Was Hollywood's most famous couple kidnapped? Or murdered?

Free Preview

L.A.

Mark Sullivan
For Betty Jane
—M. S.

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PROLOGUE

NO PRISONERS
IT WAS NEARING midnight that late-October evening on a dark stretch of beach in Malibu. Five men, lifelong surfers, lost souls, sat around a fire blazing in a portable steel pit set into the sand.

The multimillion-dollar homes up on the fragile cliffs showed no lights save security bulbs. Waves crashed in the blackness beyond the firelight. The wind was picking up, temperature dropping. A storm built offshore.

Facing the fire, four of them with their backs to surfboards stuck in the sand, the men sipped Coronas, passed and sucked on a spliff of Humboldt County’s finest.

“Bomber weed, N.P.,” choked Wilson, who’d done two tours in Iraq and had come home at twenty-six incapable of love and responsibility, good only for getting high, riding big waves, and thinking profound thoughts. “With that hit I most assuredly have achieved total clarity of mind. I can see it all, dog. The whole cosmic thing.”
Sitting in the sand across the fire from Wilson, hands stuffed in the pouch pocket of his red L.A. Lakers hoodie, N.P. wore reflector sunglasses despite the late hour. He smiled at Wilson from behind his glasses and scruffy beard, his nostrils flaring, his longish, straw-blond hair fluttering in the wind.

“I second that emotion, Wilson,” N.P. said, and flicked the underside of his cap so it made a snapping sound. His voice was hoarse and hinted at a southern accent.

“Wish I coulda scored weed that righteous in the go-go days before the crash,” said Sandy dreamily as he passed along the joint. “I would have seen all, slayed the markets, and lived a life of wine, women, song, and that beautiful herb you so graciously brought into our lives, N.P.”

Sandy had lost it all in the Great Recession: Brentwood house, trophy wife, big job running money. These days he tended day bar at the Malibu Beach Inn.

“Those days are frickin’ long gone,” said Grinder, barrel-chested, dark tan, dreads. “Like ancient history, bro. No amount of pissin’ and moanin’ ‘bout it gonna bring back your stack of Benny Franklins, or my board shop.”

Hunter, the fourth surfer, was stubble haired and swarthy. He scowled, hit the spliff, said, “Ass-backward wrong as usual, Grinder. You wanna bring back that stack a Benjamin’s, Sandy?”

Sandy stared into the fire. “Who doesn’t?”

Hunter nodded toward N.P. before handing him the roach. “Like Wilson was saying, N.P., this weed brings perfect vision.”

N.P. smiled again, took the roach and ate it, said, “What do you see?”

Hunter said, “Okay, so like we rise up and storm Congress, take ‘em all hostage, and hole up in there, you know, the House chamber. We do it the night of the State of the Union Address so they’re all in there to begin with, president, generals, frickin’
Supreme Court too. Then we make the whole sorry bunch of ’em hit this weed hard enough and long enough they start talk- ing to each other. Getting stuff done. Tending to business ’stead of bitchin’ and cryin’ and blamin’ about who spent the biggest stack and for what.”

“Speaker of the House hitting it?” Wilson said, laughed.

Grinder chuckled, “Yeah, on the bong with that sourpuss senator’s always trying to shove his morals up your ass. That man would be in touch with his inner freak straight up then.”

“Not a bad idea,” Sandy said, brightening a bit. “A stoned Congress just might get the country going again.”

“See there, total clarity,” Wilson said, pointing at N.P. before getting a puzzled expression on his face. “Hey, dog, where you come from, anyway?”

N.P. had showed up about an hour ago, said he’d take a beer or two if they wanted to partake of the best in the state, Cannabis Cup winner for sure.

Smiling now, N.P. turned his sunglasses at Wilson, said, “I walked down here from the Malibu Shores Sober Living facil-
ity.”

They all looked at him a long moment and then started to laugh so hard they cried. “Frickin’ sober living!” Wilson chort- tled. “Oh, dog, you got your priorities straight.”

Joining in their laughter, N.P. glanced around beyond and behind the fire, saw that the beach remained deserted, and still no lights in the houses above. He took his chance.

He got to his feet. His new friends were still howling.
Nice guys. Harmless, actually.
But N.P. felt not a lick of pity for them.
Two


“No Prisoners,” N.P. said, hands back in the hoodie’s pouch again.

“No Prisoners?” Grinder snorted. “That some kind of M.C. rap star tag? You famous or what behind them glasses?”

N.P. smiled again. “It’s my war name. Sorry, dogs and bros, but a few people have to take it the hard way for people to start listening to us.”

He drew two suppressed Glock 9mms from the pouch of his hoodie.

Wilson saw them first. Soldier instinct took over. The Iraq vet rolled, scrambled, tried to get out of Dodge.

N.P. had figured Wilson would be the one. So he shot him first, at ten yards, a double whack to the base of the head where it met the spine. The vet buckled to the sand, quivered in his own blood.
“What the...?” Sandy screamed before the next round caught him in the throat, flattening him.

“Frick, bro,” Grinder moaned as N.P. turned the guns on him. The surfer’s hands turned to prayer. “Don’t blaze me, bro.”

The killer’s expression revealed nothing as he pulled the trigger of each gun once, punching holes in Grinder’s chest.

“You mother-loving son of a...!”

Hunter lunged to tackle him. N.P. stepped off the line of his attack, shot him in the left temple from less than eight inches away. Hunter crashed into the fire, began to burn.

The killer glanced up at the closest homes. Still dark. He pocketed the guns. The wind blew northwest, hard off the Pacific, swirled the beach sand, stung his cheeks as he dragged the other three corpses to the fire and threw them in, facedown. The smell was like when you singe hair, only much, much worse. But that would do it, a nice touch, increase the panic.

N.P. got a plastic sandwich bag from his pocket. He crouched, opened it, and shook out what looked like a business card. It landed facedown in the sand. He kicked it under Sandy’s leg, picked up six empty 9mm shells, and pocketed them. His beer bottle he took to the ocean, wiped it down, and hurled it out into the water.

Satisfied, he snapped the underside of his Lakers cap, waded into the surf up to his knees. He walked parallel to the beach, toward Pacific Coast Highway, head down into the wind, the salt spray, and the gathering storm.
PART ONE

A VANISHING ACT
SHORTLY AFTER MIDNIGHT, as the first real storm of the season intensified outside, the lovely Guin Scott-Evans and I were sitting on the couch at my place, watching a gas fire, drinking a first-class bottle of Cabernet, and good-naturedly bantering over our nominees for sexiest movie scene ever.

For the record, Guin brought the subject up.


“Of all the movies ever made?” I asked.

“Certainly,” she said, all seriousness. “Hands down.”

“Care to defend your nomination?”

She crossed her arms, nodded, smiled. “With great pleasure, Mr. Morgan.”

I liked Guin. The last time I’d seen her, back in January, the actress had been in trouble, and I had served as her escort and guard at the Golden Globes the night she won Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role. Despite the danger
she was in, or perhaps because of it, a nice chemistry had developed between us. But at the time, relationships were not clear-cut in her life or mine, and nothing beyond mutual admiration had developed.

Earlier that evening, however, I had run into her leaving Patina, a first-class restaurant inside the Walt Disney Concert Hall complex, where she’d been attending a birthday party for her agent. We had a glass of wine at the bar and laughed as if the Golden Globes had been just last week, not ten months before.

