Hot Girl Murder Club

ALSO BY ASHLEY WINSTEAD

The Future Saints
This Book Will Bury Me
Midnight is the Darkest Hour
The Boyfriend Candidate
The Last Housewife
Fool Me Once
In My Dreams I Hold a Knife

Hot Girl Murder Club

ASHLEY WINSTEAD



An Aries Book

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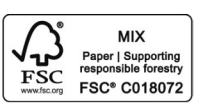
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This one's for the working-class, strip-mall, military-town kids, the ones who came of age driving the back roads with their windows down and their music blasting, dreaming of bigger lives, like the ones in books and movies.

...though I cannot be Henry the Fifth, or Charles the Second, yet I endeavour to be Margaret the First; and although I have neither power, time, nor occasion to conquer the world as Alexander and Caesar did; yet rather than not be mistress of one, since Fortune and Fates would give me none, I have made a world of my own.

—Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World* (1666)

Taking a new step, uttering a new word, is what people fear most.

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (1866)

I am singing now while Rome burns.

—Richard Siken,
"Snow and Dirty Rain," *Crush* (2005)

Listen for It

We've come to the end now, darling. The end of the road; some might say the end of our rope. This night has been years in the making. Getting here has taken a lot of heartache, a lot of false turns. A lot of faces to smash, groins to knee. It's taken a lot of humiliation, of getting my cheeks pinched, my wrists slapped, being called a bitch and a life-ruiner and so much worse.

C'est la vie. In the end, we got here, and that's what matters. They thought they could hide what really happened to you, that they were so much smarter. I can picture them, laughing at our sad faces on TV. But they won't laugh tonight. Not when I'm standing in the pitch-black night outside this McMansion monstrosity, a house you would've called small-dick compensation back when you were alive enough to crack jokes.

I've watched the lights in the house go off, one by one. Waiting here, dressed to the nines in a goddamn crop top, of all things. Sorry, scratch that—let's use a reference you can understand, since you didn't live to see the return of '90s fashion. Wearing a shirt sized for an American Girl doll—how's that? Like those Y2K fashion inspo pictures you used to love cutting out of magazines, back when you were still capable of loving things.

There was no time for a costume change. The minute I heard the news, nothing could've stopped me from coming. Accuse me of impracticality all you want, but I've learned there's a certain value to obsession. That sounds like one of your lines, doesn't it? Let's pretend it was, because I like the idea of this coming full circle. Speaking of circles, tonight he's all alone in that house, and the roles are reversed; tonight I'm the one circling him.

I wish you were here right now, even as a ghost; wish you could claw yourself out of that grave. But since you can't, I'll do the next part for you. I'll fly in like a woman possessed and say, *Surprise!* She didn't actually die, not when I've kept her alive like a holy flame in the center of my chest. *Surprise!* You didn't get away with it. Not in the end.

There are security signs posted around the perimeter, but no flood-lights have tripped on, no alarms have sounded. There's nothing to warn him as I stride across the lawn, stabbing twin holes into the turfgrass with my heels. Maybe the real joke is, I don't register as a threat, even to his security system. We'll have a good laugh about that later, he and I.

The sliding glass door isn't locked. They didn't think they would ever experience a consequence, and they were almost right. I seize the handle and slide it open, silent and steady. Tighten my fingers around the grip of my gun.

They thought we'd never find out, never come for them. Fools.

Tonight, I'm going to make him scream your name so loud you'll hear it in heaven.

Listen for it, my darling girl. And forgive me.

This is a dissertation, yes, but more importantly, it is the first official history of the twenty-first century's most unlikely outlaws. Though the events chronicled here occurred only five years prior to this publication—a blink of an eye to most historians—many of my fellow scholars still deny they ever happened, insisting that everything contained within these pages is more legend than truth, fiction spun to legitimize what we, in retrospect, might rightly call a movement.

How do I know they're wrong?

Because I was there. In the following pages, I will play not only your archivist but your witness.

My first task, then, is to prove that the organization we now know by the name of Our Ladies of the Dark began long before anyone realized, and with far different aims. This will not be an easy feat: While the myths spun about the early group have been formidable, little exists in the way of verifiable evidence.

As you will see, it is as if the main actors in our story were hell-bent on erasing themselves.

