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Through the panoramic plate glass windows of the new Maynard Holbrook Jackson, Jr. Terminal at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, I'm watching as the world's largest passenger aircraft, an Airbus 380 slowly pulls up next to the extended Jetway bridge, and stops. The ground crew is waving lighted wands, and one of them drags a fat black power cord to one side of the aircraft's nose. Another signals to the captain the power cord is alive.

I crane my neck to look up through the terminal windows at the crown of the fuselage, high above the cockpit windows. Almost everything behind the airplane, a skyscraper with wings, has disappeared. The only thing I can see is the light of the rising sun breaking the eastern horizon. Laser-like beams of yellow, orange, and pink cut across the cobalt blue, sunrise sky. The beams will extend to the edge of the Milky Way.

From where I'm standing, I can see a steady flow of anxious passengers deplaning between the aircraft door, and the Jetway bridge. My focus, though, is on the snapshot images of her. The ones I believed were locked away. The memories slice down and re-open the wound. She will walk off the plane in seconds. I thought I could handle this. I have to force the memories back into my mind vault.

The Interpol photos they sent, documented that she is as beautiful, as the day she ran away. What I have come to learn in this life is—beauty is often the beast.

The first time I saw her was in Abrams's office, the psychiatrist. She was there to try to tame her demons. I was there because of departmental policy, which requires shrink time after a shooting. I only saw her for a brief moment, when I passed her in his outer office, while I raced past the receptionist trying desperately to make my escape.

I fought going to see Abrams. I hated the probing into my psyche, and the backstory of my life. It was painful and required spilling my regrets. It brought my quieted nightmares back. It also triggered a stabbing sensation in my arm, from the bullet still buried there. She shot my arm. I shot and killed her. I didn't know it was a sixteen-year-old girl under the ski mask. She had an entire life ahead of her, before I punched her ticket to hell. She fired an assault rifle like a professional. Internal Affairs said the shooting was justified.

I spend the time since it happened, immersing myself in my work as a homicide detective. Pursuing murderers is a weird way to try to forget how sick this world really is. Business is up—murder rates are on the rise, more killing every day. There are more angry folks on the streets than when I was a kid.

No one takes responsibility for their actions anymore, at least since Nixon was pardoned. They feel deserving, or battered by life. Respect for everything is gone. There's just cold-blooded, bizarre behavior now. Life has become a dismal reality show. "Compassion" is just a word floated at us by the Dali Lama.

Someday, I swear I'm going to walk away from all of this, and spend the rest of my life just forgetting. Maybe I'll take a chance on life outside the badge, next time—crime. They say crime pays, and my pension in this economy isn't looking good.

My inbound fugitive stunned me the first time I saw her in Abrams's office. In that flash of time, she was stuck inside my head. A millisecond later, she had captured my

heart. It wasn't much longer after that, when I was holding her in my arms, kissing her pouty lips, and planning to love her forever. I can still smell her scent, and feel her embrace, as if it was happening now.

Our precious love affair came to an abrupt halt, while I was searching for Abrams's killer, and found out she killed him—Hannibal Lecter in stilettos. She's the one who left my name in blood on the wall, above the rigid, decomposing corpse in Boston. She slipped away for Europe before I could arrest her. I thought I was over her. Now, five years later, she is being escorted back to me. I can't possibly feel what I'm feeling. I'm convinced I don't have feelings anymore.

I'm glad Mika is standing next to me. We haven't spoken since we arrived here from the precinct. She takes my hand and squeezes. We know each other's pain. We need each other's support. Mika was my first love. A lot has changed since Lori became so much a part of our lives. Mika and I were lovers once. We're more like brother and sister now, confidants. How we arrived here, and what we endured, has left both of us damaged inside. I doubt either of us will ever be able to fall in love again.

There's a tight knot in the back of my neck. I try to massage it away. My head is crying out for Excedrin. My stomach is crying out for a Zantac. My heart is just crying.

"How are you doing, Jake?"

"So far—"

It amazes me how long we can bury, conceal, and ignore the things in life that have hurt us deeply. How that seething pain, without warning, returns in full force at inopportune times. We think of ourselves as great, majestic mountains, sturdy and strong, unconquerable, but even mountains erode into deserts over time. After a while, we begin to realize how puny we are in the universe, and how little we control in our lives. All we really have inside, is what we believe to be true—what we can live with.