She was leaving the next day, going on location in London, with much too much to do. But somehow we ended up back at my place, with a new bottle of wine open, and debating the sexiest movie scene ever.

“The Postman Always Rings Twice?” I said skeptically.

“I’m serious, it’s amazing, Jack,” Guin insisted. “It’s that scene where they’re in the kitchen alone, Jessica Lange and Jack Nicholson, the old Greek’s young wife and the drifter. At first you think Nicholson’s forcing himself on her. They wrestle. He throws her up on the butcher block covered with flour and all her baking things. And she’s saying, ‘No! No!’

“But then Nicholson comes to his senses, figures he misread her, backs off. And Lange’s lying there panting, flour on her flushed cheeks. There’s this moment when your understanding of the situation seems certain.

“Then Lange says, ‘Wait. Just wait a second,’ before she pushes the baking stuff off the butcher block, giving herself enough room to give in to all her pent-up desires.”

“Oh, no?” I allowed, remembering it. “That was sexy, really sexy, but I don’t know if it’s the best of all time.”

“Oh, no?” Guin replied. “Beat it. Be honest, now. Give me a window into your soul, Jack Morgan.”
I gave a mock shiver. “What? Trying to expose me already?”

“In due time,” she said, grinned, poured herself another glass. “Go ahead. Spill it. Name that scene.”

“I don’t think I can pick just one,” I replied honestly.

“Name several, then.”

“How about Body Heat, the entire movie? I saw it over in Afghanistan. As I remember it, William Hurt and Kathleen Turner are, well, scorching, but maybe that was because I’d been in the desert far too long by that point.”

Guin laughed, deep, unabashed. “You’re right. They were scorching, and humid too. Remember how their skin was always damp and shiny?”

Nodding, I poured the rest of the wine into my glass, said, “The English Patient would be up there too. That scene where Ralph Fiennes and Kristin Scott Thomas are in that room in the heat with the slats of light, and they’re bathing together?”

She raised her glass. “Certainly a contender. How about Shampoo?”

I shot her a look of arch amusement, said, “Warren Beatty in his prime.”

“So was Julie Christie.”

There was a moment between us. Then my cell phone rang.

Guin shook her head. I glanced at the ID: Sherman Wilkerson.

“Damn,” I said. “Big client. Big, big client. I…I’ve got to take this, Guin.”

She protested, “But I was just going to nominate the masquerade ball in Eyes Wide Shut.”

Shooting Guin an expression of genuine shared sympathy and remorse, I clicked ANSWER, turned from her, said, “Sherman. How are you?”
“Not very damned well, Jack,” Wilkerson shot back. “There are sheriff’s deputies crawling the beach in front of my house, and at least four dead bodies that I can see.”

I looked at Guin, flashed ruefully on what might have been, said, “I’m on my way right now, Sherman. Ten minutes tops.”
Chapter 2

SPEEDING NORTH INTO Malibu on the Pacific Coast Highway, driving the VW Touareg I use when the weather turns sloppy, I could still smell Guin, still hear her words to me before the cab took her away: “No more dress rehearsals, Jack.”

Pulling up to Sherman Wilkerson’s gate, I felt like the village idiot for leaving Guin, wanted to spin around and head for her place in Westwood.

Wilkerson, however, had recently hired my firm, Private Investigations, to help reorganize security at Wilkerson Data Systems offices around the world. I parked in an empty spot in front of the screen of bougainvillea that covered the wall above the dream home Wilkerson had bought the year before for his wife, Elaine. Tragically, she’d died in a car wreck a month after they moved in.

Head ducked in the driving rain, I rang the bell at the gate, heard it buzz, went down steep wet stairs onto a terrace that overlooked the turbulent beach. Waves thundered against the
squalling wind that buffeted various L.A. Sheriff’s vehicles converged on a crime scene lit by spotlights.

“They’re in the fire, four dead men, Jack,” said Wilkerson, who’d come out a sliding glass door in a raincoat, hood up. “You can’t see them now because of the tarps, but they’re there. I saw them through my binoculars when the first cop showed up with a flashlight.”

“Anyone come talk to you?”

“They will,” he said, close enough that I could see his bushy gray brows beneath the hood. “Crime scene abuts my property.”

“But you have nothing to worry about, right?”

“You mean did I kill them?”

“Crime scene abuts your property.”

“I was at work with several people on my management team until after midnight, got here around one, looked down on the beach, saw the flashlight, used the binoculars, called you,” Wilkerson said.

“I’ll take a look,” I said.

“Unless it’s dire, tell me about it all in the morning, would you? I’m exhausted.”

“Absolutely, Sherman,” I said, shook his hand. “And one of my people is coming in behind me, in case you have the driveway alert on.”

He nodded. I headed to the staircase to the beach, watched Wilkerson go into his house and turn on a light, saw moving boxes piled everywhere.

Either poor Sherman was leaving soon, or he’d never really arrived.
Chapter 3

MY CELL RANG when I was just shy of the yellow tape.

It was Carl Mentone. Also known as the Kid, a twenty-something hipster, tech geek, and surveillance specialist I hired last year in one of my smarter moves.

“You here already?” I asked.

“Up on Wilkerson’s terrace,” the Kid replied. “Eagle’s perspective.”

“Shoot what you can in this slop. Record what I’m transmitting.”

“Smooth on both counts, Jacky-boy. I’ve got a lens hood, no need for infrared with the lights, and I’m already getting a feed from your camera to the hard drive.”

“Don’t call me Jacky-boy,” I said, clicked the phone, saw a sheriff’s deputy coming to the tape, and shifted the pen clipped to my breast pocket. The Kid and I now saw the same things.

“We’re asking people to stay away,” the deputy said.
I showed him my badge. “Jack Morgan. Who’s commanding?”

The deputy got lippy. “You may have clout over at LAPD, but…”

I spotted an old friend moving out from under the tarps, called, “Harry?”

Captain Harry Thomas ran the sheriff’s homicide unit. I’d known him since I was a young teenager. Sixty-two now, the homicide commander had been a friend of my father’s, back before my dear old dad crossed the line, bilked clients, and ended up dying in prison. There was a time, when the old man was going downhill, and before I joined the marines, when Harry Thomas was one of the few people who seemed to care what happened to me.

Harry’s craggy face broke into a grin when he saw me. “Jack? What the hell brings Private out here in the middle of a storm?”

Ducking the rope past the miffed deputy, I said, “Four dead bodies burning in a fire, and my client owns the house right above us.”

“Public beach,” Harry said, glanced at Wilkerson’s home. “Thin reason to be inside my crime scene, unless your client wants to confess?”

“He’s clean. But now that I’ve had to leave my incredibly lovely date in the lurch and I’m all the way here, I’m curious. Can I take a look?”

Harry hesitated, said, “No funny business, Jack.”

“Me?”

“Uh-huh,” the homicide captain said, not buying it. “Boots and gloves.”

A few moments later, wearing protective blue paper booties and latex gloves, I ducked under the tarp system that had been erected over the crime scene. The space stank of burned flesh.
The victims, four men in après-surf wear, lay facedown in the wet ashes of a fire pit. Forensics techs were documenting the scene. I got out a tissue and pretended to blow my nose before passing it over the camera pen on my lapel to remove any raindrops.

