

# HOW TO DISAPPEAR

A Carlotta DuBois Mystery

J.C. Patrick

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How to Disappear, A Carlotta DuBois Mystery

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## **Dedications**

For my sibs, Kelly and Greg, you're the best.

And for Mike and Linda, my favorite Hollywood tour guides.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my husband Lyle, who saw me through the creation of this book. I also want to thank family and friends who have encouraged me as a writer - especially those of you who read my first two books *A Hollywood Classic* and *The Reinvention of Janey*.

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## **Epigraph**

I like to think of myself as an artist - one who adds a dash of fame, a touch of dirt, a pinch of stardust, and a moral to every little story I report.

~ Carlotta DuBois, gossip columnist





## Prologue

*Transcript from a televised interview with Carlotta DuBois and Alison Abbot - One month earlier*

CB:

Alison Abbot is a beloved and two-time Oscar-winning actress, at the top of her game in last year's blockbuster movie *The Decoy*. We're going to talk with Alison about her love of acting, what it feels like to be a Hollywood superstar, and her charity work.

CB:

Alison, thanks so much for inviting us into your home. Now, in *The Decoy* you play a woman whose husband disappears, and you go undercover to find him. I think your performance appealed to people because this wasn't your typical thriller role.

AA:

No, it really wasn't. Instead of chasing the bad guys, she lures them in, and in essence, preys on each of them. And she found very unique ways to do so!

CB:

The husband was certainly in for a surprise when she discovers the secret he was keeping from her. It was a rather dark film, lots of revenge. You seem nothing like your character.

AA:

That's why acting is such a joy for me. I'm able to transform into many different characters.

CB:

You're currently filming *Doctor Change*.

AA:

That's right. In fact, we're nearing the end of production.

CB:

Would you give us an overview of what that film is about?

AA:

Sure. Unlike *The Decoy*, this film is quite upbeat. It's about a doctor who transforms the lives of her patients. She makes them whole again, the way they were meant to be, and not just physically.

CB:

Wow! This role seems uplifting and very different from the dark characters you usually tackle.

AA:

(laughter) Completely!

CB:

I see another Oscar coming!

AA:

(laughter) Thanks!

CB:

You already have two Oscars under your belt and four nominations. Tell us what that's like.

AA:

It's thrilling, and life-changing, really. It means the world to have peers acknowledge my work.

CB:

I see more accolades in your future. Your charity work seems to keep you busy.

AA:

I knew I always wanted to give back. Acting opened up more avenues where I can make a difference.

CB:

Your charitable activities usually involve children. Can you tell us more about this?

AA:

I've always been drawn to children's causes, so it's been a natural fit to use my celebrity status this way. Besides, I *love* children and can't wait to have my own one day.

CB:

I know that would make your fans happy. So, let's take a turn. You've said no question is off limits. If there were a first family of Hollywood, it would be the Rogers family. What was it like to be part of a dynasty of so many fascinating and talented actors?

AA:

Why, it was magical, of course! The Rogers are an incredible family.

CB:

What were holiday gatherings like with a family that's a who's who of Hollywood?

AA:

Oh, gosh... As you can imagine, they were very lively, happy times. There were lots of great stories and laughter, lots of laughter.

CB:

I know a lot of women, myself included, are interested in knowing what Renee Rogers, the matriarch of the family, is *really* like.

AA:

Everything about Renee is fabulous. She's smart *and* beautiful, a true icon in this industry. She was very welcoming to me when I joined her family. In fact, we're still very close.

CB:

Really?

AA:

(laughter) Truly!

CB:

Every woman in America is comparing Renee to her own mother-in-law right now!

AA:  
(laughter)

CB:  
Now everyone, *including me*, was a little obsessed with your marriage to Renee's son, Ethan. After all, when you met, you were a relatively unknown actress.

AA:  
That's right. I had just finished two pictures, at that point.

CB:  
And your third movie was *The Art of Deception* with Ethan, a huge hit by the way. I loved the sexual tension in that film!

AA:  
(laughter) We had fun making it!

CB:  
Once the movie came out, the press put things together and began following you both everywhere.

AA:  
I know! (laughter) It was a crazy time.

CB:  
You and Ethan had an undeniable chemistry in *and* out of your films. What was it really like to be Hollywood's most famous couple?

AA:  
Um... It was exciting, incredibly intense, romantic...and a little exhausting!

CB:  
It seemed everything was going your way.

AA:  
It was a surreal experience. Ethan and I both starred in incredible movies. We traveled the world and were fortunate to work with very talented

people. And like I've said, I became part of this large family that welcomed me in. My life couldn't have been better scripted.

CB:

You must know, when you and Ethan decided to go your separate ways, your fans, members of the press included, were simply stunned. We thought: This *can't* be happening!

AA:

I've always appreciated everyone's support and interest.

CB:

Was that a difficult time for you?

AA:

Ethan and I've both gone on to do great things, and we're still close friends. In fact, we talk occasionally, and I'm friends with his wife, Jordan, also.

CB:

I think your fans would be surprised and thrilled to know this! Should we expect to see you and Ethan in another movie together, sometime soon?

AA:

It's funny you say that. We've been looking for the right script that might fit the bill.

CB:

Fantastic! Any hints about what might fit the bill?

AA:

I always appreciate a good thriller.

CB:

I'm intrigued. Anything else you might want fans to know?

AA:

I want my fans to know I love them. Having their support encourages me to keep acting. And I hope my performances translate into very entertaining films.

CB:

Alison, it's been a pleasure talking with you. Thanks for inviting all of us into your home *and* your world.

AA:

It's been a pleasure, Ms. DuBois.

## CHAPTER 1

The only thing distracting me from my infatuation with Vitali's savory lasagna lingering atop my plate was the man sitting across from me.

I slowly sipped the restaurant's showcase cabernet as the love of my life theorized about how his favorite baseball player managed to pitch a perfect game the prior evening. I sat there half-listening, captivated with curve of his smile and the glint in his light brown eyes, and imagined undressing him. The seductive cadence of his voice, alone, had me entranced.

"Next week's game against New York reminds me, my mother's coming to town next week, and she wants to meet you," Andy said, unaware he was interrupting my fantasy.

I snapped to attention at the mention of his highly successful mother. She was the CEO of her own cosmetics company, mother to Andy's four sisters, and grandmother to three girls. Andy sang the praises of her on a regular basis, and they kept in close touch. I wasn't overly optimistic I'd measure up as a significant other to her lone and favored son.

I managed to smile. "I do declare that's fabulous news. I've been dying to meet her for so long."

"I know she feels the same way." He smiled back.

I watched him as I took a sip of my wine, hoping he could not read my true thoughts about his mother.

Andy leaned forward and whispered, "Carlotta, I think we've had an audience for some time."

"You certainly have an audience – me," I quipped, unwilling to take my eyes off of him.

Andy glimpsed briefly to his right, then said, "Don't look now, Carlotta, but you have a couple fans nearby."

"Say it isn't so." I laughed softly, extending one hand across the table to take his. "How do you know they aren't enamored with my handsome sportscaster?" After all, I certainly was.

Looking enticing enough to eat, he rewarded me with a slightly raised brow, then answered, "Because no one would give me the time of day in your glorious presence, my love."

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After a lingering gaze, I reached for my glass and downed the remainder of its contents.

“If we’re not careful, we might end up as tonight’s tabloid chatter,” Andy said, reaching for the wine bottle. “More?”

“I’ve already had over half the bottle,” I protested, though not really meaning it, then watched as he refreshed my glass. I peered at Andy’s empty glass and pretended to pout. “Are you sure you won’t join me?”

Andy shook his head. “Not on a school night, sweetheart. Three o’clock will be here before we know it. In fact,” he said, glancing down at the black sports watch I’d given him for his birthday, “we should probably get going soon so we can continue this celebration more privately.” He smiled at me.

“I couldn’t agree more,” I murmured, raising my glass to my lips.



CHAPTER 2

I awoke, fully exposed, to Andy's lingering scent on the pillow next to me. I was barely awake, but remembered his gentle kiss goodbye before I had drifted back to sleep.

I glanced at the clock, which read just after five o'clock, then pulled the sheet up over me. My alarm would be buzzing in less than an hour.

Despite the hammer pounding inside my head, I couldn't suppress my smile and felt ready to hit the replay button on last night.

I didn't expect to hear a brief knock at my door and see the blur of my long-time assistant Marmalade rushing in.

"Sugar, it's time to rise and shine!" she announced.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, grasping at the sheet as the hallway light streamed in.

Marmalade drew the blinds, filling the room with the dawn of a new day. I watched as she quickly disappeared into my walk-in closet and flipped on the lights.

"Oh, Sugar," she called out, "I phoned you three times and texted more than that. Pardon for barging in, but I was ready to call the authorities!"

"Huh?" I managed to sit up and reach over to turn off my alarm.

"Indeed! Now is not the time to linger, Sugar!" Marmalade appeared at my closet door and threw my white robe across the room, managing to land it on the edge of the bed before she disappeared once again.

I quickly sat up, pulled the robe about me, and swung my feet to the floor.

Marmalade came forward with a couple different sets of shoes, black patent and red satin. I pointed to the black pair.

She nodded in agreement. "It's going to be a big day!"

"I need coffee," I uttered. It was going to be long day if I continued to feel as I did. I really should have stopped drinking last night at half the bottle.

"In the works!" Marmalade dropped the black shoes at my feet and vanished.

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“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” I called after her, reaching for my cell phone on the bedside table while listening to the distant clanking of china and silverware.

As my phone powered on, Marmalade returned to hand me a cream-inundated cup of coffee along with two pain pills.

For once, my assistant’s hair wasn’t done up as it normally was, and she wasn’t wearing heels or a dress. Her long dark hair was pulled into a ponytail, and she wore sweats and tennis shoes. There’d never been a better time to blackmail her with a quick snap of a camera.

I chugged my first sip of coffee as Marmalade took off into the closet again and proclaimed, “We need to get Sugar into the shower and downtown – Godspeed!” She returned with my favorite black pantsuit and laid it out on the far end of the bed.

I guzzled my coffee, hoping for a surge of energy while my phone’s symphony of alerts caught my attention. Apparently something *big* had happened, and I’d slept right through it.

My thoughts frantically raced to conclusions, starting with the worst possible one. I looked over at Marmalade and called out, “Is Andy...”

Marmalade, all six feet of her, swooped down to sit beside me and grabbed the coffee cup out of my hand. “Yes, child, that boy’s fine.” She patted me on the back.

“Cecil?” I watched with relief as Marmalade shook her head.

“Oh Sugar, you really don’t know?” she asked slowly.

“What then? Is the world coming to an end?”

Marmalade’s brown eyes loomed large, slightly eerie in the dawn light. “No,” she replied, “but it may well be, as far as this town’s concerned. That big star, Alison Abbot, she’s gone missing!”

### CHAPTER 3

A large crowd was gathered outside the Los Angeles Police Department headquarters when I arrived, just past eight o'clock. With the help of my phone, I quickly located Ravi Kalimurthy, my regular cameraman from television station KDKD, where I moonlighted a few times a week as its entertainment news reporter.

"Why don't we set up over there before we head in," I suggested, pointing toward the Los Angeles City Hall building across from police headquarters.

Within moments, I was looking into the lens of Ravi's camera. "Hello Ladies and Gents, it's Carlotta DuBois from KDKD and your favorite entertainment blog *Carlotta's Corner*, reporting live from the LAPD headquarters in downtown Los Angeles." I motioned toward the building behind me.

"In just a few minutes, our fine LAPD officials will brief us regarding their search for the lovely Ms. Alison Abbot. Like you, I'm anxiously waiting to hear our dear Ms. Abbot has been found safe. Given the amazing LAPD task force is already working toward this goal, I'm sure we'll hear good news very soon. Ladies and Gents, I'll be back with you shortly to provide another update."

A couple minutes later, Ravi and I flashed our press passes and headed inside to the auditorium where media and police were milling about. Ravi set up in back, while I took a seat near the podium. The LAPD wasn't exactly my beat, but when the news involved Hollywood stars, I wanted to be front and center.

Shortly thereafter, Police Chief Dave Faulkner stepped behind the podium, joined from behind by a small contingent of officers. He was large man with a thick mustache and full head of salt and pepper hair.

He announced himself with an air of authority before he began, "Early this morning, Mr. Jeb Cartwright, agent and friend, reported Ms. Alison Abbot as missing. Mr. Cartwright, a person knowledgeable of Ms. Abbot's business affairs, became concerned after she failed to report to work the past two days on the movie she's currently filming and also failed to appear at a charity event two days ago."

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“So far, close associates of Ms. Abbot tell us she hadn’t notified them of intended absences, in either case. In the past few hours, we’ve confirmed Ms. Abbot was last seen by household staff in her Los Angeles residence three days ago. Additionally, household staff at her New York City apartment has confirmed she hasn’t been there in the past forty-eight hours. We don’t believe Ms. Abbot has left the country, but we are in the process of confirming this.”

He paused briefly to assess the audience, without asking for questions. The only sound was silence, unusual for a room full of press.

Chief Faulkner continued, “At the moment, we don’t have any evidence of foul play, but we also don’t have any reason to believe Ms. Abbot would intentionally disappear without telling anyone.”

“We have officers deployed in the search for Ms. Abbot and have just received search warrants that will give us access to her home and personal records. We’ll also review footage of traffic cameras surrounding Ms. Abbot’s home in the past few days.” He paused, then continued, “Questions?”

“Does Ethan know?” a male voice called from the back of the room.

Every person in the room knew who Ethan Rogers was. He and Alison had captivated the entertainment world with their fairytale romance and drawn-out divorce. Their story had been a tabloid favorite for the past few years, even on my blog. Since their separation, Ethan had moved on to a new wife and child, while Alison had stayed single and romanced a good portion of Hollywood’s eligible bachelors.

Chief Faulkner replied, “We’re speaking with those closest to Ms. Abbot to help determine her whereabouts.” He pointed toward the crowd and said, “I’ll take a couple more questions.”

“Was Ms. Abbot driving her car when she disappeared?” a reporter a couple seats down from me asked.

The Chief nodded, the replied, “Her car is missing, and we are currently working off the theory she departed her home driving her own vehicle two days ago.”

Gasps went through the crowd. “What does she drive?” someone called out.

Chief Faulkner said, “Let’s get to specifics.” He went on to describe Alison’s blue Porsche Carrera, including the license plate number. He shared details about the clothing household staff believed she might have been wearing and the route she most likely would have driven if her intended destination two days ago was to the charity event.

The Chief cleared his throat, then spoke to the audience, “We ask the public to contact us as soon as possible if anyone has any information regarding Ms. Abbot’s whereabouts. If anybody has seen Ms. Abbot or her

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vehicle in the past thirty-six hours, we ask that you contact the LAPD, immediately.” He paused for short moment, then continued, “We’ll be gathering our facts as quickly as possible and will update you as key facts become available.”

Once the Chief stepped away from the podium, sounds of chatter dominated the auditorium.

I stayed seated a few moments longer and went through the motions of jotting down a handful of notes. As an experienced reporter, I knew that bizarre activities in Hollywood weren’t uncommon, but even I was stunned by Alison Abbot’s mysterious disappearance.

As I made my way toward the exit doors to reunite with Ravi, I heard someone call my name. I stopped, turned around, and found my past had walked up behind me.



CHAPTER 4

“Why Sam Carlyle, you’re looking as handsome as ever,” I said calmly, despite the adrenaline shot through my heart. There stood my ex-lover, looking a bit older and more refined than I’d remembered.

“Carlotta, how have you been?” He smiled at me.

“Never better, well, except for all this business. It’s a shame about Alison.”

I took in Sam’s navy sports coat and silver tie, wondering why he wasn’t dressed in a policeman’s uniform.

“It is. So you’re on television these days?” he asked.

I smiled at him. “I am, indeed. Are you a fan?”

Sam laughed a bit. “Now and then, when I make it home before bedtime.”

“All work and no play might make Sam a dull boy. We can’t be having that,” I teased, garnering his smile.

“And what about you?” he asked. “All work and no play these days, Carlotta?”

“I’m of the opinion that my work is play,” I shot back.

Sam threw his head back and laughed. “You haven’t changed.”

“Now, why would I?” I smiled demurely at him.

Sam grinned and shook his head, just as a uniformed police officer passed by.

“Hey, Detective,” the officer said.

“Hey, Rooney,” Sam called after him.

I touched Sam lightly on the arm and said, “I see congratulations are in order.”

He shrugged. “Well, some things have changed.”

“A detective now, I see. I hope you aren’t going to investigate me,” I said lightly.

Sam laughed briefly and replied, “Only if you want me to, Carlotta.” He paused, adding, “I know I’d like that.”

