up more of a fight than you."

"You're a diseased creature, Westly. Do you know how sick you and your friends are? How could you rape a child like that?"

"She weren't no child with her clothes off, Mom."

"You sick fuck."

Justine ducked under a strike and jabbed the long splinter of wood into his side. Westly cried out and jerked away.

"Why did you cut her like that? Wasn't beating her and raping her enough?"

Westly froze. The hard glint in his eyes vanished for a few seconds. In the shadow light of the alley, he looked like a wax museum criminal. Justine saw him shudder as a normal person who remembers something horrible would.

She jumped sideways to run around him. He was wounded, weakened, and not as steady on his feet. If she could get the knife, she'd have a chance. She failed to consider her own condition. Westly body-checked her.

She slammed against a dumpster. Pain took her breath and her legs away. There was not supposed to be any pain. Dead people feel nothing. Dead people are entitled to their vengeance. Scratching at the lid, she slipped toward the ground.

Westly caught her and dragged her up by the T-shirt. How could he still be so strong? Pipe in both hands, he stuck it under her chin and forced her head back. He leaned over, put his face close up to hers face.

"That was Sinakov who done that. Not us. Not that it matters to you anymore."

The pipe pressed down.

Justine attempted to lift the pipe, poke his eyes, hit him, knee him in the balls. Nothing worked. He was too strong, too quick. No air entered her lungs. She didn't even have enough to spit in his face. *I'm sorry, Baby.* Justine closed her eyes so the last image she saw would not be Westly's bloodlust grimace.

Then the pressure let up and she could breathe.

Chapter Five

Justine slid to the ground. Each gasp of cool, sea air soothed her dry throat. *I'm hallucinating*, she thought as she focused on the scene ten feet away.

A woman stood over Westly. She was ten feet tall from Justine's viewpoint, with black leather pants and a short-waisted leather jacket topped by wild dark hair. Westly, on hands and knees, was picking up the pipe. He lunged at the woman. Too quick for Justine's freaked out mind to comprehend, the woman snatched the pipe from Westly and smacked his head. Stunned, he offered no resistance when she lifted him up and dropped him on top of a dumpster.

Near death experience forgotten, Justine marveled at the woman's strength and speed, where she herself had been so inadequate. What happened next convinced her she was experiencing a dark dream before she woke up in Hell.

The woman held Westly's right arm, wrist up, and raised it to her mouth. She bit down hard. Westly uttered a brief cry. He thrashed about for fifteen seconds, helpless against the woman's steady grip. Blood ran across his palm. He lay quiet then. Justine heard a faint sucking sound as the woman's jaws worked at his wrist.

At last the woman released him. Head tilted back to face the sky, she let out a long satisfied, "Ahhhhh." Then she turned to Justine.

The thought *Vampire!* ran through her head, but didn't really connect. There were no such things, and didn't they always bite the neck? Suddenly a hundred questions vied to be asked first.

The strange woman had questions of her own. She had a slight French accent, easily understandable.

"I do hope I saved the correct person. You were trying to kill him, *ne c'est pas?*"

"He abducted, raped and killed my daughter."

"You are sure of this?"

"I am."

"Ahh."

The woman bit Westly's arm again. Finished, she licked blood from her generous lips. "Interesting. The blood of the evil tastes the same as the blood of the good."

"Who are you?"

"*On m'appelle Simone. And you?*"

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Justine struggled to stand up. Somehow, Simone appeared beside her, raising her up with no visible effort.

"How did you beat him?" Justine asked. "He's so strong."

Simone leaned close. "I am stronger."

Justine studied the strange woman's arms. They were only arms.

Simone noticed her look and said, "I am also quicker. I hear better, I see better." Her tongue licked blood from her lower lip. "I taste better." She rested a hand on Justine's heaving chest. "I am better in every way."

Justine attempted to step away. The hand, strong as steel, gently gripped her neck. "What is your name?"

Justine hesitated. With one finger, Simone turned Justine's face to her. "Do not be afraid of me. I am not of the *Gendarme*. And I am sated. I mean you no harm." She leaned close until their cheeks kissed. "Just the opposite, if you so wish?" Simone's hand slid down until the back of her hand caressed the top of Justine's breast.

Justine did not know what she wished. The nearness of a woman so powerful intoxicated her. Her scent washed away Justine's pains. Her touch...it had been so long since anyone touched her like that. What did it matter whether it was a man or woman? Years ago, by chance, she spent an intimate hour with a woman. It had not been unpleasant.

She let her head rest on Simone's shoulder. How could she ever avenge Brittany's death? Westly almost killed her. Somebody else had to rescue her. What made her think she could pull it off? She should tell Detective Frazer what she knew and move on.

Simone's lips brushed her cheek, whispered a kiss on the corner of her mouth. It would be so nice to surrender and let someone else take charge of her. The hand slid over her breast to her side. She sucked in a slow, deep breath. A sharp pain from her ribs cut through her like an electric jolt. She jerked back.

"No," she said, more to herself than Simone. "I can't. Not now. I can't...I won't let Brittany down."