Harry said, “Dog walker found them. Crazy to be out in this storm. Lucky for us, though. We managed to protect it within an hour of when we think the shootings went down. Illegal to have a fire here with or without a portable pit. It was like they were begging for trouble. People are very touchy around here about the rules.”

“C’mon, Harry,” I said. “You think someone double-tapped each of these guys over fire pit rules? This looks professional. A planned hit.”

“Yeah,” he admitted, distaste on his lips. “Looks that way to me too.”

“IDs?”

“All locals. All die-hard surfers. One’s a former investment guy, tends bar now down the highway. Another’s a young vet who came back from Iraq with some issues. The other two: still waiting. They weren’t carrying wallets like the first two.”

“Armed robbery gone bad?”

“If one of them was carrying something valuable enough, I suppose.”

“Or they all shared something in common, a secret, maybe, and this was revenge,” I replied, squatting to look at the sand around the corpses’ feet. “Rain and wind must have hammered this place. No tracks, no drag marks.”

“That’s all she wrote until the lab work tells me more,” the homicide captain said. “But about that, Jack: I won’t be keeping you in the loop.”

In an easy manner, Harry was telling me that, old friend or
not, my time was up. I was about to rise from my crouch when I noticed a mustard-yellow card sticking out from beneath the dead bartender’s leg.

Before anyone could tell me not to, I scuttled forward and snatched it up.

“Hey, what the hell are you doing?” Harry demanded.

Back of the card was empty. I flipped it to face my camera pen, paused, handed it to a scowling Harry Thomas, and saw what was written in eighteen-point letters:

**NO PRISONERS**
THE KILLER WHO called himself No Prisoners drove an Enterprise rent-a-car toward a set of automatic doors in the City of Commerce in southeast Los Angeles. He pressed an app on his iPhone and the doors began to rise, revealing a large, high-ceilinged, cement-floored work space that had once housed a diesel truck repair shop, with three additional roll-up doors at the far end.

He took the place in at a glance: two white delivery vans, six cots, a makeshift kitchen, four metal folding tables pushed together to create one large surface covered with computer equipment, and several tool and die machines, including a lathe, a grinder, and a welding torch with two tanks of acetylene.

Five ruggedly built men turned from their work to watch him pull in out of the rain, park, get out, and draw the two Glock's from the pouch of his Lakers hoodie. None of the men looked remotely concerned. Not even a blink.
The killer expected no less of them.

“How’d it go, Mr. Cobb?” called one of the men, late twenties, with a gymnast’s muscles and the attitude of an alley dog that has fought for every scrap life has grudgingly yielded to him.

“Outstanding, as expected, Mr. Nickerson,” the killer replied before setting the guns in front of a bald, lean Latino man who sported tattoos of the Grim Reaper on both bulging biceps. They were new tattoos, livid. “Break these down, Mr. Hernandez.”

“Straightaway,” Hernandez said, accepting the pistols. He laid them on a heavy-duty folding table set up as a gunsmith’s bench. A sniper’s rifle sat in a vise awaiting adjustment.

A slighter man, early thirties, with a bleached goat’s beard, got up from behind a row of iPads, all cabled to a large server beneath the tables. “Did the rain screw up the feed?”

Cobb removed the sunglasses. “You tell me, Mr. Watson.”

Watson took the sunglasses from Cobb, cracked open a hidden compartment in the frame, removed a tiny SIM card. While he fitted the card into a reader attached to one of the iPads, Cobb tugged off the baggy sweatshirt, revealing a ripped, muscular physique beneath a black Under Armour shirt. He reached beneath the collar of the shirt. An edge came up. He pulled.

The beard, the latex, the blond wig, the entire No Prisoners disguise came off, revealing a man in his late thirties, with a gaunt, weathered face that time and misfortune had chiseled into something remarkable. Scars ran like strands in a spider’s web out from the round of his left jawline toward a cauliflower ear barely hidden by iron-gray hair.

It was the kind of face people never forgot.

Cobb knew that about himself, and he’d suffered for it in the past. He wasn’t going to make that mistake twice. He laid
out the pieces of the disguise on a third folding table before looking to a wiry African-American man holding another iPad connected to a set of earphones hung around his neck.

“Where are we, Mr. Johnson?” Cobb asked.

Johnson stabbed a finger at the iPad. “From the traffic we’ve been monitoring, L.A. sheriff’s got their big guns on the beach.”

“Better than we hoped for,” Cobb remarked before glancing to the fifth man, the largest of them all, curly red hair, ice-blue eyes, and a rust-colored, out-of-control beard that made him look like some crazed Viking. “Mr. Kelleher?”

Kelleher nodded. “Associated Press brief ran fifteen minutes ago, four dead males on Malibu Beach shot gangland style and set afire.” He looked up. Puzzled. “That wasn’t the plan, Mr. Cobb.”

Cobb regarded him evenly. “ Burning them amplifies things, moves events along quicker, Mr. Kelleher. Other coverage?”

Kelleher took that in stride, said, “All-news radio picked up the AP story.”

“Outstanding,” Cobb said. “Start the social media component.”

The big man nodded and went to sit next to Watson, who stroked his goat’s beard and looked at Cobb, smiling. “You caught just about everything. I edited it down to the pertinent sequence. Got sporty there, didn’t it?”

Watson was by far the smartest man in the room, a genius as far as Cobb was concerned. He’d never known anyone like Watson: a man who could handle tasks of extreme physical endurance while digesting vast amounts of data and information at a baffling rate. When Watson worked with computers, it was like he was attached to them, his own brain melding with the processors, able to analyze, compute, and code with the same mind-boggling speed.
“Let me see,” Cobb said, moved behind Watson. So did the other men.

Watson gave his iPad a command and the slayings from Cobb’s perspective played out on the screen. Hernandez chuckled when Grinder, the barrel-chested surfer, pleaded for his life.

“It’s like he’s saying ‘Don’t Tase me, bro,’” Hernandez said.

The others weren’t listening. They were engrossed in the blinding-quick move Cobb had used to avoid being tackled by the final man to die.

“Damn brilliant, Mr. Cobb,” said Nickerson. “You lost none of it.”

Johnson scowled. “I still say you should have sent one of us. We’re expendable.”

Cobb stiffened, felt angry. “No one here is expendable. Ever. Besides, why would I ask you to do something I wouldn’t do myself?”

“You wouldn’t,” Kelleher said admiringly. “First in.”

“Last out,” Cobb said. “We are in this together.”

Watson said, “Upload to YouTube now, Mr. Cobb?”

Cobb shook his head. “Let’s wait, let them make the connection to the letter before we hit them with total shock and awe.”
THE KID MET me up on Wilkerson’s rain-soaked terrace around one thirty that morning, about the same time the first news of the killings was reaching the Los Angeles airwaves.

“You get it all?” I asked.

“Everything you shot,” the Kid replied, tugging his hood down over hair he slicked back crooner style. “I didn’t get squat from my perspective. Smell bad?”

“Horrible. Have Sci review the footage, then attach the files to Wilkerson’s personal stuff.”

“Reason?”

“Case someone says he did it and we need to prove he didn’t,” I replied, headed toward the Touareg, suddenly tired and wanting to sleep.