I said nothing, but stood there taking in his neat dark hair, trim mustache, and chiseled jaw. I was having thoughts of an irrational woman,

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one who'd recently spent a passionate evening with another man, her true beau.

"Actually, we're probably going to have our hands full with this case," Sam said.

His words brought me back to reality and to the reason for us being here.

"You're working on the Abbot investigation?" I asked.

His nod was brief. "You could say that."

I stood there for a moment, wondering what he meant. "They have the best then," I said, smiling. "Care to give a lonely gossip columnist first dibs?"

Sam cocked a brow and laughed. "You really haven't changed. I'm sorry, Carlotta, it doesn't quite work that way."

I tilted my head at him and said sweetly, "A girl must try."

Sam grinned, before looking at his watch, then at me. "I'd better go. It's going to be a long day."

Caught up in the moment, I'd forgotten Ravi would be waiting for me. "I should be on my way, too," I said.

Sam treated me to one last smile. "It was good to see you, Carlotta."

"You take care," I murmured, then watched as he went to join the other uniformed police officers nearby.

"Carlotta?"

I turned to find Ravi coming down the aisle toward me.

"Where would you like to set up this time?" he asked.



**CHAPTER 5 (Alison Pt 1)**

*August – seven years earlier*

Dominique and I arrive at my audition a few minutes early and stand in the back of the Heritage Theater.

Eyes glittering with excitement, he takes me by the shoulders and whispers in my ear, “You’ve never been more beautiful than you are today!”

Once my name is called, I leave Dominique and proceed down the aisle and to the center of the stage, just as a man walks out from behind the stage curtains and comes forward to stand in front of me. With his cropped red hair, tweed sports coat, and wire-rimmed spectacles low on his nose, he reminds me of a teacher.

“Alison, I’m Matt Barlow, the director of *The Killing Diary*.” He reaches for my hand, while his eyes focus on me.

“It’s a pleasure, sir.” I shake his hand briefly.

Matt stands there a moment longer looking at me, and I wonder if he is assessing me for the part or if he’s just forgotten what to say next. He recovers shortly, introducing me to the film’s executive producer, a man, and the casting director, a woman, who have taken their seats at a small rectangular table a few feet to our left, atop the stage. Both offer the briefest nods.

“We’ll have you read from Act Two, a couple pages in.” Matt turns to a man I passed along the aisle and continues, “Phillip will read the male part.”

Phillip is a short blonde man about my age who looks nothing like the Mr. Sparks I’d envisioned. In the script, Mr. Sparks is an aged college professor who’s also a serial killer stalking my character.

I’m auditioning for the part of Charlotte, a college coed from the wrong side of the tracks who’s a student of Mr. Sparks, and a very smart one at that, which is why she catches his attention in the first place.

In this scene, the professor has stopped by Charlotte’s apartment unannounced to return the cell phone he secretly took from her purse during class, when she wasn’t looking.

I nod at Phillip, then Matt, who leaves us to join the others at the table. Then, I take a moment to glance at Dominique, who’s seated in the

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shadows near the theater entrance. I'm thankful he's left no stone unturned in my preparation for this part, one he insists I was meant to play.

Now seated, Matt reaches for the script and queues us to start.

Phillip begins, apologizing for stopping by, but feeling it was necessary to return the phone quickly.

I respond, uneasily, thanking him.

Phillip continues, telling me how much he enjoys me in class and how remarkable my latest essay was.

I thank him again, before sharing that I may have to drop out of school, given some problems I'm having.

I steal a peek at Matt, unable to tell if he is impressed, but I've certainly got the attention of all three at the table.

Once Phillip and I finish the scene a couple minutes later, Matt says, "Good, good." He turns pages of the script, then says, "Let's pick it up from the climax on page seventy."

Philip and I nod, before beginning a scene that requires me to get emotional and lash out at Mr. Sparks for his meddling in my life. Good thing Dominique obsessed with teaching me to display more sensitivity. It may pay off today.

I feel exhilarated once we end the scene and can tell by Philip's smile, he's pleased, as well. I look past him to see the producer and casting director whispering to one another and watch as Matt comes forward to stand in front of me.

I notice his pale blue eyes and the slight curvature of his long slender nose. He's attractive in a studious way, and for some reason, I feel an urgent need to please him.

"Alison, that was very well done," he says, unsmiling, his eyes locked with mine.

And from this moment forward, I suspect what is to come.

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Dominique is perfectly pleased. "I could tell they adored you!" he exclaims as we enter our apartment a little while later.

"We shouldn't get ahead of ourselves." I laugh, feeling lighthearted. I played my part well, today, and I will play my part well, tonight. "Where are you taking me to dinner?" I ask.

Dominique comes up behind me, pulls me closer, and nuzzles his head in my long dark hair. "We'll dine at Vitali's tonight – only the best for my princess!"

I feel his lips gently caress my neck.

Since Dominique is intent on sparing no expense on dinner tonight, I think about how I can please him. "Shall I wear my red dress tonight?" I ask, turning to put my arms around his neck.

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“You are a goddess on fire!” He leans forward to kiss me for more than a minute.

Soon enough, we are seated on the white leather couch Dominique gifted me last week for all my hard work. I allow him to pour me pink champagne, and we toast to our future.

Next, Dominique insists on massaging my feet, so I lean back on the satin pillows to watch his brown eyes watching me.

“What do you have in mind?” I ask.

Dominique says nothing, but smiles as he works his hands slowly up my calves, then thighs. He stops, takes my glass from me, and places it on the coffee table.

I know what will come next.

\*\*\*

In early evening, we arrive at Vitali’s, a restaurant Dominique surely cannot afford. As expected, the service is unsurpassed, fitting for the movie stars that are often said to dine here and certainly fitting for our moods.

Dominique and I delight in the delicious cannelloni, scrumptious chocolate tiramisu, and sparkling white wine.

We arrive home a couple hours later, most satisfied and destined for a long night of love-making. We are further delighted once I check my phone messages and discover I’ve been called back for another audition.

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For my next audition, I do not return to the theater from yesterday, but drive to a new location in Studio City. I am without Dominique today since Matt Barlow’s assistant instructed that today’s auditions are only between Matt and the actors.

I arrive at a six-story office park and take the elevator to the top floor. Matt’s assistant greets me and directs me down the hall, where I find Matt sitting at a desk in his office.

He turns in his chair to smile at me. “I’ve decided Charlotte will have dark hair like yours.”

“It’s not natural.” I say, closing the door behind me. “Besides, I’m very fond of red.” I walk forward, place both hands on his desk, and lean toward him.

“Yes, but black suits you,” he practically stutters, still in his chair. “I mean, it suits Charlotte.”

I step back, smiling at him.

Matt rises and comes around his desk to position himself within a foot of me. He says nothing, while his pale eyes linger on my own.

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I can sense he's nervous, but decide not to make it easy on him. After all, Matt called me back to audition for his part, so I'm going to make it worth his while.

I take a step back and ask, "Would you like me to read from another part today?"

"Um...yes," he replies, reaching for a script atop his desk.

"I don't need it," I quickly say, smiling at him. I'm playing the consummate actress, ready to show off my talents. After all, Dominique has prepared me well, and I feel some loyalty to him after last night's dinner.

Matt just stands there looking at me.

"I'll read from page forty-five," I say. "Charlotte's in her apartment. She's about to break up with her boyfriend so she can focus on her project for Mr. Sparks."

Matt nods in agreement.

"Would you like to play opposite me?" I ask, approaching his office couch and taking a seat.

I soon note that Matt, with script in hand, has followed me over to sit in the chair opposite me.

As Charlotte, I ask my boyfriend, who is confused and upset, to forgive me for ignoring him and spending so much time with my teacher Mr. Sparks.

Matt, his eyes on me, does not refer to the script, but instead improvises the boyfriend's lines, telling me there's something odd about Mr. Sparks.

I insist I must drop out of class so I can spend more time with him.

Matt immediately smiles. I can tell he knows I've gone off script, too, since Charlotte should have defended her admiration for Mr. Sparks, but Matt plays along, anyway.

We role play for more than a minute longer, and I can tell Matt's intrigued with how well I'm playing my part, although I know I can do so much better.

So I stand up and approach Matt, who continues to improvise. I kneel down in front of him and slide my hands slowly up his thighs before stopping.

Matt stops speaking and our eyes linger on one another for a moment, before I reach forward to take his belt buckle in my hands.

I can tell he's very intrigued at this point, and we both know what's to come.

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Matt surprises me. I do not expect such energy and a willingness to please. He is somewhat like Dominique, but different in other ways.

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When I return home a few hours later, I feel spent. I played my part well, and so did Matt.

I tell Dominique that Matt and his team really put me through the ringer, even requiring me to adlib much of the time. It was unlike any audition I've attended, I tell him, but it was worth it. I got the part.

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A couple of months pass, and we are well into filming *The Killing Diary*. Experiencing the excitement of a film production is better than I imagined, although being the film's star is simply supreme.

Everyone is catering to my needs. Hair and Makeup ensure I look my very best, while Food Service ensures the French crepes I've become accustomed to at home with Dominique are delivered to my trailer every morning.

Dominique's around much of the time to coach me on my lines. Even Matt's doing his part - to pleasure me as often as possible so that I'm feeling my very best.

My costar who plays the serial killer is Alex Doucette, a gay man from London, who's quite high on himself. He's a very experienced theater actor with a good look for a demonic killer. Alex and I don't spend much time rehearsing outside our scenes, given that Matt and Dominique are both competing for my attention.

Being the star of my own picture is not all pleasure, however. I can tell Matt's assistant Angelique is speculating about me. I've heard from others she's been unable to find Matt a good portion of the time when I know he's been off hiding with me. I can tell by Angelique's smirky smile that she suspects something is going on between her boss and me, but she's smart enough to know I have the upper hand on this one.

I'm trying to behave, really I am. I am playing all the parts I'm supposed to, and I think I'm playing them fairly well. However, Dane, the cameraman, is starting to pique my interest, with his French accent and dark silky hair. I'm doing all I can to concentrate on my lines, but it's particularly challenging when I'm the only person in a scene, and I see Dane smiling at me.

Overall, while I'm content with my acting, I am also beginning to feel restless. Dominique is starting to wear on me. We've been together longer than necessary, and I'm hopeful he will find romance with Francesca, a young actress with a small part in this movie.

I've done all I can to bring them together, even inviting Francesca to my trailer to practice lines with Dominique and me. She's reserved, yet impressionable, and her Italian looks and accent make her undeniably attractive.

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

Perhaps Dominique will take Francesca on as a project, as he did me, for I don't intend for him to stick around. Once this movie is done filming, I will need to find a place of my own and start supporting myself.

And Matt is ok, playing his part well enough, but the picture will be wrapping up soon. He's already been discussing his next project with me, but I've secretly begun auditioning, and a couple of roles are beginning to look promising. One's even with the director Garret Clay, who's much more established than Matt.

We are a few weeks into filming, and I need a fix, one I've never gotten from Dominique, and one I certainly will not get from Matt. It would be unwise to dilly-dally with the cameraman when Matt is running the show. I am craving something different and need a reset.

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We wrap earlier than usual on a Friday and aren't scheduled to resume filming until Monday. I tell both Matt and Dominique that I need time away from them to recuperate from working. I proceed to make arrangements at a five-star hotel in downtown Los Angeles, for a suite special enough for the weekend I have planned.

After enjoying the perks of a massage and facial at the hotel spa, I return to my room and order a bottle of champagne from room service.

As I enjoy some refreshment, I return to the mirror and place the red wig I convinced Matt I should wear for the movie over my dark hair. Once the picture is out, I will be more recognizable than I am now, and I probably shouldn't take any chances tonight.

I slip a sleeveless black blouse over my head and put on a black mini-skirt. I zip up a pair of knee-high suede boots and spray a bit of perfume behind my ears. I put the finishing touches on my make-up and ready the room for my eventual guest.

I walk down to the hotel lobby, then into the dark ambience of the hotel bar, where jazz is softly playing in the background. I glance around the room and find my date is already waiting at the far corner table.

As I approach, she stands and comes round the table to greet me with a kiss on both cheeks.

I step back and note her seductive black dress and pensive smile, and I wonder if she's as excited for the evening ahead as I am. I reach down and take her hand in mine and lead her back to her seat.

Tonight is against my better judgment, but I simply cannot resist. If Dominique's not interested in bedding Francesca, I intend to have her for myself.

CHAPTER 6

Ravi and I had wrapped up our live update from the LAPD headquarters when Jamison, the producer of KDKD's five o'clock news, called.

"Carlotta, would you mind doing a little extra press today?"

"I expected no less," I replied.

"Then you and Ravi should head over to Jake Caldwell's right away."

"*The Jake Caldwell* who played the voice of the Magic Monster in the Christmas flick?" I glanced over at Ravi as he loaded his camera equipment into his van.

"That's him," Jamison replied. "And I'm sure I don't have to remind you he's the last guy known to date Alison."

"Hasn't Mr. Caldwell already moved on with that itty bitty singer?" I asked.

"Well, he's promising an exclusive, and we haven't got much else at this point."

"Marmalade's making some calls," I said.

"I hope she has better luck than we've had at the station. Sounds like the Rogers aren't giving interviews, and Abbot's agent, Cartwright, has decided to talk exclusively with another network."

"You have an address?" I asked.

\*\*\*

Ravi and I parted ways for the drive north and planned to meet at Jake Caldwell's Malibu beach home. I stopped for coffee and placed a quick call to Marmalade to discuss leads on interviews and updates to our *Carlotta's Corner* blog and social media accounts.

"The press is camped outside Advent's studio. It's all over the news," she said.

"Oh, why is that?" I asked.

"Ethan Rogers has been filming a movie there."

"Today?"

"Supposedly," she replied.

I expected the police would be talking with him about his ex-wife's disappearance.

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

“And Renee Rogers, Ethan’s mother, released a statement on behalf of the family,” Marmalade said.

“Good. Let’s run her comments. Anything from Ethan?”

“Nothing yet,” Marmalade replied, “but Millennial Talent, who represents him, issued a statement. I’ve got calls into them and agents of a few stars Alison worked with.”

“Ok. Keep me posted. Do we know anything about Alison’s family or close friends?” I asked.

“Still working it,” Marmalade said. “Alison never said much in interviews about family. We might try to talk with her prior agents, Taloria Glace and Dominique Tarpino. Ms. Glace has an office, but I can’t find anything on Mr. Tarpino.”

“Let’s see if Ms. Glace will talk with us,” I suggested. “Jamison has me heading to Malibu to see Jake Caldwell. Do we have any good photos of Alison with the Rogers family?”

“Right at Marmalade’s fingertips,” she responded.

“Great. Can you track down some poignant statements today from fellow actors and ex-boyfriends, too, and add in some memorable photos of Alison?” I asked.

“Already working it, Sugar.”

\*\*\*

A short dark-skinned man, barefoot and dressed only in bright red satin shorts, answered the door of Caldwell’s beach-front home. He led us past contemporary-styled decor and through sliding glass doors to find Jake Caldwell lounging outside on a second-story deck.

Unshaven and with mid-length hair in disarray, Jake did not rise to greet us, nor did he look ready to greet a camera.

I’d heard Nicolette, a singer and his new love, had recently kicked off a worldwide tour, so perhaps Jake was a bit worn out from playing lead groupie.

“Mr. Caldwell, you’re looking mighty fine,” I greeted him with a big smile, then looked out toward the water and added, “And look at this view.”

“Why don’t you have a seat,” Jake offered, barely smiling as he motioned us toward the small hodgepodge of chairs surrounding him. “Can Diego get you anything, a cocktail perhaps?” he asked.

I stole a peak at the table next to Jake, with a handful of opened beer bottles spread across it, then smiled at our host. “As delightful as that sounds, the day is young. Ravi and I must keep our wits about us.”

“Suit yourself,” Jake said, frowning.



J.C. Patrick

He'd likely woken up on the wrong side of the bed, or Alison's disappearance had put him in a dower mood. I secretly gave him the benefit of the doubt, opting for the latter.

Diego cleared the table, while Jake excused himself for a few minutes, disappearing through a nearby sliding glass door.

I was grateful for a few extra minutes to consider my questions for Jake.

Nearly ten minutes later, he returned, fully-clothed and with his damp hair pulled into a neat ponytail.

After a few minutes discussing the best set-up for the shot, and a few brief smiles from Jake, we were ready to roll.

"Hello Ladies and Gents, it's your very own Carlotta DuBois from KDKD and your favorite entertainment blog *Carlotta's Corner*, reporting live from the exquisite beach home of the very handsome and talented Jake Caldwell."