"Ah, *ma cherie*, a disappointment."

Justine backed away. "Who are you? What are you?"

Amused, Simone said, "You do not really want to know, I'm sure."

Westly rolled off the dumpster. He slumped against the base.

"Is he still alive?"

Simone knelt next to Westly. She sniffed. "There is some life in him yet."

Justine stalked to him. She drew the knife from her pocket and flicked it open. Without hesitation, she leaned down, jammed the blade into his crotch, and in one smooth motion sliced him open from belly to breastbone.

Westly gasped, then settled as his entrails spilled out. He may have

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already been dead. Justine didn't care. She'd done what she set out to do.

I'm dead, she told herself. *Despicable man that he was, killing him means nothing to me. It was my job.* She wrinkled her nose at the stink of fresh blood and shit and stepped back. Her stomach wanted to vomit everything she had ever eaten. But she would not show her weakness to this woman.

"I'm Justine Kroft," she said to Simone. "Thank you for saving my life."

"Justine. A seeker of justice. Appropriate. I knew who you were when you cut him open. I am glad I saved the right one. I too have lost someone close to me."

Justine nodded acknowledgment. Now that her first goal had been achieved, the rage she'd been living off of for weeks cooled. Each breath sent a jolt of pain into her body. Her legs throbbed and stiffened with each step. Her head was going to explode. She had no strength to delve into this Simone and the impossibility of what she might be.

She turned to walk out of the alley, a slow, painful process. Simone put an arm around her waist and took most of the weight off her feet.

"I sympathize with your desire for revenge, Justine. And I understand your desire to gut them like a fish. But it was not a smart thing to do. The others will now know somebody is after them. They will be waiting for you. Perhaps, looking for you."

"I'll be ready."

Simone laughed. "Not if they are like *Monsieur Westly*."

"I have a gun. Shit! In his van."

By the time they reached the van, Simone held all Justine's weight. Justine crawled in, retrieved her purse, and wiped any surfaces she might have touched. The few people smoking by the bar's back door showed them no interest.

At the end of the alley Justine stood on unsteady legs. Simone stood a few feet away. "You can't possibly be what you seem to be," Justine said.

Despite the dim, diffuse light from a fog enshrouded streetlight, Justine saw a darkness pass over Simone's face.

"Three hundred and fifty-two years ago, in circumstances much less pleasant than this, I thought the same thing."

"The power you have—I believe I may need it to do what I have to do."

Simone reached out and cupped Justine's cheek. She drew her near. "A cliché, I know, but be careful what you wish for, *cherie*. Many before you have had much time to regret their choices."

The first scream sounded from down the alley.

Justine did not shy away from a gentle kiss. She savored the coppery

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taste of blood on her lips. For a moment, she again considered allowing herself to submit to control from outside of herself.

“Go home, Justine. Heal yourself.”

The second scream turned her head to the alley. When she turned back, she was alone.

Chapter Six

Harry Frazer settled on a stool at the end of the Sundowner's U-shaped bar. Bayley, the tanned, freckled, sun-bleached blonde bartender, set a beer down without his having to ask. She flashed a warm toothpaste ad smile.

"Hey, Harry. On or off?"

"As off as I can get."

She rested her arms on the bar and looked into his close set brown eyes. "If she's got any sense at all, she'll come around."

Harry opened his mouth to say one thing then said another. "You're the expert on women. Certainly not me. How is Susan these days?"

"Still surfing the monster wave of my heart. Have I thanked you this week?"

"Not for at least two."

Bayley lightly touched his hand. "Thanks, Harry."

She moved on along the bar, pouring drinks as if her wrist hadn't been smashed with a hammer three years ago. She had lived with her husband in the condo next to the one Harry and his wife owned on the beach, two blocks from the Sundowner. Charming in public, a raging, obsessive, green monster in private, Bayley's husband had her completely terrorized and under control. Harry recognized the signs. He offered Bayley help. Eventually he had to give the husband the word according to the Law. When that didn't work and the Green Monster went after her with a hammer, Harry gave him two bullets. There were some questions, but no charges filed. Only Harry and Bayley knew what really happened, and they weren't telling.

Harry had lived alone in the condo for almost two years—his payment for putting his wife through school so she could get a job making three times his income. She had put in the requisite time and effort until a headhunter recruited her for a job in New York at an obscene multiple of any salary Harry could ever imagine making. Because of their job schedules, the only reason he knew she was gone was that he found himself living in the small condo on the beach instead of a four bedroom starter mansion in a gated community. He liked the condo better.

Bayley came back with a second beer.

"Darwin been in?" He shouted to be heard over the band in the next room and the rising cacophony of voices and laughter.

"He was in earlier, talking with some babe. She left, then he left. Too

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rowdy for him on a Friday night.”

Harry considered Justine a babe, with her blonde hair a sensible length, green eyes, and nose almost too small for her wide, strong chinned face. He wanted to see her again and had been disappointed she hadn't returned his calls. He knew that nursing a few beers at the end of the Sundowner bar while thinking of her, and observing the peculiar variety of local beach area personalities, was better than brooding at home which inevitably led to a killer hangover. Christ, he was pathetic. What was he, still in high school?