On the drive home, as my headlights reflected off the water sheeting Highway 1, I considered calling Guin, but knew she had to be up in five hours, getting ready to head to London. Then, for reasons I can’t explain, my thoughts slipped to the
only person I know who has never minded me calling at odd hours.

I reached over to the touch screen on the dashboard, called up Justine’s number, which appeared with a photograph of her I’d taken a couple of years ago. She was standing in an avocado orchard above the ocean in Santa Barbara. It was late in the day. Golden light. A breeze was blowing. Justine was brushing her hair from her eyes and smiling at me.

As I glanced at the photo, the full memory of that day came in all around me, as if I were there with Justine again in the orchard and the warm breeze blowing off the Pacific, back when it had all seemed perfect and inevitable between us.

But then we ran into the same problem again—I couldn’t open up to her the way she wanted me to. The way she needed me to. So we decided we had to keep our relationship strictly professional. Whatever the hell that will mean.

Blowing out a rueful breath, I wondered if I was ever going to get over a woman I still love but just can’t seem to be with, at least on her terms. And maybe mine. It’s complicated. Justine is a psychologist, a fine one. She also works for me, and—

My cell phone rang so loudly I jerked the wheel and skidded before righting the Touareg. The touch screen was flashing caller ID. I stabbed the answer button, said, “David Sanders, how are you?”

“Not good, Jack,” Sanders croaked. “Not fucking good at all.”

Sanders was a powerful entertainment lawyer who’d been a discreet client of Private’s several times in the recent past. And every time Sanders had called, it had been like this, in the middle of the night, with some mess to be cleaned up.

“You ever sleep, Dave?” I asked.

“Not when I’m dealing with a shitfest of potentially titanic

“I’m…”

“Hired,” Sanders insisted. “Be at LAX at seven thirty. The heliport. Bring a forensics team with you and someone who knows kids.”

“Kids? Where are we going?”

“Ojai,” Sanders said. “Thom and Jennifer Harlow’s place.”

“Uh-oh,” I said.

“A very scary uh-oh,” Sanders said before hanging up.
Chapter 6

THE STREETS IN Santa Monica were still slick and blustery around five fifteen that morning as Justine Smith climbed out of her car in shorts and a sweatshirt, drinking water and groaning. Her muscles hurt in places she hadn’t known she had muscles. And yet here she was, back for more punishment.

Am I a masochist at some level? Is that why I work too much, my love life is a zero, and my body feels like someone whacked it with two-by-fours?

Unable to formulate a coherent answer, Justine stiffly crossed the street toward a light-industrial building with a garage door that bore a sign reading “Pacific Crossfit.” Justine had a hate-love relationship with Crossfit, which was tougher than any other exercise program she’d ever followed. No high-tech machines. No mirrors. No fashion statements. Just Olympic free weights, gymnastics equipment, and the guts to perform brief, insanely intense workouts that often left her soaking wet, gasping on the floor, and sore for days.
Justine came from academics, not law enforcement, but her current job at Private required her to be kick-ass strong. So when she’d discovered that many US Special Forces operators, firefighters, and cops were switching to Crossfit for their physical training, she’d signed up at the gym, or “box,” closest to her.

The first few weeks she honestly thought she was going to die during the workouts. Rather than let the new regime defeat her, however, she had embraced it with her typical zeal. No matter what, she’d been first at the door on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday mornings, even before the ex-SEALs and LAPD SWAT team cops who usually showed up for this early class.

Six months, she thought, then admitted that she still feared Crossfit. But she absolutely loved the fact that she could now do twenty dead-hang pull-ups, deadlift two hundred and twenty-five pounds. And her abs were ripped. There was no other way to describe them.

The coach opened the door to the box from inside. A blue Toyota Camry rolled up to the curb and a guy Justine had never seen before climbed out stiffly.

She crossed through a small lobby, past a changing room, and out into the box itself. She glanced at the whiteboard on the wall before starting her warm-up. When she saw the workout of the day written there, her stomach fluttered with anxiety.

“ ‘Grace: thirty clean and jerks for time?’ a man’s voice groaned behind her. “That’s crazy. I can’t move from the box jumps yesterday.”

Justine looked over her shoulder and saw the new guy, midthirties, curly brown hair, trimmed beard and really, really nice hazel eyes.

“Soreness is a way of life here,” Justine said.
He smiled at her. A really nice smile. “Paul,” he said, holding out his hand. “It’s my fifth class.”

She smiled back, shook his hand, and said, “Justine. A little over six months.”

“Does it get better?”

“Nope,” she said. “Not one bit.”
Chapter 7

IT ONLY GETS worse, Justine thought, fighting the queasy feeling building in her stomach as people all around her grunted, moaned, and dropped bars loaded with rubberized weights that boomed and bounced off the rubber floor.

Justine was twenty clean and jerks into the workout, with the prescribed ninety-five pounds on her bar. The big timing clock on the wall was running. Four minutes had passed since she’d started. Impossibly, one of the ex-SEALs had called, “Time,” at one minute forty seconds before collapsing to the floor.

A big part of Justine wanted to lie down there with him and beg for mercy. But a better part of her got angry. She was not giving up. This was a fight to the finish. And she was finishing.

Ten more, little sister, Justine thought before leaning over to grab the bar with both hands. She gripped it, squeezed her core tight, and rose slowly, keeping the weight snug to her legs until the bar crossed her knees. Then she exploded upward, shrug-
ging her shoulders, raising her elbows, creating a moment of inertia when the bar felt weightless. Quick as she could, she dropped beneath the weight, caught it in a racked position, and then exploded again, driving the bar overhead, where she balanced it a second before letting the weight crash to the floor with all sorts of satisfying fury.

Sweat gushed off Justine's forehead. Almost every muscle in her body burned, but she was grinning. She liked the grunting, the weights crashing, the feeling like you were in a race against time. It was primal, physical in a way she'd never known before.

_Nine more, little sister._

“You, lady, are an animal,” Paul gasped minutes later as Justine struggled to get off the floor and to her feet. She’d finished “Grace” in personal record time.


“No, seriously,” Paul said. “You just kicked my ass with a heavier weight.”

Justine smiled. “Welcome to Crossfit, where strong is the new thin.”

Paul laughed. “I guess I need to learn to check my ego at the door.”

“That's what they say.”

Still smiling, she turned away and headed toward the locker room and the showers, thinking how funny it was that she was able to go from Justine the warrior goddess to Justine a little boy crazy in a matter of moments. But he was nice, and self-deprecating. _And did you notice? No wedding ring?_ “Justine?”

She startled, looked into the lobby. The giddiness faded, replaced by a vague sense of loss. Jack was standing there, looking like he hadn't slept.
“Jack?” she said. “What are you doing here?”
“We caught a case that feels epic. And I need you with me on it. Now.”
Paul passed by. Justine’s eyes flickered to him and then back to Jack. She shook her head. “I’m already swamped. It’s not fair to our other clients, expecting me to—”
Jack took a step closer, murmured, “Thom and Jennifer Harlow.”
Justine blinked. “Give me ten minutes.”
Chapter 8

FORTY MINUTES LATER we were harnessed into jump seats bolted to the interior walls of a helicopter that Dave Sanders had chartered for some ungodly sum of money. The lawyer, a bear of a man in a linen blazer, an orange Hawaiian shirt, khakis, and sandals, sat beside me.