"Mr. Caldwell and Ms. Abbot once dazzled us all with their effervescent chemistry, and as you can imagine, Mr. Caldwell, like all of us, is devastated by news of Ms. Abbot's disappearance. We are appreciative of Mr. Caldwell's gracious invitation to his home so that he can share a few kind words about his former love."

\*\*\*

I had just reached my car when the text came from Lee Romero, one of my contacts at the LAPD, who was good for all sorts of tips. Hollywood stars, especially the young ones, were always getting into trouble, and Romero helped to ensure I was one of the first to know.

"Abbot's car found in Topanga SP."

"When?" I hurriedly texted back.

"Minutes ago," he replied.

Minutes meant Topanga State Park and canyon would soon be swarming with police and become a focal point of news for the day.



CHAPTER 7

I placed a quick call to Jamison, who had just heard the news about Alison's car, and then texted Marmalade to let her know where I was heading.

The sun had already risen above the hills, promising to be a scorcher of a day. I tuned my radio to KDKD, knowing Jamison and team would be chomping at the bit to report any updates.

I followed Ravi south on the Pacific Coast highway before turning north onto Topanga Canyon Road with its hairpin turns and lush views. As I caught glimpses of the multi-million dollar homes dotting the landscape, I reminded myself that the canyon was not as remote as it had been years earlier.

I chugged down the rest of my now cold coffee and chomped down one of the energy bars stored in my car's glove compartment, hoping the combination would infuse me with energy to endure this already long day. I certainly hadn't expected to be gallivanting about rugged terrain in three-inch heels.

As we neared our turnoff, traffic slowed to a snail's pace. The pause gave me time to contemplate the interview I'd had with Jake Caldwell, which turned out to be a press opportunity for him, rather than a demonstration of his concern for Alison. His off-camera comments, though, had made the stop worth it.

"I was surprised she gave me the time of day," he'd said of Alison.

"How'd you two break it off?" I'd asked.

"The crazy bitch cut me off. I'm not gonna give that up for anyone, if you know what I mean," he'd replied.

If Alison had tired of Caldwell, who had she moved on to? She'd been noticeably dateless for the past few months, including at the last Oscars ceremony.

My thoughts drifted to Ethan Rogers, who had considerable more clout in Hollywood than playboy Caldwell. I wondered if Ethan's relationship with Alison had also cooled before their split. But the more intriguing question was this: how had Alison's career flourished post-separation, given the power Ethan's family wielded in Hollywood?

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

I followed Ravi and turned right onto Entrada Road, which would lead us into the state park, where the police had already set up barricades and were directing traffic. After flashing our press passes to gain access, we proceeded carefully along a residential area until we were directed into a far corner of the parking lot with other media.

I stepped out of my vehicle and was met with the heat of the day and the brilliant sound of police choppers overhead, which did nothing to help alleviate my hangover.

Ravi ran off to scout shooting locations, while I scoped the surrounding area, snapping a few photos for the blog and exchanging a handful of greetings with other members of the press. Like the others, I watched as a steady stream of press, LAPD, and Sheriff vehicles arrive on the scene.

I returned to the seat of my car and texted Marmalade to let her know I'd be sending video shorts from this location. Then, I uploaded a couple photos to the blog, adding a few comments to go with them.

"Why Ms. DuBois, still working for Jamison I see?" an unfamiliar voice asked.

I looked up to find Lester Burdock, a squirrel of a man, within a few feet of me. I'd first met him years earlier when he was retiring after a long career with KDKD, and I was beginning my own there. We'd come across one another at a handful of press association dinners since then.

"Lester, what a pleasant surprise to find you here," I said sweetly.

"Seems like I see you everywhere these days, Carlotta, on the web, on the news," he said with his nasally pitched voice. "Your brand has skyrocketed."

I stood up and took his aged hand in mine. "Oh, Lester, do go on. You flatter me, as always. Are you still freelancing these days?"

"Oh, here and there," he replied. Lester stepped closer, narrowed his eyes, and asked, "Do you think they'll find her?"

I stepped back from him and smiled. "Why, of course I do. I have every faith in LA's finest."

"It's a little strange, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh, I was thinking about Alison's movie, *The Decoy*. Doesn't her character kill the bad guys and dispose of their car in a canyon?"

What Lester said was true. I hadn't thought about the connection, but I wasn't going to share conspiracy theories with him today.

I nodded, then replied, "I'm sure it's a coincidence."

"Well, they probably won't find her alive," he said.

"Oh Lester, you're not the optimist I remembered," I teased, when in fact I remembered very little about him, other than Jamison had been happy to see him go.

“Yeah?” Lester squinted at me, adding, “I’m sure the Rogers knew she was trouble after Ethan married beneath him. I imagine someone else thought so, too.”

I felt relief when Ravi returned to interrupt Lester’s strange conjecture. Perhaps Ethan’s family had been disappointed with his hasty marriage to Alison, although she had proved to be a brighter star than most. I preferred to take a more optimistic view about Alison, at least for now.

“Law enforcement has the trails into the park completely blocked off,” Ravi told me. “A cop told me they’re planning a press update in a few minutes.”

I nodded, posting a couple of additional updates on my blog. An interested public would want first-hand knowledge of the day’s events. I was more than happy to report them and ask for the public’s help in locating Alison.

I took a moment to phone Jamison and reported, “The police choppers are searching the canyon.”

“The news stations can’t even get their people near,” he replied. “Police have banned air traffic above the canyon.”

“There’s a crowd gathering,” Ravi interjected, pointing to where a group had gathered around a covered picnic structure a few feet from the parking area. “We should probably get over there.”

In the next minute, I clicked off with Jamison, and we headed toward the action.

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As Ravi and I approached the press area, I searched the crowd for Sam, although I doubted our previous relationship would buy me any favors today.

I watched as policemen brought a couple of search dogs past the gathering, then onto the nearby trail before heading out of sight. A police chopper continued to fly overhead.

Ravi set up next to the other cameras, while I maneuvered toward the front with several other reporters.

Sergeant Thomas, junior to Chief Faulkner by about a decade and with a seemingly serious demeanor, took the microphone and waited patiently for the crowd to quiet down before he spoke. “At approximately ten forty-five this morning,” he began, “two hikers reported an abandoned vehicle matching the description of Ms. Alison Abbot’s vehicle near Topanga Fire Road. A few minutes later, LAPD officers arrived and verified the vehicle is, in fact, registered to Ms. Abbot.”

“Please note, Ms. Abbot was *not* with the car. If she was driving her car, she could be in the park, hurt or even possibly disoriented. We are in the process of organizing search teams to hike the miles of park trails and

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

roads. We'll also be checking in the residential areas nearby to see if anyone has seen Ms. Abbot. We have *and will* continue to evacuate anyone who does not have a need to be in the park.”

“Any signs of violence?” someone called.

“We're not going to comment, other than we'll be checking footage of traffic cameras near the canyon's vicinity, in hopes they can help us identify who was inside the vehicle.”

“We ask the public to contact the police immediately if you have any information that would assist us with our search for Ms. Abbot. Additionally, if anyone within the vicinity of the canyon noted anything suspicious in the past several hours, please report this to the police as soon as possible.” He paused briefly and then continued, “I'm not taking any questions at this point, but we plan to update you again on the progress of our search.”

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I was thinking about Lester's claims about Alison on my walk back toward the parking lot, when I heard someone ask, “Are you Ms. Carlotta DuBois?”

I turned to smile at a policeman with a boyish face and attractive brown eyes and then answered, “Indeed I am.”

“Detective Carlyle wants to speak with you, ma'am.”

CHAPTER 8

“Why that’s quite alright with me.” I smiled at the officer again before looking around for Ravi. “First, let me find my cameraman.”

“Just you, Ms. DuBois,” he quickly countered.

I looked at him. “Pardon me?”

“Detective Carlyle has a few questions for just you, Ms. DuBois.” He sounded almost apologetic.

“He does, does he?” I smiled, before surveying the surroundings once more for Ravi.

The crowd had disbursed somewhat, but Ravi was nowhere to be seen. He’d probably high-tailed it back to his van parked at the far end of the parking lot, thinking I’d meet him there.

I smiled at the officer, once more. “Alright, I’ll talk to the Detective, but only for few minutes. I’ll need to be on the air soon.”

We turned back the way I had come, walking further into the park, past the shaded picnic area where the media had been gathered. We proceeded in the direction of a large white canopy that had been erected over several picnic tables and where a handful of LAPD personnel were gathered.

I watched as Sam turned his back to the officer he was speaking with and came forward to meet me.

“Detective Carlyle,” I greeted him, “I’m mighty appreciative you changed your mind about giving me first dibs.”

“Carlotta, let’s step over there for a moment,” Sam said quietly.

“Don’t take me too far out into the woods, you might have to rescue me,” I teased.

Sam guided me a few steps off the path to stand under the shade of an oak tree and then said, “Carlotta, we need to talk to you about last month’s interview with Alison.”

I glimpsed over at the police tent, wondering if the LAPD would be concerned about one of its own talking with woman who made a living spilling other people’s secrets.

“You could have phoned me, you know,” I said, smiling.

Sam shifted his leg, unsmiling, and said, “It could be vital to the case, actually. We’re going to need a few minutes of your time.”

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

“Now?” I asked.

Sam nodded.

I studied him for a moment, but his gray eyes gave nothing away.

“Ok,” I said, “but give me a couple minutes to call my producer and cameraman. I’m expected on the air any minute.”

Sam briefly nodded, saying, “Let’s meet at the far end of the tent when you’re done.”

After Sam stepped away, I quickly phoned Ravi, then Jamison, who was full of questions that would have to wait until later.

I headed toward the table furthest away from the activities, where Sam introduced me to a man wearing a dark brown tweed sports coat. He was bald, older than Sam, and looked a little like my vision of a detective.

“Detective McDonald will be joining us,” Sam explained.

McDonald greeted me with a half-nod and unfriendly stare, before I took a seat across from them.

Sam began, “How’d your interview with Alison come about?”

“Jeb Cartwright’s team contacted me,” I replied.

“Do you normally do television interviews?”

I shook my head, then answered, “Nothing at length. My KDKD updates usually mimic those on my blog.”

“Did you think it was unusual for Cartwright’s team to contact you?”

“At first, yes, since I hadn’t approached them,” I said slowly, adding, “but then I considered their request and thought, why not me? And besides, I knew KDKD would be thrilled to get the exclusive.”

“Had you met Alison before?” Sam asked.

I shook my head again, stating, “We only crossed paths at a few press events. I wouldn’t say we’d formally met before last month.”

“The interview was conducted at her home. Did you think that was unusual?”

“Not really. It’s a more relaxed setting than a newsroom, and certainly more private.”

“Did you speak much with Alison outside the taped interview?”

“No. Cartwright and his people let us in when we arrived. Ravi and I set up, then Alison joined us for just the interview.”

“Cartwright was in attendance?” Sam asked.

I nodded, then explained, “We had a few words. He wanted me to know Alison said anything was on the table.”

“You mean as in the interview?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Did Cartwright say why *anything* was on the table?”

I shrugged, then said, “Not exactly.”

“Is that unusual for a person of her star power?” Sam asked.



I considered my thoughts carefully before speaking, “I thought it was a little unusual her publicist wasn’t involved to prescreen a few of my questions.”

“When you met with Alison, did she seem stressed about anything?”

I shook my head, quickly glancing at McDonald who was watching me. “You can check with Ravi, my cameraman – he’s actually here – but I thought Alison seemed quite relaxed and cheerful.”

“Did she say anything unusual, anything that would give you pause?”

I reflected on the interview and responded, “Not really.”

“Is there anything that stands out about your time with her?”

I considered his question and then began, “If you really want to know, when we took a short break, she asked me about my hair.”

“Why would she do that?” Sam asked.

“She wanted to know if it was natural - the color, I mean.”

“Is it?” McDonald quickly asked.

“Of course,” I said, stealing a glance at Sam who was jotting something down in a notebook.

When he finished, I looked at both of them and asked, “Is there anything else, gentlemen? I should really be getting back on the air.” I started to rise, before either could utter a word.

I watched Sam looked briefly at McDonald before his eyes settled on me. “Actually, we have a few more questions, Carlotta,” he said slowly.

I took my seat. “Are we still talking about Alison?” I asked.

Sam nodded, unsmiling.

The growing awkwardness of this meet-up prompted me to ask, “Do I need an attorney?”

“Did you have anything to do with Alison’s disappearance?” McDonald shot back.

I couldn’t hide my smirk from McDonald, before turning my attention to Sam.

“Carlotta, it’s your choice if you choose to help us. This is still a missing person’s investigation, but it’s beginning to look like foul play might be involved with Alison’s disappearance. We, McDonald and I, are of the opinion your help is critical at this juncture.”

I considered his statement, then replied, “Ok. What do you need to know?”

Sam took a moment before speaking, “We uncovered some evidence in the car that ties back to you.”

“Me?” I asked, my pulse immediately elevated.

Sam studied me a long moment, then nodded. “I need your word right now, Carlotta, that what we discuss stays between us.”

“And my attorney?” I asked.

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

“That’s fine,” he agreed. “We retrieved a burner phone from inside Alison’s vehicle and found its only calls were made to your cell number – three calls, all placed around midnight last night.”

I didn’t attempt to suppress the shock I was feeling. “I didn’t speak to Alison last night,” I said slowly.

“Did you have your phone on last night?”

“I had my phone off most of the evening,” I replied. “I don’t normally do so, but we were out celebrating.”

Sam jotted something down in his notebook and then asked, “And when did your phone go off?”

“After ten - possibly.” I hesitated, debating saying more. “If you must know, I was having dinner with my boyfriend Andy last night.”

“Where?”

“Vitali’s - over on Melrose,” I answered.

Sam’s nod was brief. “I know the place. And after that?”

“We went straight to my place.”

“And stayed there all night?”

I nodded.

“Your phone was off, and you took no calls after ten?” he asked.

“About then.” I nodded again.

Sam studied me for a long moment. “Are you telling us everything, Carlotta?”

I managed to quell my irritation before responding, “You can check my phone. There might have been a hang-up or two, but Alison Abbot didn’t leave me any messages. I can’t imagine why she would be phoning me late at night.”

“We can’t be sure it was Alison calling,” McDonald quickly pointed out.

“Three calls in a matter of fifteen minutes indicate a sense of urgency,” Sam said. “Someone must have really wanted you to answer.”

“Have you talked to Cartwright about this?” I asked.

Sam shook his head and answered, “Not yet.”

“And it’s not up to you to inform him,” McDonald was quick to add.

“Then, there’s the matter of two nights ago,” Sam said.

I looked at both men.

Sam continued, “If Alison was driving her car, we have at least thirty-six hours she was unaccounted for.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I asked, feeling unsettled about where this conversation might be going.

Sam looked me in the eyes and replied, “We’re going to need you to account for your time from two evenings ago until this morning.”

“I thought-”

“We’re dotting every I and crossing every T,” McDonald interrupted.

“Well, that’s easy,” I shot back. “With the exception of sleeping, I was working most of the time.”

Sam studied me for a moment before quietly saying, “I believe you, but we’ll need a summary of your whereabouts and names of anyone who can verify them - the sooner, the better.”

“You’re serious?” I looked from one to the other.

Sam nodded, taking a business card out of his pocket and sliding it toward me.

“That’s not a problem,” I said, retrieving the card. “I’ll have it to you right away. Anything else?”

“You’ll be placed under a gag order about what we discussed,” Sam replied. “I hope you can see this is in your best interest, as well. We don’t want the media circulating this information, just yet.”

“That includes your blog, Ms. DuBois,” McDonald reminded me.

I simply nodded, easily dismissing his abrasiveness as the seriousness of the situation began to sink in.

Sam looked from McDonald to me and said, “We need to get back.”

A few moments later, Sam walked me to the edge of the tent. I turned toward him and our eyes locked.

“Watch your back, Carlotta,” he said. “If foul play’s involved with Alison’s disappearance, someone’s just made you part of the story.”

Even the heat of the day could not dispel the immediate chill that came over me.



CHAPTER 9

Over an hour later, I was relieved by one of the station's regular news reporters, while Ravi stayed behind. Thankfully, reporting for both the station and my blog kept me from dwelling on my earlier meeting with Sam and McDonald.

I was driving past a log-jam of cars coming up the canyon road and into town for another interview when Marmalade phoned. "Sugar, your video recaps will be live in less than five."

At least part of my day was predictable. My assistant had been the heart of my blog, *Carlotta's Corner*, for eight years now, performing the busy work of tracking stories and fact checking. She was intuitive and efficient, and I don't know what I would have done without her.

"I forgot to mention earlier, we'll need to reschedule the McLaughlin interview for later," I said.

"Already done," Marmalade replied. "I've got you penciled in a few days from now, but Sugar, you know his agent isn't happy. They've been trying to arrange press with you for some time now."