Inside the terminal, is a sample of the psychotic roller coaster ride America has become. It's a country full of scammers, freaks, charlatans, zealots, liars, OCDs, and manipulators. The crying children are the only ones who get it, how it doesn't look good out here. To the left and right, executives and other suits are glued to cell phones, talking in loud, obnoxious conversations. They glance around the terminal, without making eye contact, checking to make sure we understand how self-important they are.

The nervous travelers pace between the scurrying airport employees, who work in this zoo. The elderly sit patiently, in wheelchairs, slouched over with scowls. Some have weary-eyes. Others glare with suspicious eyes. None of them can find happiness in life anymore. Most are waiting to be transported to Florida, the Purgatory on Mother Earth, and the last stop before the last breath.

Trailer trash males eye the teenage parochial school girls in sports shorts, and stenciled tank tops, who are guarded by distracted chaperones. Goth kids, with jet-black hair and deep black eyeshadow, whisper to rooster-haired compatriots. All exist within their own tunnel vision worlds, until an airport security alarm jolts them into another high-alert, terrorist attack scare. There is a constant stream of humanity into, and out of, the bathrooms and bars.

New moms with baby bellies and hips, fat and succulent with child, push Winnebago-size strollers, piled high with bags and accessories. They are indifferent to the toes of others they just ran over. Those who have been rolled over, wish they could retaliate with

a Taser set for half the voltage of a felon. There is no room in the Winnebago for the two-year-old crier, who was supposed to get the free ride.

I suspect some of these spoiled, entitled brats, will end up minor criminals, or serial killers providing longevity in a law enforcement career for some homicide detective. A few will make it into white-collar crime as Wall Street bankers, or members of Congress.

They come is an assortment of T-shirts, jeans, flip-flops, even pajama pants—the acceptable, rebel, refugee garb of Generation Zero. I don't get the whole Sudoku thing, the intensity people put into it. It would be better if they put that much energy into reading the Constitution, or an American history book. Besides, I can do a whole Sudoku book in five minutes tops. No one grades them, so who cares what number you put in the little box. I used to take crossword puzzles, fill some of the spaces with foul language, and leave the empty spaces for the next guy.

The pole dancer chick across the hall, with the inflated implants, and collagen lips, is on her way to another adult convention. She gives a pouty smile to the pinstriped business suit, hoping to escape her coveted starring role at the Pink Pony. The law isn't a problem for her, but someday the Law of Gravity may be. None of this crazed citizenry—the acned gamers, the talk show conspirator theorists, or the Internet surfers, could have ever been foreseen by Washington, Jefferson, or Adams.

In spite of all their self-indulgence, they freeze where they are, stare in stunned silence, wide-eyed, when they learn the fugitive is on the plane. Then, the *iReporters* come alive, poised with their cell phone camcorders, working free for the news channels. The fugitive's return is captured for all to gawk at on YouTube.

In Europe, before her departure to the U.S., the two Interpol agents, being the gentlemen they are when escorting a hot fugitive, allowed her time to prepare for the return. They saw no reason to rush her. The longer it took, the more time it gave the two agents to “appreciate” her.

Both men were smitten by her. Each was willing, if only in his mind, to allow her to escape, as long as she fled into his arms. They both knew, given the chance, they would surrender themselves to the infamous serial killer if she only asked. She was, after all, not charged for any crimes in Europe. The two agents were just doing a courtesy drop off for the inept Americans, who so easily let her escape, and hide in Europe.

The two of them accompanied her during a painfully long overnight flight to the United States. After a brief layover in Atlanta, they were scheduled to return on the same aircraft, which would surely prove the second leg of their journey, would be more painful than the first, especially without her to flirt with.

To the fugitive from justice, the flight time passed relatively quickly, because she knew the end was nowhere she wanted to go. She had forgotten how grueling flying was, regardless of the ten years of flight attendant seniority she had, at her former airline. She hadn't flown on an airplane, since she fled the flailing, grasping hands of U.S. law enforcement.

While the long flight to the U.S. may have tested their discomfort endurance, it was otherwise uneventful. During the flight, the agents stayed within eyesight, and arms reach of her, on the massive airliner. She was allowed to communicate with passengers and crew, and generated a buzz throughout the jumbo airliner. She was somewhat surprised by her notoriety, how much people knew of her life, and her prior criminal misdeeds. In

Europe, she stayed on the down low. There, no one seemed to care about her past, if they even put it together.

Back home, a staggering amount of coverage had been done about her, from the moment the media hounds learned the bird had flown. She had more than the typical Warhol fifteen minutes of fame. Just a week before her capture and return, a mega-New York Times bestseller had been released about her. Nearly everyone on the plane had it in hardcover, or e-readers. She had no idea about the book, until someone let her scan through it on the flight. She felt uneasy, uncomfortable. Passengers asked her to autograph them.