Next to Sanders was Dr. Seymour Kloppenberg, or Sci, the hip polymath criminologist who runs Private’s lab in Los Angeles, and Maureen Roth, also known as Mo-bot. Roth works with Sci as a technical jack of all trades, is even quirkier than he is, and at fifty retains one of the sharpest and best-educated minds I know. Opposite us were Justine and Rick Del Rio, my oldest friend, a fellow ex-marine with a pit bull’s heart. Next to Del Rio were two people I’d heard of but never met before. Camilla Bronson, a very put-together blonde in her forties, was the Harlows’ full-time publicist. Originally from Georgia, she spoke with a soft, genial twang. The tall, ripped, and red-haired
man in his midforties beside her was Terry Graves, the president of Harlow-Quinn Productions.

“What we’re about to tell you goes nowhere without our permission,” Sanders announced as we lifted off and he handed me a folder. “I expect all of your people to sign these nondisclosure forms before we get to the ranch, Jack.”

“Not necessary, Dave, you’re covered under client privilege,” I said, fighting off a general unease that had been growing since we’d boarded the helicopter.

I flew choppers in Afghanistan. I got shot down in a Chinook and a lot of men died. I’ve never been truly comfortable in a helicopter since. I glanced at Justine, who was watching me. Dealing with the memories of the crash was how I’d come to meet Justine, one of the few people I’ve ever let get a glimpse of what goes on inside my head. I glanced at Del Rio, who’d been on the bird with me when it went down, the only other survivor of the crash. I guess I expected him to be agitated, or at least tense, but true to form, Del Rio was stone cold.

“Just the same, we’d like them signed,” sniffed Camilla Bronson.

“A lot at stake here,” Terry Graves agreed, removing sunglasses to reveal bloodshot eyes.

“Suit yourself,” I said, taking the folder. “Tell us what’s going on.”

Sanders hesitated, said, “Thom and Jennifer, and their three kids, disappeared from their ranch in Ojai. They’ve vanished.”

“What?” Justine said. “How’s that possible?”

Del Rio snorted, said, “Yeah, people like that can’t just disappear.”

Mo-bot and Sci were nodding too.

I understood and shared their skepticism. Thom and Jennifer Harlow were arguably the most powerful and glamorous
couple in Hollywood these days, megacelebrities who had won multiple Academy Awards, written bestselling books, and given their time and names to causes worldwide, including a foundation they’d set up themselves called Sharing Hands that raised millions for orphanages across the Third World.

During the twenty minutes it took us to fly north to the rolling hills of Ojai, Sanders, Camilla Bronson, and Terry Graves laid out what they thought we should know.

For the past nine months, the Harlow family had been living in Vietnam, where they had been making a film, *Saigon Falls*, an epic and tragic story of love and intrigue that unfolds in the last doomed years of the American war. Thom Harlow was writer, director, and lead actor. Jennifer Quinn Harlow was starring opposite her husband. Through their company—Harlow-Quinn—they were also producing the film.

“It’s the project of their lives,” Sanders said.

“The one that will immortalize them,” Camilla Bronson agreed.

“You should see the rushes,” said Terry Graves. “Just brilliant stuff.”

The Harlows had come back from Vietnam on their private jet four days before. To avoid the paparazzi, they’d kept the details of their return secret and landed at Burbank. The lawyer, the publicist, and their head producer were there to greet them. The Harlows were blitzed from the long flight and the longer shoot on location. But they were also determined to complete the principal filming on a soundstage on the Warner lot starting the following month.

“So *Saigon Falls* is a Warner project?” Justine asked.

Terry Graves shook his head. “They’re a minor player. No other studio in town wanted to touch the project. They all thought it was too risky, more art than commerce. Warner is
involved in a nominal way, kind of a nod to Thom and Jennifer for how much money they’ve made for that studio over the years."

Camilla Bronson said, “Thom and Jennifer raised money for the film privately to supplement what they decided to fund themselves.”

“Which was how much?” Mo-bot asked.

The publicist and the producer looked at Sanders. The attorney shifted in his seat, glanced at Justine, who was signing the nondisclosure form, said, “Sixty of the ninety-three total at last count.”

“Personally?” Dr. Sci said, as shocked as I was.

“The vast majority of their fortune,” Sanders affirmed.

“But they were passionate about Saigon Falls, zealots, in fact,” Terry Graves explained.

Camilla Bronson nodded, said, “Thom and Jennifer were either going to make a masterpiece and a bigger fortune, or they were going to lose everything they had.”

Sanders said, “In all honesty, I met them at the airport because I desperately needed to explain that costs associated with Saigon Falls had overwhelmed their ability to maintain their current lifestyle.”

“You mean they were broke?” I asked.

“Not quite. But they were teetering right on the razor’s edge of it.”
AS THE SOUTHERN California landscape blurred below us, Sanders went on: “At the airport, I explained their dire financial situation, held nothing back, told Thom and Jennifer they were going to have to take draconian measures or face bankruptcy.”

“What did they say to that?” Justine asked.

Terry Graves said, “Thom acted unconcerned and said he had it covered, that a new investor had appeared who was underwriting the completion of Saigon Falls.”

“He say who that investor was?” I asked.

The producer shook his head, looking highly irritated. “Thom is like that. Likes being mysterious for no reason at all.”

“Creative tension,” Camilla Bronson explained. “Thom—and this is off the record—believes in withholding information. He does it with everyone. So does Jen, for that matter. They believe it keeps people on their toes.”

“Okay,” I said. “So then what happens?”
Sanders replied, “They pleaded exhaustion and left along with Cynthia Maines, their personal assistant, in two rented Suburbans, bound for the ranch for six days of R&R.”

Terry Graves looked like he’d bitten into something sour. “Typical of them. They knew we had a week of endless meetings set up—they’d been out of the country nine months, for God’s sake—but they just announced that it would all have to wait, and away they drove, leaving us in the lurch.”

“Jen thought the kids deserved it,” said Camilla Bronson. “Six days to help them reacclimate.”

“Anyway, that’s the last we’ve heard of any of them,” Sanders said.

“So how do you know they’ve disappeared?” Justine asked. “They’ve got two days left, right?”

The Harlows’ publicist said, “True, but they just stopped answering their phones, texts, and e-mails.”

“When?”

“Night before last,” the producer said. “I called all day yesterday on their private cell numbers, and Cynthia’s cell, and got no response from any of them.”

The Harlows’ attorney said, “Finally, around midnight last night, the housekeeper at the ranch, Anita, answered the house phone.”

The housekeeper claimed to have just returned to the ranch with two other members of the staff. The Harlows had given them all nine months off with partial pay while a caretaker maintained the place in their absence.

“Anita said the ranch was empty,” Sanders said. “She said there were signs that the Harlows had been there, but that there was no one there now. No one. I told her not to touch anything, that she and the others were to go to their quarters and wait for me. Then I hung up and called you, Jack.”
“So let me get this straight,” I said, trying to wrap my head around the situation, looking for fact, not conjecture. “Not only are the Harlows and their children missing, but the Harlows’ assistant—”

“Cynthia Maines,” said Camilla Bronson. “Yes, she’s missing too.”

“And the caretaker?”

“As I understand it,” the attorney said.

“No one else?” Justine asked.

Sanders hesitated, replied, “Not that we know of.”

