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Playing Dead

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Extract

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PIATKUS

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PROLOGUE

Thirty Years Ago

He buried Jessica White's body in the vast open space on the west end of Stanford University.

He hadn't meant to kill her. She'd been intoxicated, but coherent. He pretended to be tipsy, but in truth he'd replaced his beer with a nonalcoholic variety he kept in his room. He needed to be in control.

They fucked like animals and he couldn't climax. He'd had this problem before, knew what had to be done to bring relief. She laughingly agreed to "play the game," as she called it. But tying her to the floor spread-eagled was no game to him.

She was beautiful. Long, lean body, round tits, perky nipples, dark hair spilling around her.

So he had closed his eyes, wanting to remember the woman who had loved him, who had taught him everything about sex.

Bridget had seduced him when he was twelve. Told him what to do, what she liked, made him do things he didn't want to. But he'd loved her. Loved her breasts. If she'd just let him suck her breasts, he would have been happy.

She knew he liked it, and only let him touch them

when he finished his other duties. She said only young men made her feel good. Only young men like him.

The week before he graduated from eighth grade he went to her house like he did every Wednesday after school. He waited for her in the backyard. Leaving together would have been unseemly, she always said. After all, she was the principal.

He waited and waited and then heard laughter from inside. He walked around to her bedroom window and saw her with another boy. He was smaller and younger and had no pubic hair.

Bridget had told him last time he was getting too old.

She let the boy—a kid who'd transferred midyear and was a grade younger—touch her breasts. Like she'd done when she first brought him to her house. It was only later, after she hooked him, that she denied him until he satisfied her. Until he hurt her.

Outside her bedroom window, he hated her.

He went back late that night. Snuck into her bedroom. He wanted to kill her, but he loved her so much. She needed him.

She was expecting him.

"I saw you watching. I'm sorry we can't see each other anymore. You're leaving for high school in the fall. But I'll give you something to remember me by."

Then she hurt him and he thought he would die.

After that, he couldn't have sex like a normal person. He watched porn movies, he spied on his father and stepmother while they did it—quick and fast. Later, he spied on his hypocritical father when he learned about the young mistress.

He tried to re-create that urgent copulation with Jessica, but it hadn't worked. It never would.

He didn't even realize he'd strangled Jessica until he climaxed and collapsed on top of her. She wasn't breathing. He stared in shock at her neck, saw the bruises, the thumb impressions so deep they had to have crushed her larynx.

He looked at his hands as if he didn't recognize them as his own. They had been around her neck, his thumbs pushing, but he didn't remember.

He wasn't a murderer. It was an accident, just a terrible accident. Who would believe it? Jessica's wrists and ankles were red and chafed, probably from straining while she suffocated. No one would believe that she'd allowed him to tie her up. That he'd just gotten carried away. That's what happened, things got out of hand because she wanted him so bad. She'd asked him to tie her up. She'd begged him to do it rough, saying she liked it that way. It was all her fault. *Sick bitch.*

So he waited a few hours until everyone in the fraternity was drunk or passed out, then brought his car around to his ground-floor window, taking Jessica out that way instead of through the door.

No one had seen them together. Jessica had made a big production about leaving the party earlier—she didn't want her ex-boyfriend to know she was going to screw someone in his own fraternity. Then she climbed in through his window and . . . she died.

He drove to the west end of the campus into the rolling hills toward the Dish, a radiotelescope built a couple years back. When he could drive no further, he walked along a jogging path with a shovel he'd taken from the fraternity basement. He veered off the path about twenty-five yards, shielded by trees and shrubs, until he found soil soft enough to dig.

He was stronger than he looked, which surprised anyone who decided to pick on him. Digging the grave gave him time to clear his mind, to focus on the task at hand, and to formulate answers to any questions he might be asked regarding Jessica's disappearance. She hadn't told anyone she was coming back to his room because her ex was insanely jealous. She lived nearby, in an off-campus sorority. She had walked to the fraternity.

If she had told anyone about meeting him, he'd lie. He'd lied most of his life. He was good at it. He'd brought all her personal effects and tossed them into the grave, along with the ropes he'd used to bind her. He'd go back and make sure there was nothing of her in his room, not even a hair. He was a neat, orderly person. No one would be surprised if he deep-cleaned his room Sunday morning.