"I know, but who could have predicted today?"

"That's what I told his agent, Sugar. You haven't forgotten about Leilani's press event this week?"

Leilani Vance, an ardent blog supporter and the owner of Leilani's Lingerie, had been a close friend of mine for years. She paid me to advertise her products on my blog, and in addition, I wore her products and was a proud spokesperson for her business.

"I'll be there," I answered. Nothing, not even a missing movie star, would distract me from keeping my blog's loyal advertisers happy.

"You're still in Topanga?" Marmalade asked.

"I'm heading out now. Is there any news regarding Ethan Rogers?"

"Radio silence," she replied. "Dino and his boys are working on getting more photos on the Rogers clan, and I'm posting the best ones as soon as I get them."

Dino O'Reilly and Sons was a paparazzi outfit I'd established a long-term relationship with. My blog had a budget for breaking news stories, and there was no better time than today for Dino's services.

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

“Anything else Marmalade can do for you, Sugar?”

“Nothing comes to mind,” I responded. “I’ll swing by the house after I fit Lola in. It’s probably going to be a long night at the station.”

“I’m still trying to get you some exclusive interviews, Sugar.”

“Good. What do you think about Liam McLane?” I asked. “He played the husband opposite Alison in *The Decoy*.”

“Sugar, I’ve got two calls into his agent, already,” she replied.

I smiled to myself. “You think of everything. What about her family?”

“That poor child,” Marmalade began, “the Times is reporting her momma abandoned her at birth in Tennessee, and there’s no word on her father. She was raised by a great aunt who’s in an adult care facility now. That’s all I know, so far.”

“What about her history in Los Angeles?” I asked.

“This is interesting. The Interpreter’s reporting that Alison lived with a much older man named Jasper Bachman, for about a year before moving on with Mr. Tarpino.”

“Who’s Jasper Bachman?”

“Apparently, a movie producer of low budget films,” she replied.

“Can we get an interview?”

“That won’t be possible, Sugar. Mr. Bachman died of a heart attack a few years back.”

“Was Alison ever in any of his films?”

“No one’s reporting anything like that, Sugar, but I’ll keep you posted.”

“Any other news not on my radar?” I asked.

“This just in - Patrice Lewis was caught practically naked on the beach with a brand new beau. And you’ll like this - Brad Thomas was seen entering Taboo with the delectable Rob Carlyss.”

Now, that *was* noteworthy. Besides Rob Carlyss being one of my favorite actors, Brad Thomas had been a major Hollywood heartthrob in his twenties. Now, in his mid-thirties, he had recently divorced his wife, and the rumor he was a living as a gay man had persisted for months, although proof had been non-existent.

“I could see a romance between those two,” I said. “We’ve got pictures?”

“Yes, indeed,” Marmalade said proudly.

“Good. Let’s run something in the next hour.”

“You got it, Sugar,” she replied.

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A few minutes later as I exited the canyon road, I placed a call to Cecil Raines, my closest advocate, father figure, and attorney.

“We need to talk,” I said.

“It’s about the Abbot disappearance?” Cecil asked.

“Yes.”

“I saw you on the news. I see they found her vehicle,” he said.

“The LAPD isn’t sharing much, except to say she wasn’t with the car,” I explained.

“What’s your next step?”

I hesitated before replying, “Cecil, I might have a problem. I’m not sure.”

“Angry agent after you?” He laughed softly.

“No, nothing like that.”

“Are you speaking to me as my client?” Cecil asked.

“Yes. Yes, I am,” I replied slowly. “Sam Carlyle came to see me, here at the canyon. He’s a detective investigating Alison’s disappearance.”

“Ahh...Sam. I remember the name.”

“It wasn’t a social call,” I said quickly.

“Concerned?”

“He questioned me about my interview with Alison, and about my whereabouts last night.”

Cecil said nothing for a moment. “And you agreed to speak with him?”

“Sam urged me to, given the situation.”

“What’s the situation?” he asked.

“They found a burner phone in Alison’s abandoned car that appears to have called my number three times last night.”

My statement was met with a brief silence. Then, Cecil asked, “There were no messages from her?”

“None, although there may have been a couple hang-ups,” I replied. “I know you’ll find this hard to believe, but I had my phone off most of the night. Andy and I were celebrating our one year anniversary. I didn’t even know Alison was missing until Marmalade woke me this morning.”

“Is there a reason Alison Abbot would be phoning you?” Cecil asked.

“Nothing I can think of,” I said. “We’re not exactly friends.”

“But you interviewed her a month ago?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm...Where’d you leave it with your cop friend?”

“He asked me to account for my time for the past two days.”

“Let me take a look at what you put together, before you send him anything,” Cecil recommended.

His words gave me pause. “Should I be concerned?”

“Sounds like pretty standard procedure, especially if foul play’s involved,” Cecil responded in his usual calm tone.

I considered his thoughts, then said, “They’re not releasing this information to the press.”

“Sounds about right,” Cecil agreed.

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

We were both silent for a moment, before I remembered my upcoming appointment. “If I don’t step on it,” I said, “I’m going to be late for an interview.”

“I’ll have my phone on.”

I clicked off with Cecil, my stomach more unsettled than when I’d left the canyon.

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Just because the world seemed to stop when a major star disappeared, this didn’t mean *all* of the entertainment business did. My week operated, for the most part, on a schedule, and I had many stories to tell and commitments to attend to, today being a favor to my publicist friend, Pen.

Lola Roberts was a fifty-something film actress popular about twenty years ago. She hadn’t made a film in over fifteen years, about the time she married a well-known movie producer and began having children. Lola had recently starred in a successful TV mini-series.

I’d interviewed Lola less than five years ago, when she was a bit down in the dumps, overweight, and going through a nasty divorce, which she apparently faired very well in.

Lola was waiting for me when I arrived at the trendy Sidekick Coffee Shop off Melrose. She was seated at a small table along the window, wearing a pink jumpsuit, baby blue baseball cap, and tortoise shell sunglasses, like Pen told me she would be.

I said “hello” to Lola, who temporarily removed her glasses.

She looked great, and I didn’t hesitate to tell her so. Pleasantries were always a good way to start *and* end a client interview.

Unlike our last meeting, Lola was now a platinum blonde, instead of a redhead, and she’d either been injecting huge amounts of human growth hormone into her body or hired a top notch plastic surgeon. Her skin appeared flawless, making her look much younger than she surely was. Apparently, Lola was *well* invested in her career reinvention.

Lucky for me, Lola seemed oblivious to what was going on outside her world. My interview with her lasted less than an hour. She didn’t bring up Alison Abbot, so neither did I.

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After finishing with Lola and ingesting huge amounts of caffeine, I headed home for a change of clothing before my evening broadcast at KDKD.

Marmalade called out from the office as soon as I walked through the door. “Ethan’s wife was spotted at the airport.”

I paused at the office door to see my assistant sitting at her desk and asked, “Was Jordan Rogers coming or going?”

“Coming.”



“Comments?”

Marmalade shook her head, then replied, “Not a word.”

“Photos?”

“In the works. I left a message with Ms. Glace’s office, too.”

“Alison’s former agent?”

“Uh-huh.” Marmalade sighed, then continued, “But finding Mr. Tarpino is another matter. And this just in - Trixie Tramway news.”

“Noteworthy?”

At age twenty-two, Trixie was famous for spending one season on a reality show and subsequently doing anything strange enough to catch the eyes of both the paparazzi and news media. Dressing seductively, combined with unnaturally large breasts and flaming red hair, brought her lots of attention.

“Trixie’s website is reporting she partied with *new best friend* Tom Crowe over the weekend at Take Three’s,” Marmalade responded.

I couldn’t help but smile. “Tom Crowe, huh?”

He’d been a major motion picture star for several years, and I doubted his worldly orbit ever got near Trixie’s miniscule one.

“Isn’t he still married?” I asked.

“No, Sugar,” Marmalade reminded me. “He’s newly divorced as of one day ago.”

“Isn’t he represented by Millennial Talent?”

Marmalade smiled, then said, “He’s with Lucas Short, just like Ethan.”

“I thought Millennial kept their stars in better line,” I murmured. “Let’s give Trixie’s agent a call and see if we can get an exclusive,” I called as I headed toward my bedroom to take a shower.

“Ok, Sugar,” I heard Marmalade answer.

I sat down on my bed and removed my shoes, for once secretly wishing I didn’t have to leave the haven of my bedroom, again today.

Sam’s interrogation at the canyon still had me feeling uneasy. I’d interviewed Alison less than a month ago, but it wasn’t my only connection to her.

I removed my phone from my purse and scrolled through my contact list until I came to Ethan Rogers. Media outlets all over the metro were likely trying to track him down, yet here I sat, fully aware I could reach him at any moment. However, if I put that option in play, I might not like where it would lead me.



CHAPTER 10

I chose a black evening ensemble to match the somber mood I was in. I studied myself in the mirror, thankful makeup worked wonders to mask the exhaustion I was feeling.

After leaving a quick message on Andy's voicemail, I returned to the office to author a few more blog comments and strategize with Marmalade about our reporting on Alison's disappearance.

I put a timeline together of my activities and related alibis during the forty-eight hours before Alison's abandoned car had been discovered. When finished, I emailed the summary to Cecil for his review, then for delivery to Sam.

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Jamison was quick to make an appearance, once I arrived at the station, just after four o'clock. I'd taken orders from him years earlier when working as a full-time reporter for KDKD. These days, he relied on me for my leads and expertise, while I relied on the station for additional press for my blog.

Jamison took a seat across from me in my office and said, "News outlets are already bringing up the copycat theme."

I thought of Lester's words at the canyon, then asked, "From *The Decoy*?"

Jamison smiled grimly, then said, "You have to admit, an abandoned car in a canyon is little eerie given she won an Oscar for the movie not too long ago."

I nodded. "Vengeful wife disposes of bad guy husband and his car. Except this time, Alison's the possible victim."

"I'd be a little worried if I were Ethan," Jamison said, laughing briefly.

"Why do you say that?"

"He might be facing a lynch mob if these crazy theories get out of control," Jamison replied. "Someone might think he had something to do with Alison's disappearance."

Jamison was kidding, of course, although we sat silent for a long moment, contemplating the thought of Ethan killing his ex-wife.

"Do you think she's alive?" Jamison finally asked.

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

I hesitated, then said, "For now."

"I don't know," he pondered. "Where was she for the twenty-four hours or so before the car was dumped?"

I shrugged and said, "For all we know, she could be disoriented and wondering around the canyon, or even shackled up at someone's house in the hills. If she abandoned her car in the canyon and *is* alive, someone else probably knows about it."

Jamison clasped his hands together and said, "That's a possibility. But if Alison's been kidnapped, what's the motive?"

"Money, of course," I quickly replied.

We were both silent for a moment, then Jamison spoke, "This case will live in infamy if the mystery of her disappearance is never solved."

"Move over Marilyn Monroe. Make room for Alison Abbot."

"Hollywood reality - stranger than the best paperback fiction," Jamison concluded.

"Talk about free publicity," I added.

A long moment passed, then Jamison asked, "What's your angle tonight?"

I smiled, thinking of my earlier discussion with Marmalade, and answered, "I've cooked up something special for Alison."

Thirty minutes later, I finished writing up my newscast and shot it over to the Jamison and the production team.

Several minutes after that, I was on the air, discussing highlights from the day, including a snippet from my interview with Jake Caldwell and an update about the LAPD's search for Alison within Topanga canyon, which hadn't yet let to any leads on her whereabouts.

Then, I was ready to close my portion of the broadcast.

"Ladies and Gents, like you, I want to help bring Ms. Abbot back home. Therefore, my blog *Carlotta's Corner* is officially sponsoring a reward to anyone with information that will lead to the safe recovery of Ms. Abbot. Like me, I'm sure you believe someone out there can help, so I'm imploring you to contribute, also. No amount is too small, because together, we can make a difference. Hollywood will always have stars, but there are few superstars as beloved as Alison Abbot."

When I got off the air, my phone had several messages waiting for me: a return call from Andy, asking if he'd see me tonight; one from Pen, thanking me for making Lola's day; and one from Sam, asking me to phone him as soon as possible.

CHAPTER 11

“I don’t think you’re in danger, but as a precaution we want to have a detail stay with you for a few days, starting tonight,” Sam said.

I felt my heart jumpstart, then asked, “That doesn’t sound good. Should I be concerned?”

“You won’t even know they’re there,” Sam replied. “Tomorrow morning, we’ll send someone by to have a look around your place - check the security and such.”

“I do have an alarm system,” I said.

“That’s a good start.”

“What’s new with the case?” I asked.

“We’ve still got people searching the canyon areas, but no leads yet. We’re planning another press conference in the morning. We’ll want you to participate.”

“I thought the word was mum on the calls?”

“That hasn’t changed,” Sam began, “but because of those calls, you may be either part of the motive or part of the solution. If someone does have Alison, it might be helpful to have you out in the press to stir the pot.”

“Am I going to speak?” I asked slowly.

“We’ll discuss that in the morning. For now, think about anyone who might have a big score to settle with you. It’s a long shot, but we don’t have a lot to go on for why those calls were made to your number.”

As I drove home, I thought back to the interview less than a month ago and its wide viewership. I also contemplated anyone who might want to do me harm.

Two agents from American Artists had threatened to ruin me a couple years ago. Their small talent firm catered to up and coming hip-hop musicians who seemed to have a propensity for getting into trouble, and I’d never hesitated to publicize it. No harm ever materialized after the agency fizzled out a few months later.

I scanned my mind for other incidents, but came up blank. As a public figure, it would be impossible to know how my television stints and blog postings affected the nameless paying attention.

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## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

When I walked into the house later, I was not surprised to find Marmalade waiting for me.

She came forward to give me a hug. “Oh Sugar, you need some sleep. Marmalade got you some pecan pie, your favorite.”

When stress got to me, I craved pie, and not a piece of any pie, I craved old fashioned pecan.

I set my purse on the kitchen countertop, reached down to pull off my heels, and said, “I’m so grateful. I feel a mess.” I opened the fridge and took out a couple bottles of water for us, while Marmalade served the pie. I took a seat beside her at the bar.

“Jiminy-crickets, Marmalade doesn’t know what to think about all this,” she said, pushing a plate in front of me.

“Has Ethan Rogers given any press?” I asked.

Marmalade shook her head before replying, “That boy’s lips are sealed tighter than an alligator’s jaws. But Alison’s agent is making statements. Said he’s working with the police on some leads.”

That wasn’t news to me. “Cartwright will take any opportunity to get press for himself,” I said before savoring my first bite of pie.

“Don’t you worry about anything, Sugar. We’ll keep reporting the news, as we always have been. And good news about our reward fund. People all over the world are already contributing.”

“Excellent,” I said, taking another satisfying bite.

“Does Sugar have anything else in mind?”

I turned my head to look at her and smiled. “We’re going big with this one, bigger than anyone else. Let’s see who will talk with us.”

“Oh, Marmalade likes that,” my assistant quipped. “But first things first, Sugar. After this pie, we need to get you into a hot bath and then to bed.”

The thought was appealing, until I remembered I needed to tell Marmalade the LAPD would be nosing around and probably asking questions about me. I wasn’t sure how she’d react.

“There’s something else,” I said.

Marmalade was all eyes as I slowly explained my involvement in the case.

“Oh, Sugar...”

“We’ll just continue to do our job, and we’ll let the police do theirs,” I said. “And in the meantime, let’s be cautious and keep in close contact.”

A few minutes later, after murmuring an apology and an “I miss you” to Andy via his voicemail, I sunk into lavender-infused water and rested my head against a bath cushion. He was likely asleep given his normal early morning schedule.

## J.C. Patrick

My mind turned toward the day's strange turn of events. Eighteen hours had seemed to pass in the blink of an eye. Sam Carlyle, once my lover, was now my antagonist, of sort. If anyone other than Cecil or Marmalade caught wind of our brief relationship years ago, it could mean trouble for Sam and me.

I hadn't expected to be participating in a press conference a day after attending two, but Sam was right, I was part of the story now. Whoever had placed those calls on the burner phone found inside Alison's car had made it so. What would have happened if I had answered my phone?

I couldn't rid myself of the uncomfortable feeling that someone had targeted me, someone bad, and it had not been Alison. It was easy to believe I had enemies. After all, I reported gossip, which did not always present others in their best light.

My thoughts turned to Ethan, whom I'd rarely been kind to in the press. I was certain he'd been the most sought after man in Hollywood today, by both the media and the police. Surely, he understood the press would be unrelenting until he, not his mother, made some kind of statement about his ex-wife.

My thoughts drifted to my current love. It would be prudent for me to give Andy heads up about my involvement in the case before the police contacted him to verify my whereabouts for the past two nights.