“How do you know they haven’t just gone off somewhere on vacation?” Mo-bot asked.

“Because TMZ or one of the other gossip sites would have found them,” Terry Graves said.

“Okay,” I said, skeptical. “Ransom notes?”

The attorney said, “Maybe there’s one at the ranch. We don’t know yet.”

“I’m not questioning your judgment here, Dave,” I replied. “But why not call the FBI in? They’re the missing persons experts.”

“We can’t do that,” Camilla Bronson said. “At least not until we find out what’s going on.”

Sanders nodded. “We don’t know what’s happened, and until we do, we’re not going anywhere near law enforcement.”

I said, “It’s also a question of business, isn’t it? If the people already invested in Saigon Falls were to find out the Harlows were missing, all hell would break loose.”

Terry Graves stiffened but said, “Understandably, we don’t want that.”

I wondered how far we could push a missing persons investigation before the Feds found out, took over, and tried to hit us with obstruction charges. That likelihood would be amped by the celebrity factor. The FBI loves celeb cases.
“Fair enough,” I said at last. “But any evidence of violence and we’re notifying the cops and the Feds.”

Before any of them could respond, the helicopter swung on the wind and dropped suddenly. I had a moment of flashback to the Chinook, right after we were hit by ground fire and the rotor disintegrated above us. I glanced quickly to Del Rio, who looked unaffected as he said, “Maybe you’re wrong. Maybe the Harlows did take off to some unlikely place, wore disguises, managed to avoid the paparazzi.”

“Not a chance,” Sanders replied. “I checked the Harlows’ Visa and AmEx records. They haven’t spent a dime since they bought gas down in Ojai the night they arrived.”

“Which is an absolute impossibility,” added Camilla Bronson.

“Why is that?” Kloppenberg asked.

The publicist said, “Because Jennifer Harlow is a certifiable, world-class shopaholic.”
“IT’S TRUE,” SANDERS said. “The Harlows, and Jen in particular, rack up a lot of credit card charges every day. But since the night before last, nothing."

Out the helicopter window the Harlows’ Ojai ranch came into view, a beautiful, otherworldly place with a sprawling white ranch house, gardens, fountains, barns, and other outbuildings flanked by horse pastures and groves of almond, orange, and pecan trees.

I spotted the two Suburbans in the driveway before we landed. As the rotors died down, I finally released the tension in my fists, and all sorts of ideas bounced around in my mind. Were we on some kind of wild-goose chase? Would the Harlows just be sitting inside having breakfast?

Climbing from the helicopter after Sanders, Camilla Bronson, and Terry Graves, I spotted three middle-aged Latina women in maroon uniforms trotting toward us from one of the outbuildings.
The publicist, the producer, and the attorney immediately veered off course and went straight to the women, with my team in tow.

“Have you spoken to anyone?” Camilla Bronson demanded.

The three wrung their hands, shook their heads. The tallest, whose blouse was monogrammed “Anita,” said, “No. I swear to you. We do exactly what Mr. Sanders say. We go to our rooms, say nothing to nobody. Just wait for you. We no sleep.”

“Let’s continue to keep it quiet,” Sanders replied.

The publicist glanced at me, said, “The press jackals will be all over this if we let them.”

“Besides, we really don’t know anything yet, do we?” Terry Graves said.

We followed him. Behind me, I heard Sci whisper to Mo-bot, “Well, I was thinking alien abduction, little green men looking to perform experiments on the most beautiful beings on Earth. What about you, Maureen?”

“Specters? Ectoplasmic transport?” she said.

I had to suppress a grin.


I glanced over my shoulder to find the two of them beaming at their wit, and Del Rio and Justine hiding their smiles.

Sanders turned from the three Mexican women. “Is there something funny in all this?”

“No, Dave,” I said, covering. “Not at all.” Looking to Justine, I said, “You interview the help.” To Del Rio, I said, “Take the outbuildings and the security system. Sci, Mo-bot, you’re inside with me.”

“We’re coming inside too,” Camilla Bronson said.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” I said. “At least until we’ve done our initial sweep.”
“Not a chance,” the publicist replied icily, and followed Sci and Mo-bot toward the veranda. Terry Graves and Sanders followed her.

Before I could argue with them, Justine squealed with delight. A female Old English bulldog had appeared out of nowhere, panting, nervous, her white fur and paws soiled as if she’d been digging in the dirt.

“That’s Miss Stella Kowalski,” Anita choked, tears welling in her eyes as Justine went to pet the bulldog. “She’s the children’s. Miguel’s. You see? The dog goes everywhere with them. Even Vietnam. This no good. She’s therapy dog. Miguel…he loves her.”

At that the bulldog began to whimper and cry.
Chapter 11

IT TOOK US several hours to make an initial inspection of the Harlows’ ranch house. Most rooms remained in mothballs, the furniture still wrapped in plastic. But the core area of the sprawling home spoke of a family wearily trying to resettle after a long journey, and, yes, of a life interrupted.

Littering the kitchen counters were dirty dishes, half-eaten meals, and glasses crusted with dried red wine. The fridge was filled with vegetables, fruit, cartons of soy milk, and the pantry was stocked with a multitude of gluten-free items. The trash in the compactor stank of chicken blood. A cold mug of coffee sat in the microwave, which flashed “Finished.”

The telephone answering machine was filled with multiple messages from Camilla Bronson, Terry Graves, and Sanders, as well as several production assistants, film editors, and fashion designers, all of them apologizing for intruding but desperate for a few minutes of the Harlows’ time. The television in the den off the kitchen was on, muted, showing
the Cartoon Network and Scooby-Doo facing down yet another monstrous imposter. Lining a hall that led out to the garage was evidence of Jen Harlow’s legendary consumerism: stacks upon stacks of unopened boxes, recent and past shipments from various catalog merchandisers. In the garage, we found five wheel-less cars set up on blocks under custom covers that identified them as a Bugatti, a Maserati, a classic Corvette, and two Land Rovers.

“That’s not right,” Terry Graves said, openly worried now. “Thom told me he was looking forward to driving the ‘Vette.”

There were pictures of the celebrity couple all over the house. Most of them were what I call power shots, photographs with politicians, say, or with various Hollywood moguls, at awards ceremonies and the like, images designed to boost an insecure creative soul.

A few candid photos showed the couple with their three children: Malia, thirteen, adopted in Ethiopia; Jin, eleven, adopted in China; and Miguel, eight, adopted in Honduras, and born with a severe cleft palate. More images depicted Thom or Jennifer or both in some far-flung and impoverished land, posing with gangs of smiling children, or holding a withered infant in their arms.

Camilla Bronson’s lower lip trembled as she saw the photos, and she said, “Oh, God, what’s happened to them? They’re such good people.”

I left her and went to the west wing of the ranch house, which held guest quarters, a state-of-the-art gym, an indoor pool, and a twenty-seat screening room. The pool was empty. The gym and the screening room appeared unused.

Lights burned in the hallway that led to the east wing and five bedrooms laid out like a dormitory, with two bedrooms on either side of the hall and the Harlows’ master suite at the far
end. The bedroom on the right-hand side, closest to the living area, was Malia’s. Her suitcases were half empty on the floor. An iPhone 4S with a dead battery lay hidden between the bed and the end table. The sheets were rumpled and cast lazily aside, as if the teen had gotten up for a drink of water, or to go pee, or maybe had just left the bed unmade for the day.