He had to move her body from his car to the grave. Not yet dawn, the quality of night was changing almost imperceptibly. He didn't have much time.

He'd wrapped her body in a wool blanket. As he removed her from the trunk, her body was stiff and difficult to bend. Rigor mortis. It hadn't even been six hours! He pulled her out, falling backward and dropping her body in the dirt. Jessica rolled out of the blanket, stiff legs bent at an awkward angle from the time spent in his trunk.

Frustrated and angry at himself for his clumsiness, he pushed her back onto the blanket and carried her like a baby to the grave. He dropped her in and quickly shoveled dirt over her. Seeing her dead again had unnerved him. He wanted to get back home as quickly as possible. He needed to shower.

Relieved upon finally finishing the unsavory task, he

returned to the fraternity his father had insisted he join. He was to continue the proud family legacy. "You'll major in biology, enroll in the premed program, then you can choose your discipline. Surgery would be the smart decision." As if he wasn't smart enough to figure out his father wanted him to follow in his big, fat footsteps.

He had no desire to go into medicine. He'd tell his father to go to hell. Someday. He should have done it a long time ago.

No one was awake when he returned just as the sun crept over the horizon. He went to the bathroom, locked the door, and flipped on the light.

Something was caught in the buttons of his shirt. He pulled at it, inspecting it carefully. Slightly greasy, what on earth . . .

He bit back a scream. It was her skin! Jessica's skin had come off in a chunk on his buttons. What other parts of the dead bitch were on him that he couldn't see?

He stripped and jumped under scalding hot water in the shower, scrubbing his body over and over until he was red and raw. Images of Jessica rising from the grave, her skin sloughing off in greasy chunks of flesh, haunted him.

Before anyone woke, he scrubbed down his room twice with the strongest cleansers he could find. Removed anything, seen or unseen, that said, "Jessica White Was Here." Then he tried to sleep, but his heart was beating too fast. Every time he closed his eyes he saw Jessica rise like a zombie from the grave.

He went to the kitchen and made himself a hearty breakfast. He was famished. When he was done, he felt so much better.

It's over.

Though he'd killed Jessica only hours ago, the event seemed surreal, as if he'd been an observer of the brutal act, not a participant.

When he returned to his clean room, he saw a note on his bed. Something was wrong.

It was a plain white card in a blank white unsealed envelope. He slowly removed the card.

We know what you did last night.

Something else was in the envelope. He poured it into his hand.

Dirt. And a single earring.

ONE

Present Day

Claire was an expert bullshit detector. That's what made her so good at her job investigating insurance fraud.

This morning she'd been called to a warehouse fire in West Sacramento, at the Port of Sacramento near the docks where the Deep Water Ship Channel connected the Sacramento River to the San Francisco Bay. The port predominantly handled agricultural products, but container goods from China and beyond were not uncommon. They didn't have customs or any serious inspections, which were taken care of at the port of entry. As far as docks went, they were relatively clean and quiet, even at seven in the morning. Most of the activity was at the far end where a ship was being loaded with produce Claire couldn't identify from this distance.

She breathed deeply, the lingering scent of burned wood, scorched metal, and ash making her grimace. Best to get this out of the way now, before the temperature rose. It was only the second week of May, yet summer had arrived. While the rest of the country enjoyed spring, yesterday Sacramento had peaked at ninety-five. Today would be even hotter.

Claire was supposed to meet the arson investigator

here at eight, but she liked hitting the scene early to do her own walk-through. She'd already done everything she could from the office; the two final pieces for the report were the walk-through and interviewing the claimant.

Five-shot Starbucks latte in hand—as much to combat the mild hangover from her late night as to wake her up—Claire grabbed her backpack from the backseat of her Jeep, absently brushing dog hair off her jeans. She had to remember to cover the seats with towels when she took Chewy and Yoda on car rides.

Crime scene tape cut across the front of the warehouse—but since it was a mere shell and incapable of being locked up, she slid under the tape. Arson. She smelled it.

Warehouses sometimes burned down by accident. A careless employee left a cigarette butt burning, lightning struck, homeless people tried to get warm in the frigid Sacramento winters.

But accidents were rare.

