

The afternoon sun streaked through the blinds, forcing me to throw back the sheets and crawl out of the covers. Glancing out the second story window, I didn't see anything but perfect gardens. Worry scratched at my brain. Jillie worked late, played later, but I'd never known her to sleep this late. Usually she just barged in and jumped into the bed to wake me the minute she was dressed. Maybe she'd stayed at Kevin's, but it didn't feel right. She would have called this morning when she got up.

She'd been... relieved when I'd said I could come. Something was bothering her but she wouldn't talk about it over the phone. Trying to shrug off the fission of worry. I took a quick shower, leaving my hair to dry on its own and slipped into comfy jeans and a t-shirt. It was great not to have to put on a uniform for the next few weeks. My stomach grumbled from lack of food, and I knew Jillie expected me to act like I was at home. In some ways, that was what this was, home.

Instead of heading straight to the kitchen I headed around the landing, thinking I would give a light tap on Jillie's door, just in case she was in and maybe had company keeping her occupied. There was a staircase, just past Jillie's room, down to the kitchen. More for the use of the household staff, but Jillie didn't have anyone who lived in so it was only used when the help came on their usual days. They'd been here recently. Everything was sparkling, polished, and tidy, not even a speck of dust had settled anywhere in sight.

The odor slammed into me. Undeniable. Unmistakable. Death.

Knowing it wouldn't make a difference, I prayed to the gods for a break. There wasn't a chance it was anyone but Jillie, but for once, I found that small molecule of hope glowing in my heart. Hesitating, just for that moment, I gathered my strength.

The hallway narrowed and lengthened. "Move your legs, Gibson!" Great, now Master Sergeant Craven was in my head just as he has always been when I am faced with something I didn't want to do. I couldn't help but wish just this once he'd show some sympathy. Call me by my first name. Ashley.

I knew what to do at a crime scene. I'd been an MP for the last four years and had seen more than I wanted to.

As I got nearer and the stench got stronger, my stomach rolled and pitched.

"Don't get sick you wimpy bitch!" Craven's voice screamed across time. "You wanted to be a military cop, now act like one."

Jillie's door stood barely open. I pressed my elbow against the wood to swing it open.

*Protect the scene.*

The full brunt of the odor overwhelmed me, forced me back a step. My friend was hidden from sight. I was grateful for the extra moment before I had to look at her. I needed to prepare. I forced myself forward and looked at the body that had been Jillie. Although I wasn't a coroner, I was sure the corpse had been there for at least twenty-four hours.

I could hear Craven's voice ordering me around again, "Look. Use your eyes. Sear the scene into your brain."

Gossamer curtains floated gently in a sudden breeze. It had been hot, still and humid when I arrived last night. Maybe the partially closed door and no breeze had been enough to keep the odor trapped in this room. It really didn't matter unless there was some sign someone had come in that way.

Carefully I scanned the room like a video camera. The bed, sleek and crisp. Teddy bear nightlight by the bathroom door. Dresser drawers neatly closed. Nightgown, draped across the spread. There hadn't been a struggle here, maybe in another part of the house? The master bath? My stomach clenched as I took a hard look at the port wine colored blood stain at the far edge of the bed. One deep breath before I focused.

Jillie. The thing on the floor barely resembled the woman I claim as my sister.

Fighting the burn of acid as it rose into my throat I reminded myself once more, don't do anything to help the perp get away.

I forced myself not to run to her. I felt guilt claw its way into my heart. Rational thought took leave as I chastised myself for not taking a moment to check on her last night. The part of me that hovered over the scene knew I would have been too late to save her.

I'd seen dead bodies before. Cravens, my most hated taskmaster, had made sure I could stomach anything. He trained me to turn granite when assessing, remembering, tracking and trapping the purveyors of crime.

I pulled my shirt over my head to catch the vomit as I staggered back into the hall praying I wouldn't destroy evidence as I ran.

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I had arrived at the house just after midnight. Did I say house? More like a mansion atop a windswept hill overlooking the sea—but in land-locked Plano, Texas. I never really understood why Jillie wanted something so big. Sure she entertained a lot, and people visited often, but I like my cozy military quarters.

Carefully placed lights highlighted the Mediterranean exterior and well-tended garden. But the windows were dark, dead eyes overlooking the grounds. I should have known something was wrong even though Jillie considered midnight the start of the evening. I admit I was thankful she wasn't around. It was late. I craved sleep the way an addict craves his high.

Digging in my bag, I found the key Jillie mailed me, after she called and begged me to come. Plano isn't my favorite place in the world. Too much history and family keep me unenthusiastic about visiting, but Jillie knows which buttons to push. I have a hard time telling her no, since she's always there for me.

I slipped into the laundry room. Pulled off my boots, draped my windbreaker over the coat rack, and listened.

Nothing.

Nothing but silence unless you count the hammer-assaulted anvil ringing in my head.

Apparently Jillie wasn't home. She would have met me when I drove up if she was here, so I was sure she must be out at her club, or snuggled up to the love of her life, Kevin. Slipping upstairs I intended to fall face down and descend into the black comfort of sleep. Instead I looked around the room, noting all the changes she made since I had been here a year before.