The female passengers, and flight attendants on board, had sympathized with her in their conversations and offered her their encouraging support. The Alpha males on the flight maintained vigilance and distance from her. Her reputation with a serrated blade was legendary. Most guarded their loins with trays, or briefcases.

If history were to repeat itself, the only male on the plane that could qualify as a target by Lori, was in the captain's seat. Unlike the sick and perverted U.S. airline captain she whacked, the thirty-three-year veteran Airbus captain had not committed any offense, which would have merited Lori's wrath. He was a happily married man for as long as he had been flying, loved and cherished his wife, children and grandchildren, and was respectful of his crew. The captain had even stopped during pre-boarding, on his way to the cockpit, to wish her well under the circumstances.

We waited and watched, while the straggling last passengers deplaned, and then we started down the Jetway bridge to let the real-life drama play out. The Interpol agents did not go for overkill. The taller one simply placed handcuffs loosely on her wrists. He then held onto her hands, and took a moment to look deeply into her eyes.

"It was my pleasure, Ms. Powers. Should you manage to escape again, please call upon me. I would be happy to assist you," he says.

He bowed. A sinister smile punctuated his statement. She returned a slight, indifferent nod as she struggled on the inside, to concentrate on all that was going on outside. She wondered if she could live in caged captivity, what it was going to feel like. They escorted her to the L1 door. The airline's employees hustle between us, as they complete their post-flight and preflight duties, the activity that goes on that the passengers didn't pay attention to.

"Here she comes," Mika says.

Mika doesn't believe it's happening. She

has waited so long for this day. She pushes her fingers through her flowing, raven hair. Her mother's Asian features, almond eyes, and oval face, complement her father's European ivory complexion. Her soft, beautiful face tightens at the sight of Lori.

It took just one step for Lori to go from freedom, to our custody, one sexy ankle cradled in a Jimmy Choo stiletto heel followed by the other. It took years, but here she stands, tall and gorgeous, toned, perfect flowing California blond hair, and stunning cerulean eyes. The expression on her face is mostly resignation, some jet lag is evident, but she is syntononic overall. She still has an air of self-confidence, but no defiance. It's still difficult to see the murderer, beneath the intense beauty. The empty spaces inside me fill up quickly with a burst of emotions.

"Special Agent in Charge Mika Scott, a pleasure to meet you."

The taller agent with the hound dog eyes, impeccably dressed in an Armani suit, reaches out his hand.

“I am Inspector Michel Rugard.”

Mika shakes his hand lightly.

“You sir, you must be Detective Roberts.”

When he reaches for mine, I press his hand hard as the representative of all American law enforcement officers. He pulls his hand away. We all badge one another.

“This is Inspector Rafael Franconi. He has the required documentation for the transfer of the prisoner. Everything is in order I can assure you.”

The introduction came with a continental smile, while sizing Mika up for a pass.

“Your suspect was not a problem the entire time, indeed, are you certain you want to put such a charming woman as she, in a cold, damp prison cell, and throw away the key? I understand that we, in law enforcement, always view fugitives as our personal failures. The capture of an infamous fugitive revalidates all of our existence. We are happy to have been able to assist you with her return.”

With the signed and sealed legal paperwork in hand, the agents deliver the notorious, sexy, serial killer to us. Two APD vice cops shoulder past Rugard and Franconi. O'Donnell, mid-thirties, with a perfect square chin and curly dark hair, stoops down low to apply shackles to Lori's ankles. Mika waves him off preventing his cheap attempt to a close-up sneak-peak at Lori's legs beneath her short, black leather skirt. I watch as the disappointment registers in his eyes, as his mental bondage fantasy dissolves. He is a stout primate, who obviously hasn't heard our human ancestors began walking upright about three million years ago. The only thing erect is obvious. He clears his throat. The other, Matthews, forty, physically fit ex-Marine,

moussed black hair, has laser-whitened teeth that can barely be seen inside a pencil-thin smile across his smooth, baby-face. He has already told us that murderers make him cranky. He's a coyote inside a Hilfiger sport coat and khaki pants, concealing what I suspect to be a small dick. He likes to think he has two balls larger than Donald Trump's. He's an ambition-junkie, judgmental, and makes sure everyone notices his shiny idealism about God, country and justice. His noticeable flaw is a disjointed nose, now a beak, and the result of another vice cop's contempt for Matthew's arrogance. He waits while the Interpol agent removes his handcuffs from Lori's wrists then quickly replaces them with handcuffs made in the USA. Mika waves him off as he pulls out a waist chain. He glares into Lori's azure eyes, then lets his eyes drop down to view her teasing breasts, cuddled in her low-cut, cashmere sweater. He pushes the limit by making a terse remark.