The building owner hadn't even been smart about it, Claire thought as she walked around taking pictures and notes. There was no evidence of burned goods. They could have been stolen before the arson, but Claire suspected the merchandise had never arrived or had been sold before the arson. She'd already pulled the financials of Ben Holman and Holman Medical Supply Company, Inc. Operating on the wrong side of a razor-thin profit margin, Ben Holman was three months late on his personal home mortgage and his creditors all had 90- to 120-day lates on him.

Convenient timing for an insurance claim that would give him half a mil for supplies and damage.

Holman would likely claim faulty wiring . . . possible, of course. These dockside warehouses were old and rarely did the owners upgrade the interiors. They were used for the temporary storage of goods that came down the Sacramento River shipping lane. Product came, product left—cogs in the wheels of the economy. But in this instance? No way. It was arson, and Claire just needed to wait for the fire investigator to show up and confirm it.

Holman Medical Supply Company, Inc., would soon be one less cog to muck it up for legitimate business people.

Claire deeply breathed in the fresh air as soon as she cleared the building, then leaned against a cement wall to write up questions for warehouse-owner Holman.

He didn't know Claire had security tape from the warehouse three doors down that showed him driving up the day before the fire started. He didn't know she had a copy of the manifest filed with customs in San Francisco. And he would certainly deny knowing where the missing goods were, though she had a contact who said an unusually large supply of syringes had shown up on the streets yesterday.

Ben Holman was just one more pathetic human being who proved that no one could be trusted.

Claire drained the rest of her lukewarm latte, stuffed her notebook and camera back into her pack, and stretched, hoping the investigator wouldn't be late. She wanted to write up the report and meet her veterinarian at her house at noon. Dr. Jim made house calls, at least for her. She had started toward her Jeep when she heard a deep male voice.

"Claire."

At the familiar voice, she dropped her cup and pack, reaching for the gun she carried in a belt holster in the small of her back, and began to turn when someone from behind grabbed her arm, bending it up and back. She aimed a perfect kick to her attacker's balls, but he anticipated the move and sidestepped it, spinning her around and pushing her against the cement wall she'd been leaning on, knocking the wind out of her.

"Claire, stop. I need five minutes. Please."

Daddy.

Raw anger and deep sadness always accompanied any thoughts of her father. But here—now, in person—the anger and sadness were magnified. She heard nothing, felt nothing, saw nothing, except the familiar stranger in front of her. Heard him breathing, felt his heart beating as her arms were trapped between her chest and his, saw the plea in his vivid blue eyes, eyes like her own.

Once, she had loved him. Trusted him. Worshipped him. She remembered the past with such clarity that it took her breath away.

He looked so much older now. Of course he did. She'd never visited him in prison. She hadn't seen him in fifteen years, since the trial, since she'd testified for the prosecution against her own father.

It had been nearly four months since Tom O'Brien had escaped from prison during the San Quentin Earthquake. Four months and no word except that her father had become some sort of a dark hero, helping authorities capture the other escapees, while slipping away undetected. She'd talked repeatedly with local and federal cops, endured weeks of stakeouts outside her home, sacrificing her privacy. For a while, she even thought he was

dead. And when she finally believed he had disappeared for good, he showed up here. Now. Like a ghost.

Love and hatred for this man overwhelmed Claire.

Tears welled up in her eyes. To force them back she pictured the dead, bloody body of her mother. Fifteen years might have seemed like a lifetime, but the sight and smell of blood was as fresh in her senses as if Claire had walked in on the murder this morning.

Daddy.

She pushed against him, but he had her pinned tightly to the wall. Her gun dug into her back, and the pepper spray on her keychain was in her pocket, out of reach.

"Claire, I don't have a lot of time. The Feds are watching you."

"Were," she said.

"Are," he contradicted. "I know you don't believe me, that you never believed me, but I didn't kill your mother. And I have proof."

"I didn't believe you then, and I don't believe you now."

His face hardened, but his eyes watered. Looking at her father was like looking at an older, masculine version of herself.

They'd done so much together before that awful, life-ending day. Biking. Skiing. Camping. She desperately wanted to believe him because they'd been "two peas in a pod," as her mother used to say.

The mother *he* had killed.