—Frances Vogel, "Our Ladies of the Dark:
A History," PhD dissertation presented
to the UCLA Department of History

Chapter 1

Grey, the Detective

Present Day

The moment Detective Grey Holloway arrived at the palm tree–ringed Bel Air mansion now crawling with cops, a hush fell. A millisecond of silence, like a glitch in a movie, and then the whispering started. Since Grey was used to being a pariah among the LAPD, she simply ducked under the crime scene tape and pushed her way inside the house, past the curious eyes, reminding herself that she belonged. She'd been assigned to this case by Captain Xie himself, who'd told her over the phone, in his usual brusque manner, that he needed her, specifically, for a reason he then failed to name.

It wasn't until Grey caught fragments of the whispered conversations that she began to realize there might something different about the gossip today. "She looks *exactly*—" someone hissed as she walked past, followed by a hushed "how creepy," and then, "—just like the dead girl."

Frowning, Grey followed the line of evidence techs as they marched upstairs. They stood in a ring in what appeared to be a bedroom, peering at something on the floor. It was unprofessional, that motionless staring, and for a moment, Grey thought of reprimanding them. Then she slipped past the wall of their shoulders and understood.

The body splayed out in a pool of dried blood could've been her twin. Looking down at the woman's face, frozen in

a death mask of horror, was like looking into a dark mirror, stumbling onto the scene of her own death in a parallel dimension. All the techs grew quiet, studying her as intensely as she studied the woman.

Was this why Captain Xie had wanted her—because Grey looked uncannily like the victim? If so, how bizarre.

That was a question for later. Right now, she was in charge of bringing the scene to order. She took a deep breath. "I want all investigators to clear the room. Go downstairs and help with cataloging."

As they dutifully scattered, leaving her with the body, Grey focused on her senses. It was her grounding ritual whenever she entered a new crime scene, a practice that allowed her to gather her first impressions before other people could cloud her thinking. She'd learned that regulating her mind was just as important as regulating her subordinates—and that part was paramount for any detective, but especially for one as young and female as her, with her unfortunate wide-set Disneyprincess eyes and the vocal fry she couldn't rid herself of, no matter how hard she tried.

She crouched beside the body. The victim appeared to be in her late twenties. She was wearing a sage-green workout set Grey had seen only last weekend in the window of an Alo store on Rodeo Drive. Underneath the matted blood, the victim's hair was a balayage masterpiece, blond streaks painted with precision, even better than Grey's. Grey had come by her tan honest, thanks to days in the sun tracking leads, but the victim's skin was the telltale orange-taupe of La Mer's self-tanning line, and her astonished eyes, cerulean beneath the spiderwebs of broken blood vessels, were framed by lush lash extensions—probably mink—giving her the appearance of a doll from a nightmare. The blood streaking the victim's skin was so pungent, the air so thick with iron, that the one beat cop still lingering in the corner was subtly gagging. Underneath that blood, Grey was willing to bet that

the woman's skin was flawless, the product of pricey facials and nightly retinol. No doubt, the body on the floor was worth a small fortune.

So the victim was wealthy, on top of being young and attractive. Despite what movie studios would have people believe, young, rich, glamorous murder victims were rare, and sure to draw vultures. Grey would have to issue a gag order to keep details from leaking to the press.

She slipped on latex gloves, lifted one of the victim's stiff hands, and gritted her teeth. They were wearing the same nail polish: "Fiji" by Essie, a distinctive ballet pink. Christ. Forget the press. The other *detectives* were going to eat this up. She'd never hear the end of it: Detective Barbie's murdered twin.

The beat cop stepped closer. "I usually need a minute to process, too," he said, mistaking her gritted teeth for disgust. "Dead bodies can be a lot."

Grey rose and glanced at his name tag. j. gomez. "You're the one who moved her?"

Officer Gomez flushed. Captain Xie had given Grey a small amount of information on her way to the scene: After receiving several worried calls from the victim's mother, the LAPD had dispatched Gomez to conduct a routine wellness check. Failing to get a response to his knocks, the overeager cop had pushed his way inside, searched the home, and found the victim lying face down in her bedroom, a bullet hole to her right temple. Lack of experience combined with natural human instinct had compelled him to flip her to get a look at her face, thereby disrupting the integrity of Grey's crime scene.

"I'm sorry," Gomez mumbled. "It won't happen again."

"I'm sure it won't," she said softly. She'd decided early in her career that there was no reason, other than tradition, to be an asshole to the people below her. Even when those people were young male officers suffering from a case of

misplaced chivalry. "Why don't you head downstairs and assist the techs with cataloging?"