CHAPTER 12 (Alison Pt 2)

*January – five years earlier*

It is day three of filming, and we are scheduled to shoot the love scene for *The Art of Deception*, where I play a con artist. I suspect this was Garret's idea, slipping in the most difficult scene early as a way to get back with me for putting him off.

This is my second feature film with director Garret Clay, with *Love of Malice* being the first. The movie brought us both great critical acclaim – my first awards season nominations – including both the Globe and the Oscar - and Garret's first win as a director in almost every competition. I did not win, but Garret tells me winning is in my future.

I've pled for time away from Garret during this film, insisting I must concentrate on learning my lines, instead of romancing him during our private time. After all, my agent Taloria Glace tells me my star has risen faster than any she's ever recollected, although I feel I still need to prove myself.

Having two films and a few accolades under my belt in no way assures me of future success in a cut-throat industry. Taloria doesn't have to remind me that I need to impress my costar, Ethan Rogers, who'll play the victim to my character's deceptive ways. Ethan and his family are icons in this town, and this picture may be my chance to move into the inner circle in Hollywood.

Taloria's not a well known agent, but at least she doesn't seem to want anything more from me than the millions she plans for me to earn. I hired Taloria immediately after filming wrapped for *The Killing Diary*. Dominique was inconsolable at the time, but I finally solved that problem by introducing him to another lowly costar on my last film. Francesca may not have been to his taste, but Natasha, who came after, certainly was.

Taloria's been pulling out all the stops, convincing one of Hollywood's most revered acting coaches, Tabitha Devine, to help ensure my success on this film, and hiring a reputable publicist, Rita Fonteyn, to represent me. Taloria insists I concentrate on my acting and leave the publicity to her and Rita, which I'm happy to do.

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

Like Taloria, Tabitha is authoritative and persistent. Unlike Taloria, Tabitha has worked as an actress on the stages of London and has established a name for herself in Hollywood. Tabitha resembles a gypsy, with her loose fitting colorful attire and gray ringlets of hair she wears past her shoulders. She speaks with a crisp British accent and is fond of repetition and surprises, never hesitating to push me further outside my comfort zone.

It was a strategic move, Taloria says, to surround me with women, and she insists I put all of my efforts into building my career, given men will only distract me from the goal at hand. She is probably right, although I'm careful not to let her in on all my secrets, like my long time dalliance with Garret Clay.

I now know what even Dominique could not fully convince me of: I have a talent for spinning make-believe. I can tell Tabitha thinks so, too, when she lets a compliment slip now and then.

Taloria's kept me well versed on the media's high hopes for this picture, based on Garret's versatile directing abilities and Ethan's star power; however, some are not convinced I'll be able to hold my own.

We've been working long hours the past two days, although I've yet to meet my costar. Today will be our first scene together.

I lay here in my trailer, dressed only in my robe, making a mental note of the upcoming scene today, which will require little speaking between Ethan and me. I'm well aware that love-making scenes are grueling, given my past two films, but I'm looking forward to proving myself with a talent I'm well versed in.

My pondering is interrupted when Maggie, one of the production assistants, stops by to tell me the Hair and Makeup teams are ready for me.

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I'm on set an hour later, still in my robe and sitting right behind Garret, who's in his director's chair preparing for the upcoming scene. He's speaking with his Assistant Director, Alan Tambar, and the Director of Photography, Mike Chasse.

We're filming at a hotel across from the Santa Monica shoreline. My character Catherine, a self-professed free spirit, will be confronted by Ethan's character Alex, a technical geek, who thinks she may have conned him. The action will then move into Catherine's hotel room, where a love scene ensues, given the growing attraction between them.

Tabitha's sitting beside me, ready for an emergency coaching session, if needed. I didn't ask her to be with me today and am pretty sure Taloria put her up to it. Everyone's aware my chemistry with my Ethan in this scene could make or break the movie, and I'm determined for it to be the highlight of the film.

Ethan finally arrives with three other people, two men looking bulky enough to be a security detail and a woman dressed in business attire. I don't see Ethan's well-known agent in the bunch, and I doubt Ethan requires an acting coach onsite to mentor him.

Garret stands up and together with Tambar and Chasse walks over to speak with Ethan, dressed in a black leather jacket and jeans. He doesn't look prepared to shoot a love scene, and I wonder what he's up to.

I enjoy contrasting the two. Garret sports a full head of gray hair, bushy black eyebrows, and black horn-rimmed glasses. He runs on high octane, pushing the envelope on set like he does in the bedroom.

Ethan, several years younger than Garret and in need of a shave, looks like he belongs perched on a motorcycle, not like an actor whose films have grossed over a billion dollars worldwide. And in no way does he seem like an actor who will be making love to me today, although I feel a hint of excitement at the thought.

Garret motions at me, so I walk over to join them with Tabitha at my tail.

I take in the gorgeous brown eyes and brief smile of my co-star, who acknowledges my existence with only a nod.

Garret says, "Ethan and I are discussing a couple changes to today's shoot."

I'm curious how Garret would allow Ethan to usurp Garret's big plans for the day, but realize even a director is not immune to the power the Rogers family wields in this town.

I say nothing, but smile and nod to each. It's what Taloria and Tabitha would both want, me not making waves this early in the picture, if ever.

"Ethan thinks the love scene should be more sterile, more implied, leaving the audience wanting for more," Garret explains to me and Tabitha.

I nod again, unable to tell if Garret's bothered by Ethan's suggestion. I am wondering why Ethan would suggest such a change when I've been given the impression the love scene is the most pivotal point of the movie.

I look over at Ethan, who's looking at me, probably waiting to see my reaction.

Then, the woman who arrived with Ethan steps forward and hands Garret, Tabitha, and I marked-up script pages. She's blonde, attractive, and business-like. I can't help but wonder if she came up with the material on her own or if the real writer is lurking somewhere on set.

I continue smiling as the discussion continues, looking from Ethan, then to Garret. I'll trust what they come up with, but I have imagined my own version of the love scene, running my hands through Ethan's hair, with his lips all over my mine.

"We'll regroup in an hour," Garret concludes, looking at me.

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

Before we disband, Mike Chasse speaks to both men, giving me an opportunity to peek at Ethan, who's looking at me with amusement on his face.

I'm drawn in by his deep set eyes and strong facial features. He is more ruggedly handsome this close up than in any photo I've seen of him. My heart is racing, and I feel grateful, as will Tabitha, that we'll have time to prepare for the upcoming shot.

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We're taking a short break while Makeup touches Ethan and me up. The past two hours have been some of the most exhilarating of my life.

We've already shot the complete scene twice, and we are going to do it again. I'm wondering if this is Garret's decision or that of Ethan's and his people, who seem to be running the show.

I see Garret watching me from his director's chair, and I wonder if he's jealous Ethan is holding me in his arms or if watching us is a big turn on. Garret's a fan of experimentation in the bedroom, and I wonder if his ultimate fantasy is to watch another man make love to me.

It won't be today, although I'm ready for Ethan to take me away to a private hideaway, where we can get to know each other much better.

The scene consists of Catherine inviting Alex back to her room, where she can talk him out of his theories. Soon after they arrive in the room, Alex and Catherine's loathing of one another will materialize into romantic relations.

The closest Ethan and I have gotten to barring skin in the past two takes is him shirtless and a hint of my breast exposed, and it's only in the final part of our scene, when he has me cornered up against a wall, that we kiss.

I'm very affected by him, and when we're acting, I almost forget we have an audience. In our first go around, his lips found mine, and in the moment they did, my reaction was immediate - my knees went weak. I did the one thing Tabitha commanded me never to do, have my emotion become personal on set. I can only wonder if Ethan felt something, too.

Makeup has finished, and once again we take our positions for the shot, me at my dressing table and Ethan outside the door, ready to make his entrance. I can see through the reflection, a crowd has gathered to watch.

I witness Garret's face in the mirror and wonder if my performance is therapeutic enough for him to forgive me for my sabbatical away from him, or perhaps seeing me with Ethan, makes Garret want me more. We spoke after the last shot, and he encouraged me to demonstrate more passion for Ethan. I can't help wonder if Garret is interjecting these changes for his own fantasies, for I don't see him mentoring my costar.

I feel my heartbeat quicken as the Assistant Director queues the shot, and I turn to watch Ethan take his place across the room.

## J.C. Patrick

We banter pleasantly back and forth for a few lines before Ethan comes forward to grab me. This time, unlike the others, he does not kiss me immediately after he has pinned me up against the wall. Instead, he stands there, his eyes burning right through me and lighting my insides on fire. I want him like I've never wanted anyone or anything in my life.

Ethan doesn't stop there. He tears open the top of my robe, and while his hand caresses my breast, his lips bite at my neck. His lips find their way upward, and I find myself moaning as his tongue invades my mouth. I've stepped off into another reality and wonder if this is what falling in love feels like.

Ethan pulls away as I finally hear Garret call out, "Bravo, Bravo, Bravo!" Then, the room erupts with cheers.

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Our love scene does not transpire to closer relations on set between me and either man, over the next two weeks.

If anything, Garret has become more aloof. Since we filmed the love scene, he's not made any suggestive comments when we are alone and has refrained from making ad hoc stops in my trailer to try to convince me we should spend intimate time together. I'm so perplexed by Garret's behavior it's causing me to lose concentration at times when preparing for my scenes, which only causes Tabitha concern.

While Garret confuses me, I can't help but feel hurt by Ethan's distance, although I have no rational reason for my feelings. Ethan's been a consummate professional and is, of course, surrounded by an entourage of people at almost all times. It would be unwise for me to act like a schoolgirl clamoring for his attention, only to instead garner everyone else's.

Still, I'm not able to tell what Ethan thinks about me when we're working a scene, and I am becoming obsessed with trying to interpret his every look, every word, and every smile. We don't speak much off camera, although Maggie tells me Ethan spends a good deal of time with the crew during meals and off time, while I am holed up in my trailer rehearsing lines with Tabitha, due to Taloria's insistence.

My agent's aggressively trying to win me new roles and is already lining up big picture auditions as soon as we wrap this one. Taloria says one of our next steps is to work intensely with Rita to play up my image in the press. She also envisions finding me new digs and changing my look from dark to my natural blonde.

Taloria says that under no circumstances should I be seen with any men during my off time. We don't want to distract the public from becoming obsessed with Alex and Catherine's on-screen romance.

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

We have a few more days of filming, and I have rarely felt as lost as I feel now. I'm grateful for Taloria and Tabitha's attentiveness to keeping me focused.

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Tonight is the wrap party at Ethan's home. Maggie has it on good authority that Ethan always hosts a celebration for the cast and crew at the conclusion of all his pictures.

Tonight will be my last interaction with Ethan, until we begin our press circuit in the next several months.

In two days, I'll have my first audition for another part with Todd Stanton, who's well known for his romantic comedies. Taloria thinks I should expand into more genres and not limit myself to dark thrillers too early in my career. Look how far I've come already, she says, and who knows what I am capable of.

I've become fond of Maggie, the production assistant who has served me well on this film. She's organized, loyal, and most importantly eager to please, so I've hired her to become my personal assistant going forward. Taloria's pleased with my initiative since an assistant can only help move my career forward.

Maggie's with me today in my rental suite. After tonight, I'll move into a home Taloria rented for me in the Hollywood Hills, while her realtor searches for a permanent residence. If I'm to be a big star, I should start living like one, she insists.

We leisurely sip the champagne Garret sent as a parting gift. Then, I check my appearance one last time before the limo Ethan has sent arrives.

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Maggie and I enjoy more champagne on the ride over, and I feel optimistic about the night ahead.

I'm wearing a red halter dress that accentuates my best attributes. The dress extends almost down to my ankles, and I wear strappy gold sandals that match the large gold bangles on my ears. My long dark hair flows free, suiting the carefree mood I'm in.

Garret, wearing his trademark spectacles, greets me once we enter Ethan's home, but there's something different about him tonight. It could be that he's lost weight, or perhaps he's parted his hair differently. In either case, Garret's seems distant, but in a jovial mood. It feels as if we've never been intimate.

I'm grateful when Taloria approaches and introduces me to Ethan's agent. I've heard of Lucas Short before, but he's never appeared on set and looks much older in person than I imagined he would. Still, Lucas seems sophisticated and charming with his deep vibrato voice and smooth New

York accent. He's a powerful agent, and it would be wise to win him over with my charms.

Over the next hour, I make the rounds with Taloria, socializing with cast and crew members. All the while, my eyes search for Ethan and come up short. I'm so caught up with my obsession of finding him that I almost forget I'm one of the stars of the picture and need to act like it. Where is Tabitha when I need her to coach me along?

Commotion and laughter at the far end of the pool gets everyone's attention. Someone has fallen into the water, and we all watch as one crew member fishes another out. Once the task is accomplished, laughter erupts, again.

My eyes rise away from the scene to spot Ethan in the far corner of the patio, sipping a drink and talking with two other men. He's dressed casually in blue jeans, a navy shirt, and tan loafers, much different than the biker attire he frequented on the set.

I feel the urge to walk over and quickly sip the remains of my cocktail, hoping to calm my racing heart. I reason it's perfectly normal for one star to greet another, so I make my intentions known to Maggie and Taloria and take off on my own.

I don't know what causes me to look back, but as I do, I see Lucas standing alone at the far end of the pool, watching me as he talks on his cell phone.

Ethan appears happy to see me and introduces me to a guest who's not involved in the industry, but rather in real estate, something Ethan likes to dabble in, so he tells me.

I'm surprised when Ethan excuses us from the others and then leads me down a private path and into his home through french doors.

We end up in a lamp-lit study, walled in wood, including the ceiling. Book shelves line two of the other walls, with a stone fireplace consuming the other.

"I'm glad you were able to make it. Care to join me for a celebration brandy?" Ethan asks.

I nod and walk over to scan a row of leather-bound classics, before my eyes rest on a framed photo of Ethan and his immediate family.

Ethan pours us drinks, and I watch as he walks over to hand me mine. When he raises his glass for a toast, I do the same.

"To a successful film," he says.

Ethan downs his drink, while I continue to sip mine.

"Another?" He smiles.

I shake my head and smile back. "I should really be on my best behavior."

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

Ethan tilts his head a degree right and laughs. “We don’t have to pretend anymore, Alison.” He studies me for a long moment before adding, “There’s no one around to watch.”

I raise my glass to my lips and watch him over the rim. I know in this moment, I will never be completely happy until he is mine.

Ethan takes my glass from me and sets our glasses down on the bar. Then, he turns his attention back to me. “We never got to know each other better on the set,” he says.

I stare at him, unsmiling, and reply, “You were always busy, surrounded by your entourage.”

“True.” He laughs, then smiles. “But I would have made time for you, Alison.”

“And raise the suspicions of others?”

Ethan cocks a brow and says, “Oh, I don’t know about that. After all, we are the stars of the picture.”

Neither of us says anything for the longest moment, with Ethan content to study me, and I him.

I feel my breath, once steady and in control, rising and falling rapidly, preparing for some climactic event. I’m hesitant at first, but I then reach up to touch Ethan’s unsmiling face.

Suddenly, his hands circle around to my back, and he pulls me closer. His lips find mine, parting them as if he’s urgent to devour me. Seconds pass, maybe minutes, until I push back from Ethan.

I take his hand in mine, and draw him across the room onto the chaise lounge, his mouth once again claiming mine.

All the while I am thinking: this is no film set, we are not acting, and there is no audience. This is real, not make-believe.



**CHAPTER 13**

A restless sleep had me sipping coffee in my office at five o'clock in the morning and peaking outside the front window to see the security detail Sam had promised parked there. In a few hours, two uniformed police officers would come inside to inspect the house, and given my busy morning, Marmalade would likely end up showing them around.

As I sat there, I thought about what Sam had said the night before. Whoever had placed those calls from the burner phone found in Alison's car had intentionally involved me in her disappearance. It was easy to think Alison's disappearance was solely about her, but maybe it was also about me?

I felt unsettled and impatient. The police were doing their part, and I was doing what I could to assist them by participating in today's press conference; however, I wasn't a woman with a wait and see attitude.

It was time to start conducting an investigation on my own terms and doing so might involve getting access to people who avoided gossip columnists. The person to help me get access to practically anyone was my friend Penelope Payne.

Pen, a renowned Hollywood publicist, and I had met when I had worked as a full-time reporter for KDKD, and now we greased one another's palms on a regular basis. Pen knew, as I did, that there was nothing like a little "spin" to make the world of Hollywood go round and round. Pen specialized in comebacks of the down and out stars - apparently anyone could be made new again.