Claire knew the truth. It was as much her fault as his, but he was the one who'd pulled the trigger and coldly killed two people.

"I'm sorry, Dad," she said, surprising herself as her throat swallowed the tremble in her voice. "I should

never have told you about Mom's affair. It was childish of me. I just didn't know then that everyone lies, cheats, and steals for personal gain."

He looked as if she'd hit him. "None of that was your fault, Claire. Your mother had had affairs before."

"That's what you said at the trial, but—"

"It's true."

"It was convenient for you. And would it really matter? Even if she'd screwed around with a dozen men it wouldn't change the fact that Mom and her current lover were screwing in your bed when you walked in and shot them."

She was on a roll. She stared at him, remembered that he had been convicted in a court of law by twelve jurors. He'd been convicted of murder, and few innocent people went to prison.

"You would have said anything to get out of prison. The D.A. offered you a plea. You didn't have to get the death penalty! You could have pled guilty. Maybe if you'd just admitted the truth I could have lived with it, I could have forgiven you, but you just lied and lied and—"

"I wasn't lying," he insisted, his jaw tight. "Everything I told you then was the truth."

"The evidence showed—"

"The evidence was circumstantial. Someone framed me. I have proof."

"What proof? If you had proof, why didn't you bring it up during one of your half-dozen appeals? Have your attorney petition the court? There is no proof that you're innocent."

"And there was no proof that I was guilty!" he

shouted in her ear, his voice shaking. "It was all circumstantial, Claire. A setup. A frame—"

"Yeah, so why don't you go find the *real killer*?"

"Dammit!" He took a deep breath. "I need to find Oliver Maddox. I know he spoke to you in January before"—he paused—"the earthquake."

"Before you escaped from prison? Let's call a spade a spade, Daddy, okay? No bullshit. You're an escaped killer and they'll shoot first, and frankly, no one gives a shit about your answers."

Claire's insides were twisted and burning. She'd never talked to her father like that, had never raised her voice or sworn at him.

Don't think of him as your father. He's an escaped prisoner. A convict. A murderer.

His face hardened, but pain lit his eyes. "Oliver Maddox has information I need to prove my innocence. He works with the Western Innocence Project. I tried calling him, but his phone isn't working. I can't very well go looking for him. I think someone scared him into hiding. I need your help to find him. I don't have anyone else to turn to, Claire."

She blinked back tears. More lies from her father. "After I talked to Maddox, I did a little research. I'm good at that. He's just a law student, not even an attorney. Doesn't even work for the Western Innocence Project—he was an intern last summer. They were never going to take up your case."

Her father shook his head. "That's not true. Oliver planned on meeting me the week before the earthquake. He said he had information about Lydia's lover, Chase Taverton. Evidence that *he* was the primary target. Taverton was a prosecutor. If he was the target, that

opens an entire pool of suspects, and the detectives barely looked at that possibility."

"You're grasping at straws—"

"Oliver has even more information," he continued quickly, "but he never showed for our meeting, and I couldn't reach him. The next day, I was transferred into the general prison population."

"They don't put cops in with the general population."

"Something happened. Someone got to him—"

"I haven't spoken to Oliver Maddox since I kicked him out of my house months ago when I found out he'd lied to me. He lied to me, and he lied to you. He was just a kid jerking your chain, he didn't have the Project behind him, and he probably didn't know anything that would help you unless he made it up. You were a cop once. You should know how many killers claim they're innocent."

"I am!"

"So who did it? In the twenty minutes between when I left the house and called you and you walked in, who broke into our house and killed them? And why? You know, Dad, usually the most obvious answer is the correct one."

"I'm so sorry, Claire, but you have to believe me. The only reason I care about proving my innocence is to prove it to you. I don't want you looking at me the way you are right now. I want my little girl back."

"I'm not a little girl." She found it hard to catch her breath. She couldn't think, she just wanted him to disappear.

"I know." His voice quivered. "Please, Claire, I'm risking everything coming to you. I need your help. I

can't do this on my own. I went to the campus, his house, couldn't find him. I couldn't ask more questions without drawing attention. I need to find out where he went and exactly what he knew, get him to tell the truth no matter who threatened him. Working for Rogan-Caruso Protective Services, you have access to far more information and resources than I do."