His shoulders slumped at the dismissal. Of course, Grey also saw no reason to reward careless mistakes.

The officer was still shuffling downstairs when she heard a familiar voice. "Freaky, isn't it? How much the vic looks like you."

Grey turned to find Dr. Clifton Miles from the medical examiner's office passing Gomez on the stairs, trailed by two of his assistants. Grey liked Cliff. He was older, probably close to retiring, but unlike many of the older men she'd encountered on the job, he'd always taken her seriously.

"It's all they're talking about downstairs," Cliff added with a rueful smile. "They're taking bets on whether the two of you are sisters or cousins. You aren't related, are you?"

"No." The threat of gossip left Grey unmoved. Law enforcement had never been her plan, but her father's early death from a broken heart—officially ruled a heart attack—had left her no other option. She'd gone straight into the police academy after graduating summa cum laude from UCLA. Since then, her focus had been so single-minded that after the requisite four years as an officer, she'd ascended to the rank of detective by the tender age of twenty-five. Now, with two years as a detective under her belt, she'd already been elevated by Captain Xie to the prestigious robbery-homicide division, a department most detectives spent their careers trying to reach. Grey's clearance rate thus far was an unprecedented 100 percent.

And it turned out the only thing people hated more than witnessing the rise of an enfant terrible was witnessing the rise of a *female* enfant terrible, especially one who supplemented her meager law enforcement salary with shifts at an infamous Hollywood nightclub, working the VIP tables. By now, she'd heard every variation of "She's sleeping her way to the top" and always longed to reassure the whisperers that vengeance

was an effective enough motivator—no need to involve sex. But of course she didn't. Grey knew that once you were labeled "one of *those* girls," the kind more likely to end up on the gruesome side of the crime scene tape, there was no going back. After all, one of *those* girls was the whole reason her father had gone crazy and she'd had to become a cop in the first place.

Now she studied her doppelgänger on the floor. "All dead women look alike, if you think about it," she told Cliff. "Like a man's worst fear and his darkest fantasy combined."

"Jesus. You quoting someone?"

"Myself."

"Are you supposed to be the other dead woman in this metaphor?"

"It's an analogy."

Cliff chuckled. "You're an odd duck, aren't you, Detective?"

He wasn't wrong. Rumors about Grey's after-hours nightclub gig had spread like wildfire. From her male colleagues, it seemed to elicit either teasing or an infantilizing protectiveness, both of which were embarrassing for everyone. If she had a dime for every time she'd been called Detective Barbie or Detective Stripper, or every time she had to halt her stride for an officer who wanted to awkwardly open a door for her, she'd be rich enough to sack every man in the LAPD and replace him with a canine detective, the very definition of "don't tempt her with a good time." But because Grey expected those reactions, they rarely got under her skin.

What did was the way other female officers treated her. Women were still a minority in the force, and in Grey's ideal world, she would've preferred solidarity, no matter how kumbaya that made her sound. But a lot of older female cops had come up in an era of policing that equated femininity with weakness and machismo with respect. Unfortunately, Grey was a bottle-service moonlighter who wore a lot of pink. She understood that she and her colleagues were all just

products of their times, and while she might wish differently, there was no forcing friendship. So she'd resigned herself to keeping her head down, her mouth shut, and her clearance rate unimpeachable, and to hell with the whispers.

"What do we know so far?" she asked Cliff, redirecting.

His voice took on the well-oiled rhythm of a man who'd given this rundown plenty of times. "Victim's name is Elizabeth Drake. Thirty-three years old. Her mom called from the family home in Iowa. Said Drake moved out here years ago to work in the industry but was currently unemployed. Claimed there was no history of mental illness."

"Drake, huh?" The name stirred something. "I swear I've heard that before."

"Sounds familiar to me, too," Cliff agreed. "We haven't found any signs of forced entry, other than your Officer Cowboy getting rough with the door, so the killer might've known Drake or had a key. She was shot in the temple, at close range. The bullet hole is small, so we're looking at a lightweight handgun, maybe a nine millimeter."

"Easy to handle," Grey observed. "And conceal."

"You know what's not?" Cliff gestured to the streaks of blood and gore that had turned the wall into a Jackson Pollock painting. "The shooter was close enough to get sprayed."

Grey turned to one of Cliff 's assistants. "Check the bathrooms to see if the shooter washed up and left any DNA. And go downstairs and tell Officer Gomez to start knocking on neighbors' doors. We need to know if anyone saw or heard anything unusual around . . ." She glanced at Cliff.