Jin’s room across the hall was more chaotic, with clothes in piles on the carpet and strewn on the furniture, a canopy bed covered in stuffed animals, and another menagerie on the dresser.

The bedroom of the boy, Miguel, however, was different, neat-freak different, the bed made with almost military precision. But when I walked past the bed I smelled something acrid in the air. Sniffing around, I soon found its source. Someone had wet the bed.

The room across the hall from Miguel’s was empty, the mattress stripped, the blankets folded and put into clear plastic protectors. I wondered if it had been set aside for some future fourth orphan the Harlows planned to adopt.

I reached the master suite, a simple yet elegant space with a Steinway grand in the corner, shelves bulging with books, and a huge teak bed, crisply made with fresh white sheets and a folded duvet. A bay window overlooked the orchards. Paintings and several mirrors, including one narrow mirror six or seven feet long, hung horizontally, high on the interior wall of the bedroom, all feng shui remedies, no doubt.

“Found the Oscars,” Mo-bot called to me as she exited a massive walk-in closet to my right, hands behind her back. “They were all wrapped in newspaper and stuck at the bottom of one of Jennifer’s drawers. Can you imagine doing that to an Academy Award, Jack?”

“The Harlows are unimpressed with themselves.” Sanders
said, coming in behind us with Camilla Bronson and Terry Graves.

“They don’t judge themselves on the basis of public accolades,” Terry Graves said. “Deep down it’s always about the work.”

“If you say so,” Mo-bot replied with little conviction. “Know what else I found piled on top of the Oscars?”

“I couldn’t imagine,” the publicist sniffed. “As I said, Jennifer has one of everything.”

Mo-bot smirked as she brought out from behind her back a rather large and anatomically realistic dildo with a suction cup jutting out the back end.
“YOU KNOW WHY they’ll go for it?” Cobb asked Nickerson as he steeled a knife with a short, wicked-looking obsidian blade. “They’ll go for it because big-city hot shots or not, deep down they’re just like some limp-dick chieftain in the Old Country: small-minded, predictable, and therefore susceptible to fear. Ignorance breeds it, fear, which is useful, as you know.”

“Damn straight, Mr. Cobb,” Nickerson replied, turning the blade. “Justifiable in a state of war.”

They were in the garage in the City of Commerce. Johnson was sacked out on the cots. Kelleher and Watson worked at computers. Hernandez watched coffee drip and worked more salve into his new tattoos.

Cobb made a pistol with his fingers, aimed it at Nickerson, and said, “Perfectly justifiable in dire times such as these. People who get power have to be worms in order to get power. What we’re doing is just electrifying the soil they live in, get-
ting it so hot and shocking they’ll be forced to surface and squirm in the light of day. Then we’ll have them.”

Hernandez came over, set a mug in front of Cobb, said, “With all due respect: the pharmacy? Is that the place to maximize our efforts?”

Cobb ran two fingers over the spiderweb of scars on the left side of his face and considered Hernandez with cold intent. Hernandez was brave to the point of being impetuous, which made him one of Cobb’s best men and also his worst man. Hernandez had amazing physical skills and would fight to the death if provoked, but he tended to ad lib on plans when it was unnecessary. And he couldn’t see the big picture, a general weakness of character and intellect, at least as far as Cobb was concerned.

“For this to work, Mr. Hernandez, we don’t want anything that could be construed as political,” Cobb said at last. “Nothing symbolic, if you will. No statements. Nothing to suggest this is anything other than a single maniac at work. So why the pharmacy? It’s mundane. It’s everyday, and because of that more people will relate to it, and the fear and the panic and the pressure will grow. We want every citizen of L.A. to feel like their daily lives are jeopardized.”

End of discussion. He turned from Hernandez, glanced at the atomic clock on the wall—fourteen hundred hours—and said, “Okay, Mr. Watson, upload it.”

“Straightaway, Mr. Cobb,” Watson said, and began giving orders to his iPad. “I’m taking it through scrubbing sites in India, Pakistan, and Hong Kong. Zero chance they’ll pull an IPN on us.”

Cobb understood. “Make sure you mix up the paths you take online. It’s just like being on the job. No routine routes. Change it up, all the time.”
“Got the Facebook page up,” Kelleher said, pivoted in his chair, stroked his red beard. “You like?”

Cobb glanced at the iPad in front of the big man. A Facebook page filled the screen, topped with the headline NO PRISONERS: FACES OF WAR L.A.

“Outstanding,” Cobb said. “Show them their ignorance, sow fear through them virtually. I’m going to catch a nap before things really ramp up.”

“Sixteen hundred?” Hernandez asked.

“Yes,” Cobb said before going to a cot and lying on it with one arm flung over his eyes. As a matter of survival, he had long ago taught his mind and body to shut down on command. When they did so this time, he plunged into a deep, dark void that after an hour gave way to dreams.

It was night. The chill wind smelled of wood smoke, tobacco smoke, coffee brewing, horse sweat, and the high desert. Boots crunched on sand and rock. Dogs began to bark before gunfire threw jagged flares through the night.

Women and children began to scream. In his dreams, Cobb heard men begging for mercy. He felt nothing but satisfaction at the screaming, at their pleas, and with that grew a sense of righteousness that surged when the first explosion hyperlit his mind, shook his body so hard he thought for a moment he’d been hit by the rocket-propelled grenade.

Then Cobb bolted upright, instinctually grabbing the throat of the man shaking his shoulder. Watson choked and looked down at him bug-eyed.

“No, Mr. Cobb!” Kelleher yelled, grabbing his wrist. “It’s a good thing.”

Cobb came free of the dream, fully awake, and slowly let go of Watson’s throat.
“We’ve gone viral,” Kelleher said as Watson choked and coughed.

“Already?” Cobb said, sitting up, shedding the grogginess. Johnson and Nickerson were standing there too.

Watson crowed in a hoarse voice, “One hour twenty in, we’ve got seventy-five hundred hits on YouTube.”

Kelleher grinned. “And two thousand thumbs down on Facebook.”

“Those numbers will grow,” Cobb remarked.


Cobb twisted to see not bald Hernandez but blond-locked and bearded No Prisoners slipping the mirror sunglasses on to complete his disguise.

Cobb smiled, said, “Outstanding in every goddamned way, Mr. Hernandez.”
“PUT THAT THING away,” Sanders snapped, reddening after the initial shock of seeing the dildo in Mo-bot’s hand. “Jennifer Harlow’s private, uh, needs are not at issue here.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Mo-bot shot back. “There are drawers full of sex toys and gear in her closet. His too.”

Camilla Bronson blanched. “You cannot mention this to anyone!”

She must have said that six times over the next fifteen minutes as we discovered all manner and size of dildo, butt plug, suction tube, cock ring, and artificial vagina in the Harlows’ closets. There was also a sex swing and a device that resembled a gymnast’s vaulting horse equipped with a powerful motor inside and a mechanical penis jutting out of the top.

“Never seen one of those before,” I commented.