“You remind me of my ex-wife. What's with you glam girls, and your insecurities around alpha males?”

I consider letting Lori take Matthews out on the spot. The two Inspectors are aghast at what he said. Her thoughts swirl after his remark. When she was active, she had never felt a thing for her victims—not their touch, not their words, and certainly not their affection. The only release she ever felt, was watching her victims beg for their lives. Since she fled to Europe, she had become dormant, not one male victim died from her hands. The voices had stopped. They had gone silent. She no longer had the intense urge to kill, but she wasn't foolish enough to believe, that her murderous self was in total remission. While there was a time when the man's words would have placed him on top of her to do list, she ignored him, which toasted him even more.

O'Donnell, still trying to keep the bondage scene rolling inside his mind, moves to her left. Matthews takes his place to her right. Both wait for a cue from Mika. After Lori is transported to the precinct, both O'Donnell and Matthews will return to their normal assignment of busting pill mills in Gwinnett County. Due to a crime-fighter staffing shortage, we had to use them.

Because it had been Mika's case, and because she was so intensely devoted to the case before leaving the Bureau, the FBI administrator himself had called her. After swearing her in on a temporary status, he allowed Mika to walk Lori the remaining steps to justice. Mika Mirandized Lori. In a small voice, Lori acknowledged her rights.

"Lori Powers, I've waited many sleepless nights, and very long days for this moment."

Lori didn't acknowledge Mika, because her daughter Emily took center stage in her thoughts. Emily was the reason for everything. How many times had Emily called out to her both in life and in death? Her suicide ended the years of torment and sexual abuse by her father.

When we finally stand face-to-face, she makes strong eye contact, and studies my eyes. I guess she is searching for the forgiveness she believes is hiding in my heart and soul. A tear begins to fall down her cheek, dragging a trail of black mascara with it. The salty tear rolls off her cheek. Lori's trembling lips whisper.

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

We thank Rugard and Franconi, and say goodbye. Mika and I take the lead out the Jetway bridge door, and start down the stairs while O'Donnell and Mathews take up positions before and after Lori. Rugard and Franconi take one last look at the woman they were infatuated with then turn away to get their seat assignments for the ride home. I hang on tight to the legal paperwork stuffed inside an envelope. I will look at it when we get back to the precinct.

At the bottom of the Jetway bridge stairs, we march quickly to a parked black Suburban with heavy tinted windows. Lori is guided into the middle seat, while O'Donnell protects her head from the roof. It's also the last chance he gets to sneak-peak her legs. He preserves the view for later in his hotel room. Matthews just glares at her. Mika climbs in next to Lori on the near window side, while I hustle around to the opposite window seat. Before I get into the Suburban, I glance up, and see the faces and mini-cams pasted against the terminal windows.

The pounding rotor blades of the helicopter, with a large police insignia, is first heard then seen overhead. Our driver cranks the engine, and pulls behind the motorcycle escort. Blue lights ricochet off the terminal, the Airbus 380, the ramp equipment, and the uniforms surrounding us. Outside, shrill sirens blare, irritating everyone, except law enforcement personnel.

Inside the bulletproof Suburban, the deep silence is eerie, as if we are sitting at the bottom of the Mariana Trench. The fanfare and hype of her arrival is over, in what seems like less than a flash of the jumbo airliner's strobe light. We head for the precinct. When we arrive, Lori will be processed into the system, and then we will talk. After that, she will be placed in a cell until the arraignment. It will be her home for the near future. If the State of Georgia tries her first, she will most likely get the death penalty. If she's tried in

federal court, because a majority of her murders took place across state lines, she will, at a minimum, receive several consecutive life sentences in a maximum-security prison.

During the drive, Lori's pained expression, suggests there are a parade of vivid images of her many victims—the Catholic priest, the Senator, the CEO, airline Captain Parker, and Dr. Thaddeus Abrams. Abrams, rather than helping her with her demons, chose to solicit her instead to kill his wealthy wife. All were powerful, dominating, and abusive males who preyed on women. She was glad the running and hiding were over. Her only wish for the future was to visit her Emily one more time. There's no conceivable chance of that.