To everybody in the Sundowner, except Bayley, he was just another anonymous lonely, middle-aged guy pensive over a beer and checking out the surfer chicks. Yet, with eighteen years in the Sheriff's Department, Harry could never completely turn off his cop instincts.

The first indistinct scream floated in through the back corridor. It barely registered. There could be any number of reasons for screams on a Friday night, good or bad.

Five seconds later, at the second scream, he cocked his head and listened for related sounds. Ten seconds later hurried footsteps down the sandy corridor brought him to full attention.

A young couple burst through the door right beside him. The woman held one hand to her mouth and clutched the man's arm with the other. They rushed to the bar.

“Hey,” the man yelled at Bayley. “Call nine one one.”

Bayley sized them up for two seconds. “What's happened?”

“There's a dead body up the alley.”

“It was horrible,” the young woman said.

Bayley glanced at Harry, who nodded. He flashed his badge. “Show me.”

It was horrible. The body slumped on the ground against the dumpster at the alley's end. Blood from two gashes in the wrist covered the right hand. Viscera spilled out of the abdomen, which was slashed open from belly to breastbone. The stench of intestine leakage gagged him. Sirens approached as, hand over mouth and nose, he knelt down to check the pulse as a formality. Dim light prevented a good look at the man's face, which seemed familiar.

By the time he turned the crime scene over to an Oceanside detective team Harry had had a good chance to examine the body. That survey gave him plenty to think about on the long walk back to the Sundowner and a cold beer. He didn't have to wonder who killed Westly, and why. He knew that. What he didn't know was what he was going to do about it.

Chapter Seven

You did not fall down any stairs," Teresa told Justine. "You were beat up. Did they rape you, too?"

"No one raped me. I fell down—"

Teresa jerked the bandages around her patient a bit tighter than necessary.

"Ow, not so tight."

Justine sat in a maple kitchen chair which matched the table and cabinets. The three-year-old kitchen had seen barely six months of use. She and Brittany had been so busy the last few years they'd had little time together. But when they did spend more than a few minutes sharing their lives, they were usually in the kitchen. They'd cook and eat and talk. Always Italian food—Brittany had a sixth sense about cooking perfect pasta, though there was no Italian blood in the family. Brittany said Italian was, "slurpy, sloppy, talking food." Justine couldn't imagine ever eating Italian food again.

Teresa stood behind Justine and massaged her taut shoulders. "Don't tell your nurse how to treat you."

"You haven't been a nurse for eight years. You've forgotten everything."

"Good thing I have you to practice on."

She continued the massage in silence, then pressed her lips to her patient's hair. "Justine, I'm your closest friend of...one?"

"I have friends," Justine said with little conviction.

"You have business associates and people somehow related to raising Brittany. Since your husband died, I'm the only one who will put up with your slightly obsessive parenting. You can tell me anything. No doubt, you've had a bitch of it the last few weeks. You know that I know exactly what you've been going through. I don't know what really happened to you, maybe I don't want to know, but you have to share, or it'll eat you alive. I know how to keep a secret."

Teresa's hands moved underneath the cool, damp towel around Justine's neck. Justine relaxed for the first time since Brittany failed to return home. If she told anybody anything it would be Teresa. She had no doubt Teresa was serious about keeping a secret. But friendship can only go so far. How much to tell? All? Part? Which part?

What would she do if Teresa could not keep a secret?

A rolling wave of sadness forced a sob from her when she understood

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with firm conviction that she would do anything, sacrifice anything, or anybody, to achieve revenge. What other purpose did she have now?

Teresa pulled a chair up and took her hands. "What?"

On the other hand, Teresa wouldn't believe her. "What I tell you might get you in trouble, serious trouble, if they find out you knew and didn't report it."

"They who?"

"Police."

"I can lie with the best of them."

"You might not want to be my friend anymore."

Teresa studied her. "It's that bad?"

Justine kept her expression blank as she looked Teresa in the eye and raised her shoulders a fraction.

"So, tell me," Teresa said.

The doorbell rang.

"Miguel?" Justine asked.

"He's with the kids. Besides, he'd call first. Trouble?"

"Maybe."

Justine struggled to stand up. Thanks to a Tylenol/Ibuprofen mix, the pain was bearable. A couple of Vicodin when she went to bed would take care of the rest. Teresa pushed her back down.

"I'll get it."

Teresa pulled a long knife out of a drawer as she headed for the front door. It was Brittany's favorite knife. Justine's eyes followed it out of the room. Though the front door was out of Justine's sight, it was close enough that she could hear Teresa at a side window, checking out the late night visitor.

"A man, forty something, dark hair, needs a haircut. A hottie, though. Alas, no flowers. Looks sort of official."

The doorbell rang again.

"Go ahead and answer it," Justine said. She sucked in as deep a breath as she could stand, and waited.