The walls were recently repainted a creamy ivory. Little containers of skin cream and perfume samples were laid out on a mirrored tray. A picture of Jillie and I sat on the dresser beside a vase of white roses. A friend had taken it when Jillie surprised me six months ago on my birthday. She was laughing, and her chestnut hair was swept up in a chignon with a sparkling tiara atop it as she attempted to affix a similar one to my short blonde locks.

People said we look like sisters but we weren't really related. She was twenty years older, had been twenty years older, astonishingly beautiful. At twenty-four I was more athletic and had a much smaller bust, but our eyes had the same almond shape and we both had full lips. I was thankful I had the picture. I slipped it in my duffle bag and picked up the phone.

I dialed 9-1-1.

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Detective Braden sat across the table, waiting for me to spill my guts. A butt ugly little man, he glared at me silently. It really wasn't working--that cop's cliché, the one where you try to make the suspect—because the person who finds the body is *always* the suspect—uncomfortable. So uncomfortable they spill their life story, weeping, looking for the interrogator's approval as they tell how they stole candy when they were a child.

Instead, the quiet gave me the opportunity to think about how I felt about Jillie's murder. The pain was turning to anger and I knew I had to be the one who found her killer.

I knew it would take time to collect evidence. It would take time to start the search for the killer. It would take time to find him. Then it would take time to annihilate the bastard who'd murdered her. Annihilation is exactly what I intended to do.

Braden broke the silence first. "So the door to the bedroom was open just enough to allow you to take a peek? Nothing looked out of order?"

The silence got to him again.

"So you just walked in last night, went straight to bed," he sneered. "Didn't notice anything was wrong."

"I didn't pass her door. I didn't have to. I told your partner the exact same thing thirty minutes ago."

Braden gave a desperate, evil laugh. I wanted to punch the smirk off his face.

"I was tired. I had the key Jillie sent me. I know where my room is." Cops are not my favorite people and this one was beginning to get on my nerves. I know the routine. I know they have to ask questions. I would be just as snide and disbelieving if I was the one doing the questioning.

"Braden," DeMarco, his partner called from the hallway upstairs. "Leave her be. I need you to come up here and make sure Mathews doesn't miss anything."

Mathews must be the crime tech I'd seen coming in through the kitchen.

"You," Braden yapped, "stay put. We'll want to talk to you some more."

"Yeah, Yeah. I'll sit here, hands folded neatly in my lap, like a good little girl. Maybe you'll decide to arrest me for reporting the murder of my best friend."

Braden threw me a don't-move-bitch look and walked out of the room.

Braden was being an ass. I wondered if he knew about me. Had reasons beyond the fact I had called in the cavalry. I was tired of people in town treating me like a leper, a liar or worse. Did he know who I really was? Maybe he was just the bully on the playground. The city had grown a lot since I left when I was sixteen. Maybe I was being paranoid.

Here, in the dazzling metropolitan center of Plano, Texas, I didn't have a chance with people who knew my family background. Plano is a fast growing city, a part of what the natives call the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. About twenty years ago, just about the time I was learning to read about Dick and Jane, a guy named Ross Perot bought up a city size parcel of land and put Plano, a small farming community, on the map. Unfortunately, Plano was where I was born and raised and my history was too well known.

Left alone I fought the roller coaster of emotions that swept through me. Anger. Despair. Guilt. I should have gotten here sooner. But the reality was the only thing I could do to help Jillie was to stop feeling sorry for myself and find the bastard who had done this to her. Jillie had been sister and friend. Mentor and mother. Even with only a few years difference in our ages, she gave me the kind of care my own mother hadn't been capable of.

DeMarco came down the stairs and crossed to me. "Tell me again, why were you here? I'd think your commander would be a bit upset finding you came to stay with a porn star."

Yeah he and Braden knew. I was on the shit list without having to lift a finger.

"She didn't do that anymore. Hasn't in years."

“And you’re here because...”

“She’s a friend. Family. She was a big sister to me.”

“Yeah, well I’ve heard...”

“Are you done with me yet?”

His dark eyes stared into mine. “So, your friend called and here you are. I can’t help but wonder about the timing. She asked you to come, what a week before she’s murdered?”

“What can I say?”

The phone rang and I could hear one of the officers pick it up. “Detective DeMarco, there’s someone asking for Ashley Gibson.”

DeMarco stared at me, waiting for me to answer. Who knew I was here?

“I’m ready to get out of here. You have a problem with that? I told your partner where I’ll be for the next few days.”

“No problem, you don’t want to answer the phone?”

“No, and don’t worry, your partner told me not to leave town.”

“Get out of here. I’ve got your cell and I’ll call if I need to talk to you again.”

I didn’t want to ask for a favor, but what could I do? “Jillie was a good friend. You’ll let me know if you find anything.”

He stared me in the eyes for at least a full minute before he replied. “Yes, if you’ll do the same.”

I didn’t like the fact he could read me so well, but I couldn’t change that. I nodded, picked up my purse and headed out the door. I had some people to talk to if I was going to discover why Jillie had been murdered.