"Why would I help you? I could lose everything I've built since you went to prison," she said. "My career, my PI license, my home. I don't want to go to jail."

"Claire. Please."

The quiet plea twisted her heart. "Go away. Leave me alone."

"I don't have anyone else," he whispered.

She spoke equally quietly. "Well, then, you don't have anyone, Dad."

A truck turned onto the road heading for the warehouse.

"Think about this, Claire. Think about *me*. I'm not a killer. You know that in your heart."

To prevent her from pursuing him, he pushed her down. "I'm sorry," he called as he ran in the opposite direction of the approaching truck.

Claire slowly pulled herself up. She might have been able to chase after and catch her father, but what would she do? Shoot him in the back?

Instead she put her hands on her knees and fought to regain some semblance of control over her emotions. To try and forget the pain in her father's eyes. To try and forget the pain twisting in her heart.

The truck belonged to the arson investigator, Pete Jackson. He got out, looked at Claire with a frown. "You okay, Ms. O'Brien?"

She faked a half smile as she stretched. "Fine. The sooty air just got to me."

"I told you not to go in until I got here."

"Sorry. Why don't you walk me through it?"

"You must already have your own conclusion."

"I need you to prove it."

"Lucky for you I already have the proof your company needs. Found the hot spot and identified the accelerant. The burn pattern indicates not only arson, but an amateur."

"Too cheap to fork over for a professional," Claire muttered.

As she followed Pete Jackson into the warehouse, she glanced over her shoulder, looking for her father. Tom O'Brien was nowhere to be seen.

That didn't mean he wasn't around.

The Feds had made it perfectly clear to Claire that she needed to report any contact from her father, or be considered an accomplice. They'd threatened her—jail time, loss of her private investigator's license, her concealed-carry weapons permit. Her dad said that the Feds were still watching her. Agent Donovan had come around a couple times, but it was routine. She'd answered his questions and told him to get lost each visit. She didn't think they had someone on her 24/7 after the first two weeks since the quake, but maybe she was wrong. Maybe she'd been so preoccupied with trying to forget about her father, she'd missed the obvious.

Remembering the look on her father's face gave her pause. And his words had sounded . . . truthful. But he'd had fifteen years to perfect his act. How could she believe him now when she hadn't believed him then?

But what if he *was* telling the truth?

For fifteen years she believed, she *knew,* that he was guilty. After the trial she learned to block everything out to prevent the nightmares from creeping in. If it hadn't been for Detective Bill Kamanski and his son Dave, a young street cop who had been her dad's friend, she would have probably turned to drugs or worse. They taught her to be strong, to accept what had happened and move on. She'd almost changed her name to forget who her father was. But in the end, she'd realized that if she changed everything about herself, she'd be living a lie. So she remained Claire Elizabeth O'Brien, accepting the truth, at the same time forcing that horrific day and the trial from her memory. Most of the time it worked.

Seeing her dad again after so long, especially with the panic in his face and voice, made her question everything she believed. *Stop that.* She knew her father was guilty. There could be no other explanation. Her mother was having an affair and her father snapped. It happened all the time throughout the world.

But would it hurt to find Oliver Maddox? Talk to him? Learn what he knew? Maybe the kid had proof of her father's guilt, and that's why he hadn't shown up. If that was the case, Claire would call the Feds and set up a meeting to put her father back in prison.

At least then she could tell her father he had nothing to hold on to. Maybe she could get him to turn himself in. She didn't want him to die, gunned down by an overzealous cop.

Who was she kidding? His execution date was six weeks away. If not for the earthquake, his days would have been numbered anyway. Why had he foolishly returned to Sacramento when he'd managed to stay under

the radar successfully for the last four months? He should have kept on hiding. He was obviously good at it.

Still. Oliver Maddox had told her father he knew something about her mother's lover Chase Taverton. Taverton had been a Sacramento County prosecutor who, from what Claire remembered from the trial, was successful, charismatic, and well liked. Still, prosecutors acquired enemies—criminals they put in prison, victims who didn't get the justice they deserved. Or maybe it was personal.

Her heart twisted at the thought of turning in her father, and she doubled her focus on Pete Jackson's comments as they walked through the burned-out warehouse.

Why couldn't you have just stayed away, Dad?