“It’s called a Sybian,” said Sci, who’d just come in. “The penis attachment not only goes up and down, it can be set to rotate or corkscrew.”
“And you know that how?” Terry Graves asked.
“Kit-Kat’s got one,” Kloppenberg replied matter-of-factly.
Sanders frowned. “Who the hell is Kit-Kat?”
“Sci’s virtual girlfriend,” Mo-bot said.
Not really wanting it discussed that my chief criminologist’s private life consisted of online video sex with a woman in our Stockholm office, I quickly changed the subject, asked, “Find anything in the kitchen, Seymour?”
Sci nodded. “Enough mold and bacteria to say those dishes and glasses are from thirty-six to forty hours ago at the outside. I’ll be able to give you a more definitive answer once we get back to the lab.”
Thirty-six to forty hours. Which meant the Harlows had left the house voluntarily or involuntarily roughly two days after they returned home from Vietnam. What had happened in those two days?
I left the others and again walked around the house, trying to see something I’d missed on the first pass, trying to imagine the things that might have unfolded in the time before the family disappeared. Had they left on their own, or at gunpoint? In what vehicle? And what about the caretaker, and the personal assistant, Cynthia Maines?
I had more questions than answers, and the growing feeling that I was indeed missing something, something that was staring me right in the face. Then again, little of the scene made sense to me. There were no signs of violence that I could find, no indication that they’d been forcibly taken, no blood, no broken furniture, certainly no ransom note or demand of any kind.
So what had happened here?
I discovered an editing room in the basement below the east wing of the house, with five big screens all linked to a main-
frame server and a state-of-the-art editing and mixing console. I tried a door beyond the console. It was locked.

I turned, my eyes drifting across the electronics in the editing room, and it hit me. There were no computers anywhere. No desktops. No laptops. No tablets. No handhelds except for the dead iPhone in Malia’s room.

This was a wealthy family in a home equipped with the highest-end techno-gadgets. No computers beyond that phone? Impossible. So they were gone too. But there had to be some kind of backup system, right? A cloud connection, at least.

I was about to go find Mo-bot and the trio I’d come to call the Harlow team to dig into that issue when Del Rio found me.

“Went through the caretaker, Héctor Ramón’s, place, Jack,” he said. “It’s like the main house, used, but abandoned. There’s a cat down there, walking around meowing.”

“No signs of struggle?”

“None,” Del Rio said.

“Maybe Sci’s not that far off, then. Maybe that’s what scared the bulldog and made the computers all disappear. It is an alien abduction.”

“Yeah, maybe, except for the fact that for two hours the night before last, either the electricity blacked out and the backup to the security system suffered a complete failure, or the system was disarmed and fucked with by total pros.”
ME, DEL RIO, Sci, Mo-bot, Sanders, Camilla Bronson, and Terry Graves were all crowded into a small room off the garage watching a big screen split into ten frames. Each frame displayed a different feed from security cameras arrayed around the ranch, at the gate, near the barns, above every exterior door, and at intervals on the roof, panning the near grounds.

“Fairly sophisticated system,” said Del Rio, who on the whole is largely unimpressed with security he didn’t himself design. “Redundant controllers. Satellite link. Cable link. Pressure sensors inside the fences. Lasers in the hallways. Fiber optics in the windows. Panic room off the master suite.”

“I didn’t see any panic room,” Sci said.

Del Rio tapped a feed that showed a room equipped with couches, a refrigerator, and two sets of bunk beds. “Entrance is off Jennifer’s closet. Looks like a frickin’ fortress. But obviously they never made it in there.”
“Which means something happened to the security system?” Mo-bot asked. “They were never alerted?”

“Something did happen,” Del Rio agreed. “I reviewed the logs in the two computers that run the show. At seven twenty-seven p.m. two nights ago, the entire system went down, the backups failed, and no alerts were issued to police or the folks who installed this.”

“And who was that?” I asked.

Del Rio got a sour look. “You’re not going to like it.”

I cocked my head in disbelief. “Tommy?”

“His people, anyway.”

“Who’s Tommy?” Camilla Bronson asked.

“My brother.”

“The guy in the papers?” Sanders asked in a groan. “The one implicated in that murder?”

“One and the same,” I said.

What was the likelihood of that? My brother designed and installed the system, a system that failed?

“You think he could be involved here?” Terry Graves asked.

I considered the producer’s question but then shook my head. “Tommy’s a wack job, but his specialty is security systems. How exactly did it fail?”

Del Rio ran a paw over his stubbled chin. “Logs say the computers ran diagnostic software upon rebooting at nine twenty-seven p.m. two nights ago. It detected a failure in the trip connection to the backup generators four seconds before the ranch’s main power line died.”


Del Rio nodded. “A transformer blew about that time, cut power all over Ojai. Took three hours to bring electricity back online.”

“But you said the computer logs show the system was only down for two hours, not three,” I said.
“That’s right,” Del Rio said. “The logs say the generators kicked back to life at nine twenty-seven, main power came on about an hour later.”

“So someone inside cut the generator, and then what, reconnected it?”

He nodded again. “I figure coordinated attack, inside, outside. Takes a few minutes for the system to reboot. Enough time to vanish when you’re done.”

My mind raced through the people who were supposed to have been on the ranch that night. The Harlows. Their kids. The caretaker. The Harlows’ personal assistant.

“Cynthia Maines,” I said.

“What?” Camilla Bronson asked.

“Unless I’m out to lunch here, the only beds in the house I’ve seen used were the family’s. If Maines was here, where did she sleep?”

“Maybe she didn’t,” Terry Graves said.

“Or maybe she cleaned up after herself, made it look as if she hadn’t slept here,” Mo-bot said. “I mean, the Harlows’ bed was made, right?”

“Or Jennifer and Thom just hadn’t gone to bed yet,” I said, gesturing at the screen. “You find tapes from these feeds?”

Del Rio nodded, gave the keyboard several commands. The screen images jumped and now carried a time stamp four days prior.

Del Rio said, “The cameras are set up with motion detectors. They only record when there’s movement. Lights too. You can see the two days of activity leading up to the system failure in like five minutes.”

He speeded up the tapes. My focus jumped all over the split screen, seeing the Harlows arriving four nights ago, hauling gear from the Suburbans into the house, greeting a man wear-
ing a straw cowboy hat, who I assumed was the caretaker, Héctor Ramón; and the three kids going in and out of the house multiple times during the days and into the evenings with the bulldog rambling behind them. The dog seemed never to leave their side.

Thom Harlow appeared infrequently. His wife was everywhere, a frenetic personality. On the second evening, however, Thom came to the back door to watch Jennifer leave on her run, which Sanders said was a daily ritual, along with yoga. The last recording took place moments before the system failed, roughly thirty-six hours after the Harlows had returned to the ranch. The back-door and deck view again, looking down at a steep angle: Jennifer returned from her run in the dark, sweating, chest heaving, and climbed onto the lit deck.

Del Rio typed, turned that frame full-screen. Jennifer slowed, stopped, turned to look behind her. The light beyond the deck was dim, shadowy, so I caught only a flicker of movement in the shadows, the hint of a human form before the screen blinked black.

“What—” Mo-bot began.

Del Rio held up his hand. “Wait, you’re gonna see the first thing the cameras picked up after the system rebooted two hours later.”

The screen jumped back to life.

Stella, the Harlows’ bulldog, was on the deck in much the same place where Jennifer had been when the screen went blank. The dog was frantic, howling and ripping at the screen door as if she’d seen something worse than a ghost.
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