I shot her a text, and true to form, my early-rising friend responded immediately and invited me to join her for a morning yoga session. I hoped the LAPD officers protecting me didn't mind taking an early morning jaunt.

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"Carlotta, you won't be comfortable in that!" Pen quipped at first sight of me. I had arrived wearing a black velour jump suit, typical attire for lounging about my home.

Pen had her game face on, dressed in white yoga pants and a matching sports-bra, with her long black hair coiled high on her head.

"I'm only here for the warm up." I smiled as I made my way past her.

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

I heard Pen's throaty laugh follow me as we made our way into her workout studio, a small cottage behind her house.

After catching up on our own personal lives for five minutes or so, I sat down on the mat beside Pen and stretched my legs out in front of me.

"It's such a shame about Alison," Pen said. "Hopefully, your reward fund will entice someone to speak up."

I leaned forward with two hands, in a failed attempt to touch my toes, making it to my ankles. "Marmalade said it made press last night on all the major networks."

Pen raised her hands to the sky and stretched slowly to one side. "I assume you're here to discuss rounding up some press for the cause."

"You know me well," I said, attempting to bend forward again and touch my toes.

"Hoping for first dibs with Ethan?" Pen laughed. "You might have to get in line."

I smirked before leaning forward again, this time inching my way a bit further until it felt painful.

"Oh, that's right. You disdain the Rogers family," she teased.

"You know, that's not true," I corrected her, laying back onto the mat and bending one knee up in front of me.

Pen didn't argue and sat down beside me. "I'm sure you've already heard the copycat theory, about the car in the canyon. If you ask me, I think this might go way beyond that."

Bending the other knee up in front of me, I asked, "Meaning?"

"The movies Alison chose were all a bit sinister. Imagine the minds of her fan base."

I thought about my recent interview with Alison. She seemed like a well-adjusted star, but with the exception of her current movie, she'd always played dark roles. Alison had been convincing as a con artist, a serial killer, a stalker, and a murderous wife.

Pen laughed a bit as she raised a leg into the air. "I see Renee wasted no time telling everyone how fond she is of her ex-daughter-in-law," she noted.

I raised my head in a feeble attempt at a stomach crunch as I thought about the family's matriarch Renee Rogers. Many considered her the most powerful person in Hollywood. I had a hard time believing she'd been a fan of Alison and was probably less so after Alison and Ethan had parted ways.

We continued stretching for a few moments longer, before I sat up with my legs in front of me and brought up the real reason I'd stopped by. "I was kind of wondering if you still had close ties with Millennial Talent."

Millennial Talent had been started by Jordan Rogers' father Lucas Short, who still oversaw the company. Millennial's team was small, but the name was one of the oldest and most respected talent agencies in the business. Alison Abbot had been represented by Millennial before she defected to Cartwright's team, after her divorce from Ethan.

"Are you thinking about Ethan's attractive young wife? You get Jordan, you get the inside scoop?" Pen asked, smirking sideways at me. "You know I left there years ago?"

"It wasn't that long ago," I quickly replied. "Beside, Hollywood is a small town for a girl like you, Pen. No one has the contacts you do."

"You might as well be speaking about yourself." She raised a brow, but I could see her internal wheels spinning. "I'm sure the Rogers family sees you as the enemy these days," she continued. "We both know you've never been *exactly* kind to Ethan in the press."

I watched as Pen took a deep breath in and slowly exhaled as she gracefully extended forward and captured each foot with a hand. "I doubt Jordan's father would talk to us," she said slowly, "but she has referred a client or two to me when all hope was lost."

I attempted to follow Pen's lead, but the tops of my ankles were the best I could do. Flexibility had never been my strong point. "You and Jordan are on a first name basis?" I asked.

Pen slowly stretched again, while I didn't make another attempt. She looked over at me, her face closely aligned with her left knee as she held her stretch. "Jordan and I aren't exactly close, Carlotta," she responded. "You know, as I do, Ethan doesn't run with the friendliest of packs. He's hails from old Hollywood, old money. His family's had many years to build a moat about their castle."

"I'll owe you?" I proposed, almost begging.

Pen sat up, then heaved a sigh. "Oh hell, who doesn't owe who in this town?" She smiled at me. "I've got some other ideas, too."

"I'd love to get exclusives with former agents and anyone that worked with Alison," I said.

"You're asking for the world, Carlotta!" Pen smiled again. "But why not, right? Let me make a few calls today and see what I can come up with."

Pen got to her feet so I followed suit.

"Ok, Carlotta, time for you to go." She leaned over and patted me on one shoulder.

I smiled at her and asked, "What? I'm just getting warmed up. What do you know about Trixie Tramway?"

Pen smiled back, then replied, "You're beginning to feel like a work project."



CHAPTER 14

A short while after my security detail and I returned home from Pen's, Cecil picked me up for the drive downtown for the LAPD press conference.

"What's your take on the copycat theory?" I asked.

"I heard them talking about *The Decoy* on the news. Haven't seen the movie, but I guess anything's possible."

"An obsessed fan could be involved, but then where does that leave me and the calls in all this?"

Cecil shook his head a couple times and asked. "You talked to her about that movie in the interview you had?"

I nodded. "It's her best role to date. She won an Oscar for it."

Cecil said nothing, concentrating on the traffic ahead.

"Do you have any idea what the police are going to ask me to say?" I asked.

"Your ideas are as good as mine."

I looked down to study my bland attire. Marmalade had suggested I wear my dark plum pantsuit, and Cecil had agreed a formal look would fit the mood of the day. My hair was pulled into a loose bun, and I wore a pair of pearl stud earrings, a gift from Andy, which lifted my mood, somewhat.

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Thirty minutes later, we met Sam and McDonald in a conference room at the LAPD headquarters.

"I almost didn't recognize you, Carlotta," Sam said quietly as he came to stand beside me, away from Cecil and McDonald who were conversing apart from us.

Sam was clean-shaven and dressed in a navy sports coat with pressed black pants. He looked every bit like a detective.

"You look handsome," I said.

"Sleep and caffeine work wonders." He smiled, his eyes not wavering from mine. "Did you get any sleep?"

"A few hours," I said.

"Well, you look great, Carlotta." He studied me for a long moment before softly adding, "But then you always have."

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

I took in his light-colored eyes, then the curvature of his lips, fully aware of my attraction to him.

“What’s next?” I asked.

“Let’s take a seat at the table and talk.” Sam glanced at his watch. “We’re live at the top of the hour.”

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Several minutes later, we headed down to the LAPD Auditorium and congregated in a press room next to the stage.

I didn’t expect to have Alison Abbot’s red-faced agent Cartwright greet me as soon as we arrived.

“Ms. DuBois, I didn’t expect to see you so soon again,” he said.

“Why Mr. Cartwright, what a surprise to find you here,” I greeted him with a smile.

“*Apparently*, we’re having a dog and pony show today, and you and I are the livestock.” He boomed a laugh, then whispered loudly, “It’s a little like show business.”

I felt grateful when McDonald, unpleasant in his own right, came to pull Cartwright away before I could respond.

I stepped into a corner to check my texts, but was interrupted when Sam came up from behind and whispered in my ear, “Are you nervous?”

I turned to face him and asked, “Why would I be?”

I was no stranger to a camera, being on the air more than a couple times a week, but today would be different. The focus would be on me and not on the news I had to share.

“This isn’t entertainment television,” Sam said, “although I expect it may seem a bit like a red carpet event.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I shot back.

Sam grinned and cocked a brow. “We met like this, you know.”

“It was a long time ago,” I reminded him.

The press conference we’d met at also related to a Hollywood starlet, but Genevieve Tripp had murdered her fiancé. I certainly hadn’t expected a handsome officer to track me down in the hallway afterward, which led to a date the very next night.

Sam leaned closer and said, “Take a couple deep breaths. Everything will be fine. I’ll be right there beside you.”

He met my immediate eye roll with a smile.

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A few minutes later, Police Chief Faulkner began his update about the investigation. “As most of you are already aware, Alison Abbot’s abandoned vehicle was found in Topanga canyon late yesterday morning. Since that time, staff and volunteers continue to search the canyon and

surrounding areas for evidence that would assist us in determining Ms. Abbot's whereabouts."

"Have you talked to Ethan?" Jane Valance from a cable news station blurted out.

"We've been talking with several people," the Chief responded, "including those who worked for and with Ms. Abbot. I'm not going to comment about specific individuals involved with our investigation."

"Is Ethan being helpful?" I heard someone call out.

Chief Faulkner raised a hand, then lowered it. "Let's hold your questions until the end." He paused, looking across the crowd. "Now, I'm going to turn it over to Sergeant Thomas, who's going to provide a more thorough update and take a few questions."

Sergeant Thomas stepped up to the podium, briefly scanned then audience, and then began, "As the Chief indicated, we've been talking with several people, including those who worked for and with Ms. Abbot. We believe she drove away from her home in the late afternoon timeframe three days ago and that no one else was in the vehicle. We've tracked her vehicle to within a few blocks of the charity event in Santa Monica she was expected at, but never arrived for. We found Ms. Abbot's cell phone inside her home."

"Besides our search in Topanga Canyon, we're interested in the areas west of 20<sup>th</sup> Street in Santa Monica and between Wilshire Boulevard and Interstate 10," he continued. "We ask anyone in that vicinity between seven and eleven o'clock three evenings ago to contact the police if they saw Ms. Abbot or her vehicle."

The Sergeant paused to clear his throat before glancing down at his notes. "Based on our current assessment of traffic camera footage, we believe Ms. Abbot's vehicle made its way into the park around midnight two evenings ago. At present, we are unable to verify if Ms. Abbot was in the vehicle, since the driver was wearing a mask depicting the Disney character Snow White."

Gasps shot forth from the audience.

Sergeant Thomas did not react to the crowd, but looked down at his notes briefly and continued, "We don't believe anyone was riding in the passenger seat. We'll release photos of the vehicle after this conference." The Sergeant paused briefly, then said, "Given the evidence uncovered thus far, we aren't ruling out foul play in the disappearance of Ms. Abbot."

Gasps shot through the crowd, once again.

Sergeant Thomas waited for the commotion to settle down before continuing, "Based on our conversations with people closest to Ms. Abbot, we don't believe she purposely abandoned her vehicle in the canyon or decided not to honor her outstanding commitments."

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

The crowd came alive from every angle.

“I’ll take a few questions now.” Sergeant Thomas pointed forward.

“Any significance in the mask?” someone in the back asked.

“It appears to be a standard costume mask. Given the proximity to theme parks and the entertainment industry, it could have been purchased from multiple sources and at any time.”

“Do you think someone from the paparazzi took her?” a man asked.

There would be potentially hundreds of paparazzi to hunt down. Alison Abbot was followed everywhere, all the time.

Sergeant Thomas responded, “We have no evidence of that. We’re talking with all people Ms. Abbot may have come in contact with the last few hours before she went missing. We are and will be following up on all credible leads that may lead us to Ms. Abbot.”

Bitsy Garmam, from the Times newspaper, asked next, “Do you suspect Ms. Abbot could have taken her own life?”

“We have absolutely no evidence of that,” the Sergeant quickly replied.

“Have you talked to past boyfriends?” I heard someone call out.

“Yes. We are talking family and friends of Ms. Abbot.”

Tony Abner, a reporter for a local television station asked, “Have you considered kidnapping?”

Sergeant Thomas nodded. “We’re considering various scenarios at this point, and that is certainly one.”

I raised my hand and asked, “What are your thoughts about the copycat theory? Ms. Abbot’s character in *The Decoy* also abandoned a car in a canyon.”

Sergeant Thomas looked down at me and answered, “Ms. DuBois, we aren’t limiting our follow-up to any one theory at this point.” He looked out across the audience before adding, “We want to caution the public at jumping to any conclusions at this point, also.”

My question and the Sergeant’s comments heightened the noise level in the room, while I sat silent, wondering how much the LAPD knew and wasn’t sharing at this point. They certainly weren’t disclosing the calls to me from the burner phone found inside Alison’s car.

Sergeant Thomas continued, “Again, we urge anyone who has information regarding Ms. Abbot’s whereabouts in the past three days to contact the police department, immediately. I can assure you, we’ll do our best to keep you informed about our investigation. Thank you.”

As Sergeant Thomas stepped away and Chief Faulkner took his place at the podium, I rose from the front row and walked onto the stage to stand between Cartwright and Sam.

Chief Faulkner spoke, “As you may or may not be aware, both Mr. Jeb Cartwright, Ms. Abbot’s agent, and Ms. Carlotta DuBois, an acquaintance



of Ms. Abbot, have been assisting us with our case. As you may recall, it was Mr. Cartwright who first reported Ms. Abbot's disappearance."

Chief Faulkner briefly turned to look at me. "And we are grateful to have Ms. Carlotta DuBois, who had an exclusive interview with Ms. Abbot less than a month ago, with us today. As many of you know, Ms. DuBois, a member of the press, is spearheading a reward for anyone with pertinent information that will enable us to locate Ms. Abbot."

"Since Mr. Cartwright and Ms. DuBois are both acquainted with Ms. Abbot, we asked them to speak on behalf of both the entertainment and press communities. Mr. Cartwright will now say a few words. I'll return later for any final questions."

Cartwright stepped up to the podium and assessed the crowd. "Alison Abbot's an amazing woman and the best damn actress I've come across in a long time!" he boomed.

"I knew something was awry when she didn't show up for a couple of her commitments. You see, Alison's a true movie star. She's committed to her *fans*, her *pictures*, her *fellow actors*. This is a woman who honors her commitments!"

Listening to Cartwright, I was beginning to feel like we were at a political rally and was willing to bet the house I wasn't the only person feeling this way.

"You know," Cartwright began, pausing to lean forward on the podium, as if he were telling a secret, "I've never met an actress who loves what she does more than you Alison Abbot. Yes, Alison, I'm speaking to you!" he boomed again before standing up straight. "Your fans and friends are waiting for you to return. We need you back where you belong." Cartwright reached up and wiped his eye. He had a reputation for being somewhat zealous, but I couldn't help wonder if his emotions were genuine.

When Cartwright finally stepped away, Chief Faulkner stepped forward and introduced me.

I walked up to the podium. "I don't have answers for you," I began, "but I am here to voice my strong support for Alison."

I scanned the cameras at the back of the room, then continued, "Alison, I don't know where you are, but I hope you're listening to this message." I quickly glanced over at Sam, looking unusually somber, before turning my attention back toward the cameras. "We're concerned about you and want you back with us. That includes me, Mr. Cartwright, and all of your friends in the press and in the entertainment community. The police are doing everything in their power to find you, and they won't stop until they do. If you are able to reach out to me, the police, or any of us, we'll be waiting."



CHAPTER 15

As Cecil pointed the car in the direction of Hollywood, I couldn't stop wondering about the significance of the mask. I was certain the police were doing the same.

"Did you know Snow White has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame?" I asked him.

"You don't say," Cecil responded.

"She was the fairest princess in the land, after all, just like Alison," I mused.

"Much to the Queen's dismay, they say."

"Then, who is the wicked Queen? Better yet, *who* are the dwarfs?" I thought of Ethan's mother, Renee Rogers, and wondered if Alison's beauty and fame had caused friction in their relationship.

My thoughts were interrupted by Marmalade's phone call.

"How'd it go, Sugar?" she asked.

"Good," I replied. "Cecil and I just left downtown."

"I've got news. Trixie Tramway's agent finally returned my calls. She'd love an exclusive, if it's done tastefully."

"What's tasteful?" I smiled, looking over at Cecil who glanced at me.

I heard Marmalade softly chuckle. "I'm not sure, Sugar," she replied. "Maybe we should talk with Tom Crowe's estranged wife. I hear she's madder than a wet hen these days."

I laughed, then said, "I guess hefty divorce settlements aren't everything. We should probably stick to Trixie for now. Lucas Short wouldn't be too happy, and I'm not quite ready to sever ties with Millennial Talent, yet. What else you've got?"

"Marmalade's been casting her net and caught a big fish! Jerry Donovan's looking for some publicity."

"Wasn't he Ethan's costar in *Gemini's Rising*?" I asked.

"That's right, Sugar."

"Wasn't that film made when Ethan was married to Alison?"

"You got it," she responded proudly.

"Hmm... He's willing to share secrets for a little publicity - perfect. What time?"

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

“Today. He’s working on a film and wants to meet at Warner Brothers.”

After I hung up a couple minutes later, Cecil asked, “Are you going to let Sam know about this meet-up?”

I considered Cecil’s question, then smiled sideways at him. “A gossip columnist only shares the secrets of others, not her own.”

My response earned me Cecil’s chuckle.

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After Cecil dropped me off at home, I changed clothes, refreshed my makeup, and hopped in my car.

A few minutes later, I watched my LAPD detail hang back as I pulled onto the Warner Brothers lot.