"My best guess is she's been dead anywhere from twelve to twenty-four hours. I'll know more once I get her on my table."

"Yesterday afternoon," Grey concluded. "Through the evening." The assistant nodded and left.

"An execution-style killing," Grey mused, returning to the body.

"Single bullet to the head." Elizabeth Drake was dressed

like she was on her way to Pilates, which suggested she hadn't realized she was under imminent threat of death.

"It's a cold job," Cliff agreed. "You don't normally see a professional-style hit on a girl like this. Sorority type."

Grey turned to the most unsettling part of the room, other than the body. "Now tell me about that."

She pointed at the wall, where the words i eat traitors for breakfast were streaked in large crimson letters. "Is that what it looks like?"

"It's blood," he confirmed. "We'll have to test to be sure, but I'm guessing it came from Drake."

"So our killer enters the house—either invited or found a way to sneak in—makes their way to the bedroom, shoots Drake, dips their fingers into that hole in her head, and finger-paints this message. Then they walk right out, possibly in broad daylight, and no one calls in anything suspicious."

Cliff whistled. "Someone hated her. Maybe an ex?"

Grey's eyes roved over the words on the wall. "You don't go to the trouble of writing a message in blood unless you want to make a statement you hope others will see. I think it's a warning. But to who?"

She studied the rest of the bedroom, which was wall-to-wall pink. Drake's mansion was styled like a mid-century cottage. Most of the houses in Bel Air's exclusive zip code, like the two that dwarfed this one, were ostentatious mansions owned by entertainment moguls, complete with helipads. Grey was willing to bet that this home, even though it was on the smaller side, would still net north of two million. Even if Drake was renting, it would've cost a pretty penny.

"Her mom said she lived here alone?" Grey asked. "And she was unemployed?"

Cliff caught her drift. "Maybe she was an heiress. Or an actress between projects, and that's why her name sounds familiar. Face might look more recognizable once we clean her up."

"Or maybe she's an OnlyFans celeb," snickered a uniformed cop who'd wandered upstairs. "And it's not her face that's famous."

Grey slid him a cool look. "You find that funny?"

His smile deflated. "I guess not."

She scanned the room. "If Drake *was* running her own content business, there'd be filming and lighting equipment in the house, and I haven't seen any." She turned to Cliff. "Have your guys found anything?"

"Nada."

"That's why we don't speculate without proof," she told the cop, who would undoubtedly dislike her from this moment forward. He could join the club. "And why we stay professional."

The cop cleared his throat. "Detective, I was sent to tell you that the message on the wall is a lyric from a Scout Sage song. Officer Kelly recognized it."

"Who's Scout Sage?" asked Cliff.

"A pop singer," Grey answered, before the cop could. "Not exactly famous, but on the rise."

"She won a Teen Choice Award last year," offered the cop.

Cliff rolled his eyes. "Good Lord. A teeny-bop-loving murderer."

"Killers," Grey quipped. "They're just like us." She waved the cop away.

"Well, do you think this is a rich boyfriend's house?" Cliff asked, once the cop had retreated. "I mean, it's Bel Air, and Drake's a young lady without a job. Where'd the money come from if not a sugar daddy?"

Grey pointed at the walls. "A sugar daddy who painted his house millennial pink? Nah, I'm willing to bet this place is Drake's. We'll check the property records to make sure, but if something shady's going on, I'm betting it comes down to her."

Lots of cops talked about trusting their guts, but to Grey, the gut was where bias lived. Her success had come by doing

the opposite, a lesson learned from her father: *Leave your feelings at the door and focus on the facts*, he'd told her. *Never forget the world is infinitely capable of surprising you.*

Grey's father had once been a great detective in his own right. And even though he'd since fallen from grace, the scandal of his screwup yet another reason cops side-eyed her, Grey was convinced he'd died one. Her determination to prove him right and finally close his last case was why she was here.

Now Grey's skepticism was telling her there was more to Elizabeth Drake's death than a bitter ex. That word on the wall—*traitor*. It suggested something bigger than romantic drama.

Cliff scrunched his face in disbelief. "You really think this girl could be part of something crooked?" He cocked his head. "She looks so small and helpless. Poor little thing. Reminds me of my daughter."

Suddenly, Grey knew exactly why Captain Xie had assigned her to this case. Everyone always wanted to believe that young, pretty women were pure, innocent creatures, especially after they were dead. But Grey, more than anyone, had reason to know better.