Mika disappears into her own thoughts, and the dream that haunts her every night since the first kill, the one she tells me about so often in tears. In it, she is gleefully celebrating her seventh birthday with mom and dad. As she blows out the candles, the dream goes dark for a brief moment, and then a small flame on a candle reignites. As the flame glows brighter, she is standing knee-deep in eviscerated male bodies. She gasps for air, starts to gag, her pulse elevates until she becomes dizzy and disorientated. She is forced awake, frozen in panic and sweat, too terrified to move from the dampened sheets. After the first nightmare, she made it to a sink to splash cold water into her face. She cupped her hands to sip the water. It's why she left the Bureau. It was all due to her relentless pursuit of the woman sitting next to her now. She knew she had to let go of it, or be taken down completely. It would consume her, until she was crushed beneath the weight of it. Today, all of this, is some kind of closure for her, the only closure she will ever get.

Her father, Robert Scott, the powerful and extremely wealthy, military-complex maverick, passed shortly after she resigned and became a civilian. He left his entire empire to her, his only child. She had just begun to learn the business. Mika had neither reason, nor desire, to be involved in the weapons hardware industry. She sold off most of the business and kept the "intelligence-gathering" side of the company her father used against business rivals and enemies. She became a major player in her private investigative practice. The Robert Scott Company occupies a complete penthouse floor of the downtown 191 Landmark building. Inside is the latest technology, updated daily, capable of doing surveillance across the globe. The building's rooftop had more satellite dishes and antennas than the Federal Building where the FBI and DEA monitored the bad guys. Her success in tracking fugitive felons in her private practice had become legendary, except for the felon who caused her sleepless nights.

Lori had been able to avoid capture by remaining outside of the radar, staying low-tech. She never surfed the Internet, never had a Facebook page, and never was on Twitter, never Googled. She didn't have a cell phone. She didn't fake her own death, a mistake made by most fugitives, or someone trying desperately to disappear. She never tried to sneak back home. Then came the letters, Lori's only mistake. That was when I called Mika. I had found one of the letters. She couldn't help it, it was too overpowering. Lori was a strong and intelligent woman, with one very serious weakness—Emily. She knew the danger the letters posed, knew they were crumbs on the trail, but they had gone undetected for so long she felt safe sending them. Deep inside, she knew she couldn't run forever. The good side of her, less dominated by the voices, wanted to make things right again.

My turn. I close my tired eyes, and think about how I got here. The letter I found broke the case. The letter, addressed to Emily's gravesite, is inside my APD stenciled windbreaker pocket right now. The secretary, who ran the day-to-day affairs of the cemetery, believed the letter was just like all the hundreds of other fan letters, sent by demented, pathetic ghouls. She remanded them to the trash. From the last bag of trash carried, the letter fell out of the bag to the concrete during the dumpster run. Later, the groundskeeper, an elderly black gentleman, somewhat lost in his own time, had picked it up. Unaware it was destined for the dumpster, he delivered it according to the address on the envelope, to Emily's grave, where he respectfully laid it gently against the tombstone.

After Lori slipped out of the country, I would often surveil Emily's gravesite, to see if she might return. I saw the envelope, saw the European stamped postmark, opened it, and read the heartbreaking words about a mother's loss and despair. With the letter in our hands, Mika and I debated ending the chase for Lori. We considered letting the cold case, turn into an arctic case. In the end, because we still believed in it, we decided in favor of the law. With the letter, Mika was able to track Lori. She advised Interpol there was a renewed interest in her flight warrant.

Sitting next to Lori, I look out through the tinted glass, and see the same hopelessness, the same poverty, the same homeless, and the same abused souls filling the streets. Not much ever changes. I want to escape the bad dreams, like Lori and Mika, and find a simple, peaceful existence, where the old-school rules still apply. I want to find something to fall back on, something besides a sword. Maybe I can find my redemption out there, something, or someone, to fill the empty, aching hole inside of me, assuming the job doesn't take me out first.

Our motorcade passes through red lights at intersections cordoned off by traffic cops. We arrive at the precinct, and the Suburban takes the down lane into the parking garage, through a police line that tussles with the onslaught of media dogs. We park and exit the vehicle in the garage. Lori is taken through two double doors, and into an elevator that will take her to Central Booking to be processed for fingerprints and photos, strip-searched. While she is taken through the system, I find a quiet place to decompress and regroup. Mika finds a place next to me.

I know why Lori murdered those guys. I don't even feel the slightest sympathy for her victims. They were all deserving scumbags. Still, I'm going to play out my oath to protect and serve.

It's over, Jake," Mika says.

She leans over to rest her head on my shoulder.

What can I say? It's over? How can it ever be over?

We're all in prison. Some of us just have the keys to our cells.