Jerry had arranged for me to pass through the guard gate, but I wasn’t about to ask if my security detail could, too. Having a tail didn’t exactly fit with my goal of performing my own investigation into Alison’s disappearance.

After I found parking, I followed the gate guard’s directions toward sound stage sixteen and found Jerry Donovan’s trailer next to it.

“It’s not every day I face the enemy head-on.” Jerry laughed as he welcomed me in and closed the door behind us.

The trailer’s insides were refreshingly modern with dark granite countertops and stainless kitchen appliances, a combination that worked well with the light gray furnishings and blinds. With a bank of recessed lighting overhead, it felt like evening in the middle of a warm sunny afternoon.

“And to think you invited me in,” I said, taking a seat at the built-in dinette.

I turned down Jerry’s offer of refreshment, while he helped himself to a bottled beer.

“Front and center in the news, I see, too,” Jerry began with his heavy Brooklyn accent as he fit his large frame into the seat across from me. “What’s this about you and Alison Abbot? I had no idea your two were so close.”

“Oh, Jerry,” I paused to smirk at him, “you know I’m friends with a lot of people. It’s a pleasure to get some of your time.”

“You’re in the detective business these days, too? I guess that’s a little like passing gossip.” Jerry laughed.

“I’m in the *knowledge* business, Jerry,” I said, taking in his full head of sandy blonde hair, ruddy complexion, and muscular arms that were bulging beneath his shirt. “Always and foremost, I gather the facts and report them, good or bad,” I added, smiling.

Jerry raised a brow. "My agent said your assistant phoned, snooping around to get scoop on Ethan Rogers."

His agent was Brent Walton, who probably knew as I did that Jerry was on the downslide of his career and publicity from me was as good as any.

I shrugged, smiling at him. "Did he now? And I thought we were interviewing you about your upcoming film?"

Jerry shrugged slightly. "Walt thought we might help one another out."

"Walt's right. It never hurts to generate a little publicity, while keeping up friendly relations."

"Don't mean to beat a dead horse, but there's quite the stir about Alison, huh?" Jerry's dark brown eyes loomed large.

"Yes, it's all very unfortunate. I'm hopeful they will locate her very soon, safe and sound."

Jerry studied me for a moment, scratching his head.

"Jerry, I do declare, speak your mind," I said.

"It's the darnedest thing. I bet you hear this all the time." He shook his head a couple times.

"Now Jerry, it's not polite for you to make a lady wait like this." I tipped my head to him.

He pointed at me. "You and Alison – you two could be sisters!"

"Oh Jerry, you do flatter me." I laughed.

"You forget, I've seen her with dark hair and up close, and you two - wow - you really resemble one another," Jerry insisted, his eyes large once again.

"Well, I guess I should be very flattered." I smiled at him. "Had I known you were such a gentleman, we would have had this meeting much sooner." I laughed a bit before continuing, "Tell me, how was working with Ethan?"

Jerry took a moment, then said, "He's not the easiest guy for a fellow like me to like."

"But the audiences love him," I pointed out.

"Exactly!" Jerry boomed. "I mean how can a regular guy like me compete with a rock star like Ethan?" A serious look overtook his large face as he shrugged. "Look, I'm not here to snitch on anyone. I was more curious about what you're up to, if the truth be told."

"Come on, Jerry. It's no fun if we don't spill a few secrets. What's Ethan *really* like?" I shared my most seductive smile, which had worked wonders for me in the past.

"Um... If Ethan tells the director it's good in one shot, it's good in one shot." Jerry reached for his beer and took a long sip.

"Maybe Ethan's always right?" I proposed.

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

“Yeah, right!” Jerry laughed. “I’m sure it helps to have Rogers for a last name.”

“Ethan’s arrogant, and his family is powerful. Is this all you’ve got? I knew this walking in the door.” I glanced toward the exit, then back at Jerry. “I’m looking to know the real Ethan and Alison.” I smiled at him.

A slow grin overtook Jerry’s face before he shrugged. “Ok, I’ll play. After all, I’ve got a family to feed.”

“Excellent.” I rewarded him with a smile. “Did you ever meet Alison?”

“Yes, once.” Jerry paused, as if giving the question more thought and then shook his head. “No, make that twice - once on the set and another time at the Los Angeles premier.”

“That’s it?”

Jerry nodded. “Yep. And we didn’t say much other than hello. Ethan made sure she kept her distance.”

“Why do you say that?”

Jerry hesitated before speaking, “It’s like she was his prized cow or something.”

“Meaning?” I asked.

“It’s as if Ethan was saying, you can look but you can’t touch. Other than a very brief hello a couple times, he moved her right along.”

“You never really spoke to Alison?”

Jerry answered my question with a brief shake of the head.

“Tell me about Ethan,” I said.

Jerry took a sip of beer, then said, “At the beginning of every film, most actors put their best face forward. Don’t want to be un-cool on the set and all.”

“You and Ethan became chums?” I cocked a brow at him. “Is that all you’ve got?”

Jerry hesitated, then leaned forward and clasped his hands atop the table. “Ok, here goes. One night, Ethan invited me to join him after the shoot. I thought, sure what the heck. It’s sort of good for my career to hobnob a bit.”

I nodded and said, “Go on.”

“We ended up at some party downtown.”

“At a club?” I asked.

“No. I think it was somebody’s place.” Jerry took his beer bottle in both hands and began picking at the label as he spoke. “And this wasn’t your typical high society crowd - more like a cast of divergents.” He paused to laugh. “Maybe Halloween came early that year and no one told me. I don’t know.”

“Did Ethan know anyone there?”

Jerry looked at me and shrugged before answering, “We didn’t exactly partner up all night. It was a weird scene; some people were getting it on right in the open. If you ask me, it had the beginnings of an orgy.”

“What did Ethan do?”

Jerry shook his head slowly a couple times. “Don’t know. I lost track of him and ended up taking a cab home. I stood around with a guy I didn’t know and even got invited to join in a couple times. It was crazy.” He laughed.

I nodded, waiting for him to continue.

“Oh yeah, there was a guy named Larry. He had tattoos all over his body, even on his neck. Said he could hook me up if I wanted to get some work done.”

“Did he give you his contact information?”

“Nope.”

“Did you and Ethan attend these parties frequently?”

Jerry shook his head. “Just that one time. Then, we were into filming, and I began to think Ethan was a bit of an ass.”

“Did you ever hang out again?”

“He invited me over to his trailer on the set a couple times. Said we’d rehearse lines, but we never did. Other people always showed up, and we’d end up having a few drinks.”

“Keeping friendly relations on set can’t hurt,” I said.

“Ethan kept interesting company. I never saw Larry again, the one from the party.” Jerry paused, taking one last sip of his beer before he put the bottle to the side. “But that other guy was always hanging around.”

“Who was that?”

“Maybe he was a bodyguard, I don’t know,” Jerry mused. “We were never introduced. He had these big scorpion tattoos up and down his arms.”

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My phone rang immediately after I had left Jerry and was headed toward the guard entrance in my car. I expected Marmalade, but instead got Jamison.

“I assume I’ll see you in a few hours,” he said.

“I thought we were on for tomorrow. Did something happen?”

“I thought you’d be the first to know.” I heard him chuckle.

“They found Alison?”

“No. But Ethan Rogers finally made a statement. His name’s all over the press.”

“I just got out of an interview,” I explained.

“Then, you don’t know the good news about your little reward fund, either. Ethan Rogers pledged one million dollars to the cause.”

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

His words caused me to tighten my grip on the wheel. “He did?”

“I thought you might have worked some *Carlotta magic* on him.” Jamison paused to laugh. “But I guess he’s just an upstanding guy.”

I called Marmalade a minute later. “Have you talked to anyone at Ethan’s camp?” I asked.

“I thought you might want to do that, Sugar. You know, thank them and all.”

“You’re right. It should probably come from me. Ethan gave a statement?”

“It was real poetic, too. Read it himself outside his house. It was on all the networks. I sent you the link.”

“Have you posted anything?”

“Any minute, now. Blog traffic’s on fire, and the phone’s been ringing nonstop. The police released some traffic photos of Alison’s car.”

I arrived at my car and said, “I’ll take a look.”

A few moments later, I studied several snapshots of the car released by the police - three of the car and its masked driver. Two other photos appeared to be of Alison, dressed in red near two stoplights in Santa Monica. I was surprised how easy, despite the graininess of the photos, it was to clearly see the Snow White mask.

As I drove to the studio, I thought: Why Snow White? There were hundreds of Disney characters to choose from. There could be significance to the choice, but maybe not? Why wear a mask at all, except to hide in plain view - but wouldn’t a mask draw attention?

I didn’t expect Sam’s call as I drove past the guard gate and watched a LAPD police car fall in behind me on Warner Boulevard.

“How’s your tail?” he asked.

“They haven’t lost me yet,” I quipped.

“Except for about a couple hours ago,” Sam corrected. “I heard you visited Warner Brothers. Not auditioning for a part are you?”

“I’m still a working girl after a story.” I laughed briefly before continuing, “In fact, we might need to rethink my need for security.”

“It’s for your own benefit, Carlotta,” Sam quickly replied.

“Maybe an occasional checkup at home, but I certainly don’t need an entourage all day. Promise you’ll call them off?” I asked sweetly.

Sam was quiet for a long moment, then spoke, “I hope you aren’t drumming up trouble.”

I laughed briefly at his seriousness, then said, “Let’s be honest, Detective. My job is all about drumming up trouble, the kind the LAPD most assuredly won’t be interested in.”

“We’ll see about that. I wouldn’t be surprised if you cajoled Ethan Rogers into making a statement and pledging the funds.”



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“I don’t have magical powers, you know,” I teased.

“Don’t forget, I’ve seen you in action, Carlotta. You can be mighty persuasive.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, but I’m as surprised as you are. I’ve seen the photos of the car. No ransom note, so far?”

“Nothing,” he responded.

“Disappeared without a trace,” I suggested.

Silence filled the line, until Sam spoke. “We both know that’s not possible.”

To my satisfaction, shortly after hanging up with Sam, I watched as my LAPD detail turned off and disappeared into traffic.

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A few minutes later, I arrived at Take Three, the venue for Leilani Lingerie’s press event to announce expanding its already flourishing business. The company had already made a name for itself selling Hawaiian-styled women’s lingerie and was now expanding into specialty bath and adult products.

My friend Leilani liked to have press events a couple times a year to highlight certain products and give out free merchandise to advertisers and celebrities who supported the business. I was happy to stop by to say a few words on behalf of her and the company.

When I arrived, the get-together was in full force, with music jamming in the background and beautiful people smiling and talking with free drinks and appetizers in their hands.

It didn’t take long for a smiling dark-haired Leilani, dressed in a multicolored sundress and with a large orange flower tucked behind one ear, to corner me near the bar.

“What’s this I hear? You’re friends with Alison Abbot?” she whispered loudly in my ear as she greeted me with a hug. “Had I known, I would have requested a meet-up!” She stepped back and looked at me.

I smiled at her and explained, “We’re not *actually* friends.”

“Really?” Her smile quickly turned to one of concern. “Kidding aside, I hope she’s ok.”

I nodded, thinking of Sam. “They’ll find her,” I murmured.

“I hope so.” Leilani paused to smile, adding, “We’ll invite her to the press event next time.”

\*\*\*

I arrived home later to find a LAPD squad car parked outside and Marmalade peering into her computer screen.

“The crazies are out today,” she said, without looking at me.

“They are?” I asked. “Is there Trixie Tramway news?”

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

Marmalade turned away from the screen to look at me. “That reminds me. Her agent called this morning and wants to meet with you to plan some publicity for Trixie.”

“Does she now?” I mused.

“Oh, Sugar, and that’s not all.” Marmalade frowned slightly, shaking her head a couple times. “There are all kinds of theorists who want their two minutes of fame.”

“Anything plausible we might want to tell the LAPD about?”

Marmalade scooted up to the screen and read aloud, “According to this source, Alison Abbot secretly ran off with a reclusive billionaire.” She paused briefly, then began reading again, “Another theorist thinks Ms. Abbot had a sex change and is secretly living as Archibald Abbot.”

I shook my head and laughed. “Now, that’s creative, although I’m not surprised. Maybe we should impress on them the importance of sticking to *the facts*.”

Marmalade shot me a worried glance. “Oh Sugar, maybe one of these oddballs *actually* knows something.”

I left Marmalade to her pondering and went to change into more comfortable clothing.

When I returned to the office, I once again studied the photos of the masked driver. In a city the size of LA, the mask could have come from anywhere, but someone *might* have noticed Snow White driving about in an expensive sports car.

Next, I watched a video of Ethan reading his statement. There he stood, dressed in black jeans and t-shirt outside his front door with Jordan, obviously pregnant with baby number two, beside him.

“Jordan and I are here to voice our concern and support for Alison, who has been a significant person in both of our lives. We care for Alison greatly and have every faith that the LAPD are doing all they can to bring Alison home. Jordan and I would like to show our support by contributing one million dollars to the reward fund that has been established by columnist Carlotta DuBois. We hope that anyone who may have knowledge of Alison’s whereabouts contact the police, immediately. Thank you.”

I was pleased by Ethan’s generous pledge, although I wouldn’t have called his statement *poetic*, as Marmalade had. Ethan had chosen to acknowledge me in his very public statement, and I couldn’t help but wonder about his true intentions.

Over the next hour, I returned calls to a couple of blog advertisers who were happy to see the press I was putting out about Alison. Then, I read through blog comments.

I even made good on my promise to provide some free publicity to Jerry Donovan, who I reported “had the highest praise” for Ethan and Alison. I mentioned that his burgeoning career and being father to five made him a Hollywood role model. I held back on spilling the beans about Ethan’s supposed provocative night life.

It seemed that stars everywhere were coming out on social media in support of Alison, so Marmalade was spending a good amount of her time capturing the highlights, some of which I would include in my next telecast.

I went into the bedroom to dress for my KDKD update and took out my phone to scroll down my list of contacts. Ethan’s people would be waiting for my call.

I dialed Millennial Talent and was passed off to Lucas Short’s assistant, who confirmed that Ethan’s offer to contribute to the reward fund I’d initiated was indeed genuine.

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When I finished with the broadcast, I stayed another hour to work on the blog and talk with Marmalade on the phone.

“I’ve got a lead on one of Alison’s prior co-stars,” she said.

“Good. Hopefully, we can set something up soon.”

“And I wanted to remind you, Margo Marselle gets out of prison in a couple days. Variety already scored an interview. I wonder how they managed that.”

Margo had evolved from porn star to adept business woman, whose staff of call-girls had discreetly catered to the sexual desires of LA’s wealthiest. She’d served a five year sentence after her most trusted assistant provided Margo’s client list to the police and copped a plea deal.

“We should try to line something up,” I suggested. “Landing a first-hand interview with Margo would be a huge boon for the blog.”

“I’m already on it, Sugar,” Marmalade replied.

I wrapped up my work shortly after hanging up and headed straight to Andy’s townhouse in Echo Park. He would be asleep, but I wasn’t going to let another night pass without holding him in my arms.

I felt relieved I wouldn’t have to explain about the LAPD following me around, although I expected the police would be verifying my whereabouts with Andy at any time, and the sooner I warned him about it, the better.



**CHAPTER 16 (Alison Pt 3)**

*April – four years earlier*

As I sit staring at my reflection in the mirror, Ethan comes from behind to put his arms around me.

“You’re looking lovelier than ever,” he whispers in my ear.

I smile at him in the mirror. “Yes, but will your family think so?”

“Everyone knows I’m married to the most beautiful and talented woman in show business.” He laughs a bit and stands up, his hands now resting on my shoulders.

My eyes not leaving his, I pick up the pendant diamond earrings he gave me this morning for our one year anniversary and put them on. “And I thought it would be wonderful if we celebrated our special day privately away from all the prying eyes,” I suggest.

Ethan pretends to pout. “Sweetheart, you know mother. She loves to throw a party, and what better excuse than to celebrate you being part of our family.”

I stand up and take his face in my hands. “I love you more now than I ever have,” I say.

“And I, you.” Ethan leans down to kiss me.

I observe Ethan getting ready and think about the night we just spent together. My husband’s not like other men. Dominique was passionate, Matt energetic, and Garret experimental. Ethan’s lovemaking is so intense at times I feel as if I’m an inadequate lover.

Ethan comes toward me and says, “We should be going. We’re already running late.”

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As we arrive at the Rogers estate in the limousine Ethan’s mother sent for us, I find myself in a state of anxiety. Nothing Ethan can do or say ever prepares me for an audience with Renee.

It’s not that she’s ever uttered an unkind word to me or interferes incessantly in our lives, but it’s clear Ethan has a loyalty to his mother and family that I find difficult to comprehend, never having had a real family of my own.

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

Many would say Renee is a Hollywood legend, starring in a handful of classics the world is familiar with. She was beautiful in her youth, and it's apparent she does all she can to maintain a glamorous appearance in her seventies.

Renee was married to Ethan's father Edgar, also a famous actor, for over twenty years, until he was killed suddenly in a car accident. She proceeded to marry a Persian billionaire less than six months later. He passed early on in the marriage, much to the chagrin of his grown children who were given a pittance in his will, compared to Renee's windfall. Ethan tells me they challenged his mother in court for several years, although Renee, with her newfound billions, prevailed.

Thus, Renee does not live like other Hollywood stars, she lives larger, much more so. Everything about her estate is grand, from the house to the gardens and outbuildings, and even to the views.

Ethan's younger brother Edward, a more effeminate version of my husband, is the first to greet us. He's often in California, although he makes his home in New York where he works primarily in theater.

Edward shakes Ethan's hand and plucks a kiss on my cheek. It appears he's been swimming since his hair is damp, and he's dressed down in a t-shirt and shorts.

Edward steps back and smiles at me. "To the woman of the hour and recent Oscar nominee, our lovely Alison!"

"Edward, such a gallant and handsome younger brother," I reply with a teasing smile.

He steps forward and puts an arm about my shoulder. "Now, dear sister, let me escort you out to the others."

I glance over at Ethan, who's talking with his cousin Alan, and quickly plant a kiss on his cheek. Then, Edward walks me out to the pool area where a party is ensuing.

I immediately spot Renee's brother, Randy, off to our left. He was immensely talented once upon a time, so they say. I presume Randy's fond of women since he's been married four times, although currently divorced, and has fathered nine children, cousin Alan included.

I scan to our right and see Alan's sister, Adrian, in the pool with two of her small children. I'm sure other heirs of Randy's are lurking about since it's almost a religious requirement to attend a family gathering.

I am disappointed to find Jordan, Lucas Short's daughter, here, standing at the far end of the pool along with a couple of her minions and talking with Eva, Ethan's older sister.

Jordan's been taking more of an active role overseeing both Ethan and my careers, although she seems somewhat preoccupied with my husband. I

haven't had an audition in quite some time, and Jordan simply tells me no good scripts have come her way.

I don't trust Lucas or Jordan and miss having Taloria as my agent. And for that matter, I miss Dominique. Somehow I always knew both of them were looking out for my best interests. They now seem part of my distant past, when in reality, less than four years has passed since Matt offered me my first role.

Jordan's smile evaporates as we approach. "Alison," she greets me with a slight tilt of the head.

I nod and smile before laughing at something Edward says about Ethan.

I glance over at Renee who's staring my way and smile at her. Looking more youthful than she can possibly be, Renee appears toned and tan, dressed in a striped black and white sundress, with her hair styled atop her head.

Next to Renee is Rossi, her sixty-something companion and a permanent fixture anywhere she goes. My husband seems reluctant to talk about the man, although he insists his mother and Rossi are in no way a couple. Rossi is always wearing sunglasses and has never said as much as a word to me.

Ethan has joined Renee, no doubt showering her with accolades in front of her guests. I suspect she'll secretly despise me later for not greeting her upon arrival, which gives me great satisfaction. I've learned to live with her resentment for eloping with Ethan, barely a week after filming wrapped for *The Art of Deception*.

My eyes find the comfort of Ethan's brown ones, before watching him walk a few feet to talk with an older man I've never met. The man turns and looks my way, likely laughing at something Ethan said. I happily excuse myself from Jordan and company to go meet my husband.

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I'm alone on the eve of my first wedding anniversary. After the day enduring Ethan's family, I'd imagined a night of romance and champagne. I glance down at my phone, waiting for my husband to respond to the four messages I've already left him.

Ethan disappeared midway through the party and still has not returned, even two hours after my arrival home. It was Jordan who told me something had come up with one of Ethan's films, but her lack of specifics has left me more than a little suspicious.

This is not the first time Ethan has disappeared and not let me know where he's gone, but I have tried to overlook these occurrences. I realize he's used to doing as he pleases, but still, it's not what I expected our marriage would be.





**CHAPTER 17**

I struggled to wake when my phone alarm went off, but the thought of spending valuable time with Andy roused me. He was an early riser, and I was the night owl. To make matters worse, our weekends were often jam-packed with commitments to others, so I had learned to savor our precious time together.

As I lay there, I reached for my phone and quickly scanned the press sites for the night's happenings. There were no further updates about Alison's case, but I had to believe the LAPD was being inundated by calls from the public and doing all it could to find Alison.

I emerged from the bedroom to find Andy standing in the kitchen, already dressed with his sandy-blond hair slightly damp, and sipping a cup of coffee.

"I was going to bring you a cup," he said, walking around the counter to greet me with a kiss.

I put my arms around his neck and rested my head on his perfectly molded shoulder. I loved the subtle scent of him and wanted to forget the events of the past couple days and stay close to him for a long while.

"Traffic was eerily absent, yesterday," he said. "Maybe the world stayed home for your press conference. I even managed to catch it."

I leaned back and watched as Andy smiled down at me.

"Are you planning to update me about what's really been going on?" he asked.

It was the perfect opportunity to tell him what I needed to about the LAPD following-up on my whereabouts, but instead I hugged him and whispered in his ear, "I don't want to talk about anything."

"It's good to see you, too," Andy replied with a soft laugh. "This isn't like the Carlotta I know."

We stood there for a long moment before releasing one another. Then, I procured myself a cup of coffee and said, "I want you all to myself. Maybe we should play hooky today."

Andy looked down at his watch, then at me. "You realize I'm on the air in less than two hours?"

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

I smiled sideways at him, suggesting, “Maybe Antonio can fill in. I realize he’s the weather guy, but one day won’t matter.”

I turned, opening the fridge in search of creamer and hearing Andy laugh.

“We haven’t talked for real in a couple days, Carlotta,” he said. “That’s gotta be a record with you.”

I poured some creamer into my coffee and took a seat at the bar, silently contemplating how to bring up my involvement in Alison’s case.

Andy took a seat beside me. “You seem pretty wrapped up in the Abbot disappearance,” he began, “especially with spearheading that reward fund. I was surprised to see you speak at the press conference.”

I shrugged, stating lightly, “The police needed a member of the press to speak, and I’m an easy recruit. You know, I never turn down good publicity.” I smiled at him.

Andy laughed, then said, “What I do know is that you’re always chasing stories, but this time you’re becoming part of one.”

It was the perfect time to come clean about what was really going on. “About that-“ I smiled, watching Andy remove his coffee cup from his lips.

“Yes?” he asked.

“I heard the LAPD is questioning lots of people,” I told him. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they questioned you about me.” I rewarded him with my most demure smile.

Andy smiled back. “Is that right? *Famous gossip columnist suspected in starlet’s disappearance.*”

“It’s not out of the question, you know. They suspect almost *everyone* in the beginning,” I pointed out.

Andy raised a brow at me and asked, “You know Alison Abbot’s whereabouts?”

“Of course not,” I replied quickly. “But I *did* just interview her.”

Andy laughed, saying, “Reaching, *definitely* reaching.”

He stood up, set his coffee cup in the sink, and then planted kiss on my forehead. “What will my little columnist come up with next?” he asked.

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I listened to my messages on my drive home from Andy’s. One was from Jamison about tonight’s newscast, while another was from Steve Oliver, the agent for Liam McLane, Alison’s co-star in *The Decoy*.

Liam had been in the news expressing his concerns for Alison, but he hadn’t discussed his views on the copycat theory.

Steve mentioned his curiosity about our offer to provide press for his client, and I was pleased he hadn’t shut the door on an interview.

I'd barely entered the kitchen when Marmalade came straight at me with a stunned look on her face. "Heavens, Sugar, you're not going to believe this."

I immediately felt my pulse skyrocket. "They found Alison?"

Marmalade shook her head, a serious look upon her face. "Not that earth shattering, but you'll like this. Alison's former agent Taloria Glace wants to speak with you."

"When?"

Marmalade raised a brow and answered, "Now."

A minute later, I was seated in my office with a phone in my hand. "Ms. Glace, so nice of you to call," I said.

"I need to see you," she responded with a deep throaty voice I didn't expect.

"I'm glad to hear you say that."

"Yeah, well, I need a favor from Pen. She said the only way she'll help me is if I talk with you."

Her unfriendly tone took me off guard for a brief moment, but I quickly recovered with a friendly reply, "I'd be mightily appreciative to have a few minutes of your time."

"Cut the crap, Ms. DuBois," she shot back. "I'm not buying your act for a second. If you want to talk with me, show up at the Copper Penny in West Hollywood at noon. I'll be in the back." She hung up before I could reply.

I didn't expect Marmalade's grim look when I got off the phone.

"Oh, Sugar..." Marmalade shook her head a couple times before looking at her computer monitor.

"What is it now?" I walked over to stand beside her.

"Have you scanned the feedback?"

Feedback consisted of incoming communications from all our social media sources, including our blog email box. We both regularly scanned feedback and at times responded to fans.

"Next on my list," I replied.

Marmalade faintly nodded as she continued to stare ahead. "I declare we are getting some press over our Alison story," she said slowly.

I laughed a bit. "Any press is good press. What's up?" I looked over at her.

Marmalade, with her long dark hair pulled up in a tight bun, looked up at me briefly before returning her eyes to the screen. "Sugar, you might want to pull up a seat."

I set down my coffee and rolled my desk chair over to sit next to her.

Reading postings on our social media accounts was nothing new. We were two women tuned in practically every waking hour to our mobile

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

devices, staying abreast of everything Hollywood. However, lately, Alison Abbot's disappearing act had certainly taken me a little off track. I'd been relying on Marmalade more than ever for her work on the blog.

"I'm not sure what to make of this, Sugar," Marmalade practically whispered.

I peered forward at the screen and read aloud the words from an anonymous email that had caught her eyes: "Roses are red, violets are blue. Catherine conned Alex, and now you're being conned, too."

"Those are the characters from Alison's movie, the one with Ethan," noted.

"*The Art of Deception?*" Marmalade asked.

I nodded.

The seemingly upbeat con artist flick surprised viewers when the last scene revealed a sinister murder.

"Didn't Catherine end up killing Alex?" Marmalade asked slowly.

"Yes," I replied.

Marmalade's eyes grew large as she stared at the email. "Sugar, maybe we should let your cop friend know about this email."

Inviting the police further into my life because of one off-the-wall email held little appeal for me.

"Don't worry, it's probably nothing," I reassured her. "Any word on Mr. Tarpino?"

Marmalade looked at me and shook her head. "Your guess is as good as mine. I expect the police will be talking with him. I'll see what my contact can find out."

I managed to put the email out of my mind and placed a call to Liam McClain's agent Steve Oliver, and as luck would have it, he answered. With a bit of persuasion, Steve agreed to an hour-long interview between Liam and me later in the week.

CHAPTER 18

After more blog updates, a call to Trixie Tramway's over-enthusiastic agent to discuss dates for a potential meet-up, and a quick teleconference with two of the stars of the *Days of May*, a thriller being released the coming weekend, I prepared for my meet-up with Alison's former agent.

I'd known little about Taloria Glace prior to Alison's disappearance. After a quick call to Pen and a couple of internet searches, I learned that Taloria was a no-nonsense New York native who'd gotten her start representing stage actors, although she'd been representing film clients in Los Angeles for the past several years.

Ms. Glace appeared to operate independently, not affiliated with an agency of any size, and on her website, she promised highly personalized services to her clients. I was uncertain of what "highly personalized" might encompass.

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A little over an hour later, I found Taloria Glace sitting in a back booth in a dark corner of the Copper Penny. She was dressed in a tailored tan suit coat with a black bead necklace around her neck. Her petite face was framed by short, tightly curled hair.

The scowl she greeted me with was as friendly as her earlier hangup. "I've been grilled by the police. I don't need you doing it, too," she insisted.

"Want to catch me up?" I smiled, taking the opposite seat.

Taloria sighed and reached for her drink, which appeared to be a frozen daiquiri of some sort. She took her time taking a sip, before settling back in her seat. "I haven't worked with the girl in over five years." Her voice was light and quick, which matched the movement of her beady brown eyes.

"But you were Alison's agent. You knew her well."

"She was my *student*. I *taught* her well. I taught her about the harsh realities of this business and what it took to succeed."

"Until Ethan came along," I pointed out.

"Until the big bad wolf and his family came and blew my little house down, if we want to get all dramatic about it." She shared a humorless smile.

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

“You seem angry.”

“Heck no, I’m not *angry*,” she explained. “I was quite fond of Alison. She had gusto, and she made a real run of it, too.” Taloria almost smiled.

“After Ethan,” I murmured.

She nodded, then said, “After Ethan turned her world upside down.”

“Did you try to recruit her back?” I asked.

“After Ethan’s people were done with her, Jeb Cartwright swooped right in.” She shared a half-hearted smile, then added, “I like to think I had a small hand in her success.”

I smiled at her. “I would agree. You’re still representing talent?”

She nodded briefly. “I’ve done ok. I don’t have any A-listers, but the ones I do have keep me hopping.”

“I’m familiar with Top Hat,” I said, thinking of Taloria’s client, a hip-hop artist who’d had a few run-ins with the law, which made him newsworthy for my blog.

“Who isn’t?” She smiled in a sly way. “At least he generates his own publicity. Now, we’ll have Pen generate a bit more.”

“When’s the last time you talked with Alison?”

“We parted after her first movie with Ethan,” she replied.

“You never came in contact with her again?”

Taloria shrugged slightly, looking across the bar. “It’s not like we ran in the same circles. The Rogers are like royalty in this town.” Her eyes met mine.

“They like to think so,” I said softly, watching her face warm a bit. “Did Alison ever mention her former agent, Mr. Dominique Tarantino?” I asked.

Taloria nodded. “Maybe once, when we first met, but that was about it. As far as things went, Alison didn’t talk about her past. In fact, she never talked much about her personal life, that is, if she even had one.”

“Did you ever see her after she and Ethan parted?” I asked.

“Look, we weren’t close in that way,” she said, her attention focused on the straw she was circulating in her drink. She looked up at me and asked, “Anything else?”

Taloria had answered my questions, but she was being evasive with her eyes. I’d interviewed enough people to know when someone was hiding something, so I decided to test her.

“What did *you* think of Ethan?” I asked.

“I talked to him once or twice when they were filming *The Art of Deception*,” she answered, looking past me.

“Alison and Ethan seemed very in love, an idyllic couple,” I suggested.

Taloria shrugged. “I supposed some thought so.”

“And then they split suddenly, and their parting still remains a mystery.”

"I suppose," she murmured, looking past me for a brief moment. "Listen, I've already talked to the police, and as I've said, I knew Alison some time ago."

I thought of Sam and wondered if he had been the one to talk with Taloria and found her to be as pleasant as I was finding her to be.

She continued, "I told them if anything else came to mind, I'd let them know."

It was apparent this interview was about to be over if I didn't change my approach. The time had come to spice things up and see where Taloria might lead me.

"You know what I think? You didn't like Ethan. You thought he was bad for Alison." I watched Taloria's eyes come alive before continuing, "And you know more than you're telling me."

"I already told you that—"

"I can tell," I interrupted her.

Color flooded her cheeks, her anger evident. Still, I wasn't about to go easy on her.

"You hated the Rogers for what they did to your prodigy," I said.

Taloria shook her head and laughed quietly. "You're way off the mark."

"But that wasn't the last of it," I continued. "You've spoken with Alison, and you know more than you're admitting to."

We sat there with our eyes deadlocked, before I said softly, "I'm not the police, Taloria, but I do want to help find Alison. I thought that's what you wanted, too."

She lowered her head and replied, "I've already said too much."

I leaned forward and offered quietly, "Anything you tell me today is off the record."

"I don't understand what you get out of this," Taloria said, looking at me.

"I'm on Alison's side, too. And I'm promising some free positive press for Top Hat - let's not forget about that." I smiled at her.

She glanced quickly around the room before speaking, "I'll give you this, but only this - *off the record*."

I nodded.

Taloria leaned forward, putting both hands on the table. "People in this town think they know the Rogers family. Stories about them are certainly good for tabloid sales," she said quietly, deliberately. "But the Rogers *aren't* like other people. Ethan's *not* like other actors." She paused for a long moment, as if she were debating saying more. "I don't know how, but they're involved with Alison's disappearance."

Her accusation surprised me, but I didn't show it. "This is your opinion?"

## HOW TO DISAPPEAR

“It is.” She sat back in her seat, reaching for her near-empty glass and adding, “And I believe it with my whole heart.”



J.C. Patrick